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REVOLUTIONARY BARDS: IRAN-IRAQ WAR HISTORY AS PROPAGANDA

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REVOLUTIONARY BARDS: IRAN-IRAQ WAR HISTORY AS PROPAGANDA

A Master Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

American Public University

by

Brandon Andrew Pinkley

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Arts

December 2017

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Charles Town, WV
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to Manar Alhamdy, who makes me believe in the American Dream even during his nightmares, and who reminds me that cruelty and beauty are often entwined in the darkest moments of history. How could I not become obsessed with the war that brought him to me?
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

REVOLUTIONARY BARDS: IRAN-IRAQ WAR HISTORY AS PROPAGANDA

by

Brandon Andrew Pinkley

American Public University System, December 24, 2017

Charles Town, West Virginia

Dr. Jon Mikolashek, Thesis Professor

This research examines the relationship between Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps’ (IRGC) histories of the Iran-Iraq War and popular mobilization institutions supporting the Iranian state. This research draws on primary sources from the IRGC’s Center for Sacred Defense Documents and Research, an organization that began as a grassroots network of field histories for the IRGC Public Affairs Organization. Most political histories of the Islamic Revolution have focused on ideologies of elites; military histories of the Iran-Iraq War have focused on strategy or tactics; and only recently have scholars begun to examine the war’s impact on social welfare institutions or Iran’s administered mass organizations (namely, the Basij Organization of the Oppressed). This research connects the Islamic Revolution to Iran’s political and social welfare institutions through its military history.
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Chapter I.
Introduction

The official histories of the Iran-Iraq War published by the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) provide a lens into Iran’s recent past currently neglected by historians outside Iran. There are plenty of reasons to read such sources with a degree of suspicion. These narratives are funded and controlled by a ruling regime that has skillfully sidelined and imprisoned its critics. The IRGC had little incentive to tell the story of the everyday Iranian experience of the war. Rather, these traumatic memories have been carefully crafted into a hegemonic and univocal narrative that not merely legitimizes the ruling elites’ incompetence during the war, but that has become “a source of shared, individualized resentment.”¹

Problematic as these official histories may be, they still provide historians outside Iran with documents that are important to consider when thinking about the Iran-Iraq War and its influence upon Iran today. To the extent that these sources represent the IRGC’s preferred framework for understanding its role in the conflict, these records should not be disregarded as useless propaganda. The IRGC’s historiography clearly has political motives, but perhaps that provides opportunities to historians seeking to understand Iranian politics. Specifically, these narratives provide historical frameworks which support the IRGC’s attempt to transform Iran’s politically diverse populism into revolutionary institutions for popular mobilization that reinforce the Supreme Leader’s position, reframe expectations for social welfare distribution, while deflecting blame for society’s failures away from the regime.

Throughout the 1960s and during the 1970s, Iran’s Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi took advantage of increased revenues from rising oil prices to greatly expand the Iranian military arsenal. Iran’s arms buildup corresponded with the Baath Party coming to power in Iraq in 1968 (Iraq also greatly expanded its military—primarily its ground forces—in the 1970s in response to Iran’s growing stockpiles) while also serving to consolidate its domestic political power and enabling it to control the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. During the early 1970s, Iran had been providing military and economic support to Kurdish rebels in Iraq and used this support as a bargaining chip during the 1975 Algiers Agreement, which resulted in heavy territorial concessions to Iran’s benefit, including the agreement to demarcate the Shatt al-Arab River (known as Arvand Rud in Persian) at its deep waterline. As Iraq’s sole access to international waters, this crucial waterway links the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers to the Persian Gulf and has historically been a point of conflict in the region between Arabs and Persians. In April 1969, Iranian naval and air forces escorted a merchant vessel through the waterway, disregarding Iraq’s required tolls in a blatant abrogation of the previous 1937 agreement.2 With the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, and Saddam Hussein’s ascension to the presidency in Iraq, new layers of conflict were added to the already dangerous combination of arms stockpiling, historic territorial disputes, and ethnic conflicts.

