



Social Capital and Psychological Resilience in Post-war Iran: A Critical Review of the Twelve-Day Conflict

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The twelve-day conflict between Israel and Iran, which began in June 2025, resulted in widespread destruction across the country, causing significant casualties, mainly among civilians. However, Iran experienced an unexpected development: A notable increase in social capital. This outcome challenges the common belief that war weakens social cohesion and worsens mental health issues. Instead, the Iranian experience showed that a national crisis can strengthen social bonds, increase trust, and build community solidarity. This phenomenon supports previous research suggesting that collective trauma, rather than breaking apart social structures, can improve community resilience, promote social relations, and aid in psychological recovery after crises (1-3).

A Three-Dimensional Framework of Social Capital

Social capital in public health comprises three key dimensions: Individual trust, social cohesion/support, and social trust/associative relations. These elements are fundamental to shaping community responses to crises and enhancing psychological resilience. Evidence shows that social capital significantly influences mental health during and after traumatic events (4, 5). In Iran, the war catalyzed the rebuilding of social ties, which buffered psychological impacts and fostered resilience. Mutual aid, shared resources, and community mobilization were central to recovery, demonstrating social capital's crucial role in mitigating crisis-related mental health challenges (4, 6).

Individual Trust: A Psychological Anchor During Crisis

During times of institutional collapse, individuals often rely on one another for survival and psychological support. This was evident across Iran during the war, where neighbors shared vital supplies, strangers offered financial assistance, and displaced families were welcomed into homes. These acts were motivated not by obligation but by trust, by a belief in the kindness and solidarity of others. Psychologically, this mutual trust acted as a buffer against trauma, displacement, loss, and fear. Trust reduces perceived social threats, which are closely linked to anxiety and depression, ultimately enhancing mental resilience (7, 8).

Moreover, Iran's deep-rooted cultural and religious context amplified these informal support networks. Pre-existing social structures, such as family units, religious gatherings, and local networks, became lifelines during the war. These social fabrics, long established, were deepened and expanded in the face of adversity, providing critical emotional and material support. Theories of social capital emphasize that networks built on trust are vital for coping with collective stress, and Iran's experience exemplifies this phenomenon (7, 9).

Cohesion and Social Support: Society as a Healing Force

Social support derived from informal networks such as family, neighbors, and community leaders constitutes a pivotal factor in mitigating psychological distress during crises. In the Iranian context, these networks extended beyond emotional reassurance to encompass practical assistance, spiritual guidance, and informal education, compensating for institutional shortcomings. State media, particularly the Islamic

Republic of Iran Broadcasting, reinforced social cohesion by disseminating messages of solidarity, collective identity, and coordinated action (3,10,11).

Furthermore, public rituals, including communal prayers, mourning ceremonies, and spiritual gatherings, provided structured spaces for emotional expression and recovery. By alleviating isolation – an established predictor of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – such activities functioned as critical psychosocial interventions. Empirical evidence shows that community-based bonding fosters belonging, reduces distress, and strengthens resilience. Collectively, these mechanisms demonstrate that social cohesion operates not merely as a coping strategy but as a foundational element of post-crisis recovery, enhancing societal capacity to withstand and adapt to adversity (4, 5,12).

Social Trust and Associative Relations: Civil Society Awakens

Civil society plays a vital yet often underestimated role during crises. In Iran, religious institutions, mosques, charities, and local councils rapidly organized relief efforts beyond their traditional functions, restoring purpose, reducing burnout, and enhancing post-crisis well-being. Mosques acted as logistical centers and spaces for emotional recovery, while academic groups offered psychological support. Participation in these initiatives strengthened social identity and belonging, essential for mental health after disasters. Social capital theory underscores that robust civic engagement significantly shapes community recovery and resilience (4, 7,13).

State institutions, even under immense pressure, collaborated effectively with grassroots organizations, creating a unified response. This collaboration between governmental and informal groups demonstrated a mature civic awareness and helped to strengthen public trust in both civil and government efforts (14, 15). Also, transparency and open governance are essential components of civic trust, as they enhance accountability, strengthen institutional legitimacy, and create conditions where social capital can flourish (16).

From Vulnerability to Resilience: The Mental Health Impact

Undoubtedly, war leaves deep psychological scars. However, the growth of all three dimensions of social capital – individual trust, social cohesion, and civic engagement – acted as a collective shield against the mental health impacts of the conflict. Previous studies from countries like Japan, Turkey, and the United States show that communities with strong social ties and active civic life report fewer symptoms of PTSD. Iran's

experience during the 12-day war further confirmed this pattern, highlighting how the protective function of social capital can mitigate mental health challenges during national crises (5, 8,14).

Iran's experience also contributed a culturally unique element to this dynamic. The country's rich tradition of martyrdom and resistance provided an important psychological tool for coping with trauma. National and religious narratives helped individuals reframe their suffering as part of a larger, noble cause, transforming helplessness into action and reinforcing collective resilience (7, 8).

Cultural Reinforcements of Social Capital

Iranian society, steeped in religious tradition and historical resistance, offered powerful cultural mechanisms to support psychological resilience. Public mourning rituals, such as lamentation, served dual purposes: Offering a channel for spiritual expression and providing emotional release. These collective practices allowed individuals to process grief and pain in a supportive communal environment, helping to normalize sorrow and affirm loss within a larger narrative of perseverance (1, 8).

Religious and national stories provided a framework for interpreting grief as a form of honor, transforming individual sorrow into collective strength. Instead of encouraging repression, these cultural tools facilitated the healthy expression of distress, enabling individuals to cope with their trauma in meaningful ways (5, 9).

Conclusions: Healing Through Human Bonds

Despite the devastation caused by the twelve-day war, Iran emerged with a stronger social fabric and a more resilient population. The growth of interpersonal trust, community support, and civil society engagement was not merely a survival response but a culturally rooted process of emotional and social recovery. This experience underscores a vital lesson: True resilience does not lie in military power or financial resources, but in human relationships. The bonds that connect individuals – trust, compassion, and solidarity – form the foundation of national stability and mental endurance.

Importantly, greater emphasis should be placed on the role of social capital not only as a response mechanism but also as a preventive force against psychological harm. In the Iranian context, strengthening social networks, enhancing civic participation, and nurturing community trust can proactively reduce mental health risks before they manifest, while simultaneously promoting psychological well-being and collective resilience. This dual role of social capital, both preventive and

restorative, highlights its central importance in public health strategies and post-crisis reconstruction efforts. In times of crisis, it is these human bonds that help societies not just recover but thrive.

Footnotes

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