During the post revolution purges of Iran’s military officers, and especially following a July 1980 attempted coup d’état involving officers from the Artesh, Iran’s new regime executed, imprisoned, or forcibly retired approximately 12,000 high-ranking officers, leaving its military with a leadership vacuum and throwing the organization’s future into political controversy.

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among Iran’s untrusting clerical elite.\textsuperscript{3} Iran’s precarious domestic circumstances provided Saddam Hussein with a unique opportunity to go after a number of disputed—or just desired—resources. Particularly, Hussein thought this could afford him the opportunity to “liberate” the oil-rich and Arab-majority Khuzestan Province and gain full control of the Shatt al-Arab. The Islamic Republic now faced its own challenge with its Kurdish population: more than any other minority group, Iranian Kurds sought to institutionalize and expand the autonomy they had achieved during the turbulent years of Iran’s revolution, especially from 1978 to 1980.\textsuperscript{4} Meanwhile, the new Iranian regime resumed its support for Kurdish dissidents in Iraq as a part of a much larger anti-Ba’athist propaganda initiative that included efforts within Iran to both paint Ba’athists as enemies of the Islamic Revolution as well as influence Shi’ite groups and ethnic dissident groups in Iraq to overthrow the Ba’athists.\textsuperscript{5}

When Iraq’s forces invaded Khuzestan Province in southwestern Iran on September 22, 1980, the majority of Iran’s Artesh were still deployed along the Iran-Soviet borderlands, as was the policy under the Shah.\textsuperscript{6} Most of the newly formed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were focused on Kurdish rebellions in the northwestern borderlands and on urban skirmishes against groups opposing the new Islamic government.\textsuperscript{7} As a result, Iraqi forces swept through Khuzestan quickly; however, their advance stagnated the following month (October 1980), as the Iraqis failed to overcome the strong popular resistance movements that kept them from controlling Khuzestan’s urban centers.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{5} Karsh, 11-12.
In May 1981, Iran began a series of successful campaigns that ultimately regained these border regions back from Iraq. In July 1982, having regained the majority of its occupied lands, the Iranian forces made the controversial decision to continue the war onto Iraqi soil, despite heavy domestic opposition. However, it would not be until February 1986 with the capture of the Fao Peninsula that Iranian forces would gain their first substantial foothold on Iraqi soil. From Fao, Iran could cut off supply lines from Kuwait to the south and threaten the city of Basra to the north. Iraq offered to trade Fao with the Iranian city of Mehran, which was then being occupied by Iraqi forces, but Iran refused. Despite repeated efforts to take Basra, the war effort stagnated until the spring of 1988 when, over the course of three months, Iraq—with much help from its allies, including both superpowers—regained all of the territory Iran’s forces had taken on the southern front over the course of three years. On August 8, 1988, the UN Resolution 598 ceasefire went into effect, ending one of the longest conventional wars of the twentieth century—and the most deadly war in Middle Eastern history—that altered the trajectories of both Iran and Iraq.

There is a disproportionate emphasis in the historiography on the Islamic Revolution of 1979 compared to the Iran-Iraq War. The bulk of the English language military histories of the war are more interested in doctrine and tactics, and thus these histories are largely dominated by either English news media and military reports or, more recently, by translations of confiscated Baathist Party records. Taken as a whole, the historiography largely fails to address the relationships between Khomeini’s ideology, the eight years of war, and President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani’s postwar reconstruction.

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9 Ostovar, 98.
Following the literature review (Chapter Two), Chapter Three examines a potential body of source material to connect postwar Iran to the Islamic Revolution: the IRGC Center for Sacred Defense Documents and Research. During the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC tried to develop and articulate its own ways of fighting to make use of Iran’s larger population and to identify what distinguished their methods from those of their counterparts in the Artesh (Iran’s regular armed forces), as well as those of their Iraqi adversaries. The IRGC developed an extensive network of field historians during the war, and have since pursued aggressive research and publication agendas and public history roles. These publications have largely gone unexamined by English-speaking academia due to their biases toward the IRGC and the Iranian state, as Samuel and Farhi have noted.\(^\text{10}\) While these works may provide narrow representations of history, they also provide unique insight into how elite members of the IRGC perceived their own doctrine, their challenges, and their appropriate roles in Iranian society.

Chapter Four examines the theme of “Imposed War” in IRGC publications as a way to consider the IRGC’s preferred framework for understanding Iran’s international context, scapegoating of “the West,” and the IRGC’s responsibility to Iranian society in the face of regional and global challenges. Chapter Five examines the relationship between IRGC historiography and Iran’s intra-elite competition of the 1980s by examining a politicized debate over military doctrine that emphasizes popular mobilization, support of the people, and leadership of the Supreme Leader. Finally, Chapter Six aims to consolidate these relationships between IRGC historiography and society to argue that the political power of Iran’s war history

lies in its merging of popular and divine forms of authority. Specifically, aforementioned narrative themes sought to transform Iran’s politically diverse populism into revolutionary institutions for popular mobilization that could reinforce the Supreme Leader’s position, reframe expectations for social welfare distribution, while deflecting blame for society’s failures away from the regime.
Chapter II.
Literature Review

Before examining Iran’s official narratives of the Iran-Iraq War published by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), it is worth reviewing how historians have tried to understand the IRGC, the revolution that brought it about, the Iran-Iraq War, and how each has impacted the relationship between state and society. Scholarship relevant to these questions can be divided into four broad categories, in descending order of their prominence in the historiography: histories of the Islamic Revolution of 1979; intellectual history of political ideologies in Iran; military histories of the Iran-Iraq War; and histories dealing with outcomes of the war in Iranian society.

A short review of the literature regarding Iran’s Islamic Revolution of 1979 is unavoidable for two main reasons. First, this material makes up the bulk of histories related to Iran during the war period and, therefore, has shaped how historians have written about the Iran-Iraq War and the IRGC. Second, because the IRGC is an organization constitutionally mandated to protect not only Iran’s territorial boundaries, but its revolution as well.11 Similarly, a review of the military histories will focus less on their strengths (tactics, techniques, and strategies), and more on how they fail to address the questions regarding the impact of the war in postwar Iranian society. The latter half of the literature review will deal with the creative ways that more recent scholarship has examined the war’s influence through institutional, political, cultural, and literary histories, while tracking a relationship between Iranian populism and the Islamic Republic’s use of history. Finally, the review identifies the few scholars who have dealt with IRGC publications in a critical way, and the main questions they have raised relevant to this research.

Iran’s Revolution

In the years immediately prior to Iran’s revolution, a “third generation” of American social scientists had aimed to deepen the analyses offered by modernization theorists of the 1950s and 1960s by incorporating more diverse social structures beyond a simplistic linear progression toward modern industrialized nationhood. Heavily influenced by Marxist base-superstructure frameworks to examine states and societies, structural theorists looked at historical case studies to compare revolutionary outcomes. These macrostructural, class-based, state-centric comparisons often left little to no room for ideology, culture and, often, individual agency.

It is difficult to overstate how influential Theda Skocpol has been to the study and interpretation of Iran’s revolution, despite her primary focus on the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions. Published in 1979, the same year as Iran’s revolution, Skocpol’s *States and Social Revolutions* argued against the value of ideology in comparative historical analysis of revolutions, and centered her analysis upon the challenges facing the state. The Iranian Revolution raised important questions that seemed to undermine her thesis, and in 1982 she published a highly influential analysis of Iran’s revolution that charted the course of historians and analysts of Iran to focus primarily on Iran’s ideology and intellectual history. Iran’s revolution was an outlier: seemingly caused by rapid modernization; no military overreach by its powerful but ineffectual army; and “a revolution deliberately ‘made’… if there ever was one.”

Propped up by oil revenues, Iran was a unique place where religious ideology caused for a

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14 Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1979), 14.
separate analysis apart from her state-centric approach, at least so long as oil revenues remained high.\textsuperscript{16}

Since Skocpol, historical sociologists and some historians continued the theoretical debate over whether and how to apply class-based analysis to Iran or the relationship between state and society. Abrahamian’s \textit{Iran: Between Two Revolutions}\textsuperscript{17} incorporated categories of “social bases” and ethnic groups into a broader temporal scope of Iran’s revolutionary twentieth century, but still found class-based analysis beneficial. Conversely, Katouzian argued that because Europe and Iran experienced different historical trajectories rooted in their respective Greek and Persian civilizations, Marxian paradigms like the concept of class were inappropriate tools.\textsuperscript{18} Moaddel sought a way to incorporate ideology into the analysis of Iran’s class struggle by identifying separate competing discourses that produced revolutionary momentum among antagonizing social groups.\textsuperscript{19} Parsa compared the Iranian, Nicaraguan, and Philippine revolutions of 1979 as a way to try to bypass ideology and look for social origins of revolution in different contexts during the same historical period.\textsuperscript{20}

While scholars of revolutions and their theories are helpful in thinking about the complexities and continuities that exist within and among revolutions, these approaches are clearly too general to address the more particular questions of this research. Such concepts are,
however, important to consider because IRGC publications also attempt to theorize their revolution, and apply those theories to both the war and postwar society. 21

**Intellectual History and Ideology**

Unlike historical sociologists and theorists of revolution, the majority of the historians studying Iran were less interested in developing grand theories and generalizable frameworks than in the particulars of Iran’s revolution, especially its religious components and their relationships with secular ideologies like Marxism, liberalism, and nationalism. The literature tracing modern Iran’s religious and intellectual terrain is vast, partly due to the notion—already seen in Skocpol—that Iran is a unique place in need of area specialists and religious experts. As Maloney points out, this disparity in the literature is also due to the general unexpected nature of Iran’s revolution, and its “novel” and “compelling” religious components in particular. 22 For the purposes of this research, only the most common and relevant themes will be discussed. 23

Many historians of Iran’s modern intellectual history have focused upon Khomeini’s charismatic authority and his theological and ideological development, which is helpful as many IRGC histories also emphasize Khomeini’s ideas and crucial leadership role in the war. 24 Other historians have examined the intellectual transformations of Iranian Shi’ism and its key institutions, especially in regard to debates between the Usuli and Akhbari schools of jurisprudence, which paved the way for Khomeini’s idea of velayat-e faqih, or guardianship of

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21 As will be discussed in Chapter Three, theorizing the relationship between revolution and war is particularly true of Muhammad Durudiyan, and is an important component of the Imposed War narrative in Husseyn Ardestani’s work as well.


the jurist.\textsuperscript{25} Some intellectual historians took a more biographical approach, and traced the key
Iranian thinkers and clergymen that influenced Iranian anticolonial and Islamist movements. Such biographies are particularly helpful in complicating prevailing notions of the Islamic Revolution as a fundamentalist reaction against “the West” or European conceptions of modernity because many of Iran’s most influential intellectuals were educated in the Europe or inspired by European philosophical constructs as much as they reacted against them.\textsuperscript{26}

Beyond the clergy, some historians turned to Iran’s broader intellectual history outside the Shi’i establishment and examined thematic concepts like democracy, representative government, popular sovereignty, modernity, or constitutionalism over longer periods of time to contextualize the events of 1979 not against the West, but in conversation with it.\textsuperscript{27} Some literary historians, like Hamid Dabashi, applied Edward Said’s model from \textit{Orientalism}\textsuperscript{28} to Persia’s unique relationship with “the West” and looked at Iran’s literary and intellectual history to answer, or push back against, questions and simplistic responses regarding Iran’s supposed reaction against modernity that triggered the revolution.\textsuperscript{29} A particularly robust area of


scholarship deals with the intellectual history of Iranian nationalism, which is an important body of work to read in concert with IRGC literature, as these historians ask many of the same questions, and point to some of the same turning points. Because secular and Islamic leftists so often appear as antagonists in IRGC publications, histories examining Iranian leftist organizations and their ideas have been particularly helpful.

Military Histories of the Iran-Iraq War

During the 1980s, as the Iran-Iraq War played out, military historians were able to rely on regular news coverage and open-source military records to achieve their objectives. These histories were limited in temporal scope, several published before the war was even complete, and often addressed a single theme such as why the war broke out, its immediate implications for the region, or basic tactics and strategies deployed by each side. These histories are important because most of these early histories were translated into Persian and are cited in IRGC publications. While these works provide robust reference for tactics, techniques, and


procedures, there are a number of weaknesses apparent in the English language historiography taken as a whole. To address these weaknesses raises further political and linguistic challenges that need to be overcome.

First, there is an underrepresentation of Persian sources in the English historiography. Non-Iranian historians have primarily relied on English news media accounts and military and intelligence reporting, and secondarily upon the unique Ba'athist Party records confiscated after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Second, the historiography has largely been shaped by U.S. foreign policy objectives. Historiographical trends formed in response to three pivotal moments, as historians sought to respond to the needs of policymakers: literature written in response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990; the political environment leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003; and the U.S.-led coalition’s confiscation of Ba'athist records following the collapse of the Iraqi government.

As a result, the Iran-Iraq War has not been adequately studied apart from seeking “lessons learned” for U.S. policymakers. Nor has it been studied as a "defining event in itself, worthy of discrete study irrespective of the teleological pull exerted by the events of 1990 and 2003.”33 Where it has been studied as an “event in itself,” it has relied primarily on Euro-American and Iraqi sources to the exclusion of Persian sources. 34 The most current histories of the conflict use documents from the Conflict Records Research Center, a currently closed archive of Ba’athist Party records housed at the National Defense University and the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. The only source material even remotely comparable to provide

an analogous level of insight into Iranian perspectives and decision-making during the war is the IRGC Center for Sacred Defense Documents and Research, which are almost entirely absent from the English literature.

The third challenge to studying the war is that Persian historiography has been shaped by the nation-state: both in terms of the legal confines of the Iranian government’s censorship regime, as well as the conceptual confines of histories of the Cold War which accept the nation-state as the analytical framework. Censorship creates an unavoidable challenge with access to reliable accounts that deviate from official narratives, and therefore requires that sources be interpreted as historical works with propagandist objectives. Existing English historiography lacks global contextualization of the war into its larger Cold War frame. Much of the earlier literature frames the war as essentially a territorial dispute along the Iran-Iraq border or as two opposing ideologies contained within their respective nation-state. Only recently have scholars begun to look at the Iran-Iraq War as a global phenomenon.³⁵

The fourth challenge is that the historiography rarely connects the original themes of Iran’s revolution to the war’s outcomes. While nearly all histories address the role of ideology and religion in mobilizing people for war, very few examine the transformation of the revolution's originally diverse populist factions into the war's centrally controlled Islamic inspired propaganda, or the war period the reshaping of redistributive policies during the postwar reconstruction period. This is particularly problematic because the institutions responsible for popular mobilization—the IRGC and Basij—are the very institutions which have had the most dramatic impact in transforming Iran since the war.

### Institutional Histories

³⁵ Razoux, in particular, attempts a more global narrative. But it should be noted that even the earliest IRGC histories frame the conflict as a global phenomenon.
Recently, three scholars have published institutional histories relevant to the Iran-Iraq War’s legacy in Iranian society that are particularly important contributions to the literature. First, Afshon Ostovar’s *Vanguard of the Imam* is the first scholarly history of the IRGC that extends beyond its military endeavors. Ostovar contextualizes the IRGC into the larger history of Shi’i militia support traditionally provided to clerical elite, showing that it is the centralization, development, and institutionalization of these militias that transformed bands of guerilla-styled revolutionaries into the military force it is today. While the Iran-Iraq War is crucial to Ostovar’s narrative, and he includes some IRGC publications as source material, his aim is understanding the IRGC as an organization, rather than their narratives themes or analyses of the war.

Similar to Ostovar’s work on the IRGC broadly conceived, Saeid Golkar’s *Captive Society* is the first scholarly study of the IRGC’s Basij Resistance Force, historical or otherwise. Golkar’s work features a wide variety of IRGC sources, including interviews and surveys conducted while teaching at the University of Tehran. He not only traces the Basij’s historical development, but also details the broad spectrum of influences the organization has on society, such as: mobilization in voting; anti-riot control; state-supported replacement for labor unions; recruitment for armed services; and means for narrowing social mobility for individuals supportive of the regime, and a broad array of professional organizations. Golkar’s research situates the IRGC’s Basij as the locus between its defense apparatus and the revolution’s promises for improving the lives of everyday Iranians.

Recently, Kevan Harris has published important work detailing the continuities and dynamism of Iran’s social welfare institutions. Harris’ *A Social Revolution: Politics and the*
Welfare State in Iran\textsuperscript{38} looks at the historical development of Iran’s system of institutions providing welfare benefits and redistributive social policies from the Pahlavi dynasty to today. Harris’ work is important because he shifts scholarly focus away from Iran’s political and clerical elite and security apparatus toward the institutions which most directly affect the lives of Iranians. The Iran-Iraq War is a crucial part that story because, according to Harris, during the war Iran developed a dual overlapping “martyrs’ welfare state.” However, though Khomeini and his supporters were able to consolidate power from opponents during the war, they failed to develop a single, unified revolutionary party. The result was a highly competitive factional political environment with competing institutions, where social benefits were used to mobilize people for political support. The parallelism that Harris describes in regard to Iran’s social policies is important for understanding how similar parallelism and politicking developed within Iran’s military and security apparatus between the Artesh and the IRGC.

**Histories Recounting Iran’s Factional Politics and Populism**

Iran’s political environment does not easily conform to the left-right spectrum of American politics because, in addition to debating the size and role of government, there is an added spectrum concerning the role and authority of the supreme leader. Complicating matters is the transformation of Khomeini’s idea of Islamic government, both during his lifetime and after his death. Mehdi Moslem’s *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*\textsuperscript{39} has been essential in understanding Iran’s political dynamism up to the first term of President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). Though written for a popular audience, Axworthy’s *Revolutionary Iran: A History*


\textsuperscript{39} Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002).
of the Islamic Republic is a well-sourced and readable account that goes up to the 2009 reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Following the 2005 surprise election of Tehran’s Mayor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency, scholars and journalists attempted to make sense of Iran’s seemingly populist upheaval. Prior to 2005, however, two scholars in particular had been arguing for the need to examine the Islamic Republic through the lens of the populist roots apparent in the revolution itself: Ervand Abrahamian and Val Moghadam. Abrahamian’s Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic made the case for rejecting the label of “fundamentalism” to describe Khomeini’s interpretation of Islamic government, and seeing it, instead, as essentially populist. Abrahamian argued not only that Iranian politics should be seen on a populist-moderate spectrum, but in later articles argued that the Islamic Republic’s survival was due to the successful implementation of populist promises. In the chapter, “History Used and Abused,” Abrahamian employs a method similar to the one this author suggests in interpreting IRGC histories. Comparing three highly publicized “confessions” of imprisoned and tortured leftist leaders from the Tudeh Party, Abrahamian notes that all deal with the same essential script:

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43 Ervand Abrahamian, Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic (). By “populism,” Abrahamian means “a movement of the propelled middle class that mobilizes the lower classes, especially the urban poor, with radical rhetoric directed against imperialism, foreign capitalism, and the political establishment.” (17)
“Each cited the same four decisive points in history in which the Left had supposedly betrayed Iran.”46 One of the aims of this comparative analysis is “to show how the regime tries to use history to give itself populistic as well as religious legitimacy.”47

Val Moghadam’s 1994 essay, “Islamic Populism, Class, and Gender in Postrevolutionary Iran,”48 has also been important in thinking through the relationship between populism, Iran’s revolution, and the Islamic Republic. Similar to Abrahamian’s argument against labeling Khomeini’s ideology as “fundamentalist,” Moghadam takes issue with describing the revolution an “Islamic revolution,” opting instead for the term “Islamic-populist” revolution. As a sociologist, Moghadam is interested in provided an “alternative analysis of the revolution,” but she provides a helpful review the different ways that scholars have approached populism in both the Iranian context and other Third Worldist contexts of the period. Moghadam’s essay is important to read in conjunction with IRGC publications because while IRGC histories deal primarily with mobilizing Iranians to fight at the war front, Moghadam ties the revolution to the economic overhaul and implementation of redistributive policies in the economy which greatly affected resources available for the war effort.

More recently, a number of scholars have returned to the questions of populism, populist expectations set during the revolution, and how populism relates to the military-security apparatus. Saffari has analyzed the way the term mostazafin, or “oppressed,” was appropriated during the late 1970s to show two different strands of populist and revolutionary fervor, corresponding to Ali Shari’ati and leftist groups first, and then incorporated into Khomeini’s

46 Ibid., 90.
47 Ibid., 92.
rhetoric at a later stage in the revolution.\(^{49}\) Ehsani examined not only how the war channeled revolutionary mobilization away from Iran’s politics to the Iraqi border to help consolidate power, but how the unfulfilled redistributive promises of the revolution shaped postwar politics.\(^{50}\) Noori argued that the alliance that developed between Iran’s principalist faction and “war veterans’ associations”—primarily referring to the Basij—worked to prevent class-based mobilization.\(^{51}\) Though she argues to subordinate the role of ideology to economic analyses, Maloney’s *Iran’s Political Economy Since the Revolution*\(^{52}\) also places “populist promises… to buy off popular frustration” at the center of her story about the development of Iran’s political economy and its “bifurcated” authority and legitimacy.\(^{53}\)

**Critical Examinations of IRGC Official Histories**

The few references to the Iranian state’s official narratives of the Iran-Iraq War are broadly dismissive as propaganda, a description which is not entirely unwarranted. Within cultural histories and film studies, the domination of IRGC narratives within Iran is asserted as the basis for investigations into popular cinema and cultural production as acts of resistance, while never actually critically examining IRGC texts.\(^{54}\) It is quite common to refer to IRGC narratives in broad sweeping terms, even when their importance is noted. For example, Adib-


\(^{53}\) Ibid., 4-5.

Moghaddam argues in *Iran in World Politics*\(^{55}\) that in trying to identify the “ideas, institutions, and norms… pertinent to the contemporary strategic preferences of the Iranian state,” scholars should look to the authoritative narratives of Iran’s institutions.\(^{56}\) His book, however, contains a single reference to IRGC literature: “the official jargon of the Islamic Republic.”\(^{57}\) The footnote instructs the reader to see a 60-volume IRGC chronology of the Iran-Iraq War, with the added guidance: “especially the preface.”\(^{58}\)

Two historians stand out from this trend, and have engaged IRGC publications in a scholarly manner: Farideh Farhi and Annie Tracy Samuel.\(^{59}\) In a 2004 collection of essays on the legacy of the Iran-Iraq War, Farhi addressed Iran’s official narratives of the war represented in IRGC literature to raise some apparent contradictions: How does one square the IRGC’s glorification of self-sacrifice displayed in the war with political and economic demands being made by those who displayed that sacrifice? \(^{60}\) How did it happen that as soon as the war was over, and President Rafsanjani began his “Era of Reconstruction,” did Iran’s fighters go from being victorious warriors of Islam and model revolutionaries to “victims” and “social categories that needed to be taken care of?”\(^{61}\) Farhi closes her essay with a relationship—seen already in Abrahamian—between the Islamic revolution’s populist roots and the Islamic Republic’s uses of

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\(^{56}\) Ibid., 43.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 86.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 212, Footnote 8.


\(^{61}\) Ibid., 108.
The most systematic study in English dealing with the IRGC’s literature has been done by Annie Tracy Samuel, whose 2012 essay “Perceptions and Narratives of Security: The Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Iran-Iraq War,” appears to be the first scholarly attempt to consolidate lessons learned based upon the IRGC’s own sources. Interesting, the IRGC itself translated Samuel’s essay and published it in one of its academic journals, *Negin-i Iran*, almost immediately. Samuel has published an essay tracing the IRGC’s understanding of nationalism, and how nationalist, Islamic, and revolutionary themes merged in their retelling of the IRGC’s defense of the Islamic Republic. Samuel has also published an article with international relations and security scholar, Ariane Tabatabai, in which the authors applying IRGC perspectives to challenge prevailing frameworks for thinking about Iran’s nuclear policy and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, more commonly referred to as “the Iran [nuclear] deal.”

Both Farhi and Samuel acknowledge that their work with IRGC literature is only scratching the surface of an enormous gap apparent in the historiography. The aim of this research is to provide an additional scratch that connects populist promises of the revolution to

wartime popular mobilization and the Islamic Republic’s postwar failures to deliver on these promises as is apparent in the IRGC’s use of history.
Chapter III.
Guardians of History: IRGC Historians and Publications

The largest IRGC affiliate to focus on publishing the history of the Iran-Iraq War (often referred to as either “the Imposed War” or “the Sacred Defense”) is most recently named the Center for Sacred Defense Documents and Research. The Center focuses on compiling, studying, and publishing materials about the Iran-Iraq War; its causes; and its implications. In mid-July 1981, barely two years into its existence and not even a year into its war with Iraq, the IRGC founded a War History Department or War Section within the IRGC Political Affairs Office (IRGC PAO). The Commander of the IRGC PAO, Ibrahim Haji Mohammadzadeh, argued that the IRGC should think about documenting the Iran-Iraq War based on a model provided by the history of Ashura and the Battle of Karbala, a series of events leading up to the martyrdom of Imam Husseyn that marked a pivotal moment in Shi’i Islamic history:

Had the message of Ashura (the tenth day of Muharram and anniversary of Imam Husseyn’s martyrdom) not been passed on in the history of Islam, its glory for displaying the true understanding of Islam would have been lost to the Islamic world. For the same reason, because [the Iran-Iraq] war was also waged between Islam and non-Islam, it also had to be preserved for future generations, especially as the war was modeled after Ashura and Karbala. That was why the [IRGC PAO’s] War Section was formed, and why the Commander of the IRGC agreed that it should be stood up.

To a group of IRGC historians and war correspondents, Mohammadzadeh repeated this story of how the organization began with the support of the IRGC’s top commander:

When the Imposed War began, I realized that we had to understand the magnitude of this war. During the war, I went to [Mohsen] Rezaei’s office (the commander of the IRGC) and told him that I want[ed] to chronicle the events of the war and that the way I saw it was that this war had characteristics which we had to record just like during the wars of early Islam. If it were not for Rezaei, this Center would never have been established.

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68 Ibid.
The IRGC PAO set up subordinate history offices in Kermanshah and Ahvaz to coordinate an effort to embed war correspondents known as “narrators” (ravian) throughout the areas of the conflict. Their early missions consisted of collecting documents, chronicling events of the war as they occurred, and conducting interviews with fighters who engaged in the war’s earliest battles.70 Early in the war some leading field historians began meeting monthly to discuss their efforts and how they could develop more systematic methods for collecting records and documenting operations and political events.71 As the IRGC developed organizational processes for its field historians, volunteer revolutionaries were already working to preserve memories of the war because they thought the war was worth chronicling. Likewise, commanders realized that historic preservation would require equipment and devoted personnel. Speaking to a group of narrators, former Minister of IRGC, Ali Shamkhani, recalled a source of inspiration for the project:

When the war began, a group came to Khuzestan . . . and they wanted to make a film. Around the same time, I had been watching films of the Vietnam War, and I realized that there were war correspondents there at the [Vietnam] war who had recorded video footage. This was the reason that I was fascinated with [the idea] that we should do this same thing.72

In all IRGC histories examined, Iran’s regular armed forces (Artesh) led the war effort in its very earliest attempt to retake the areas occupied by Iraq in Khuzestan. From October 1980 to early January 1981, the Artesh conducted a series of operations that failed to break Iraq’s sieges on the urban centers of Khuzestan Province. In response, the IRGC expanded its role in the war

As the IRGC grew in numbers and expanded its influence, its field historians were institutionalized within the war effort at various echelons, which changed their approach to documenting the war.

According to Mohammad Durudiyan, a prolific author and leading figure among IRGC historians, when the war correspondents first began their work, their “process—which was based upon our political-social approach to documenting the war as acts of resistance against an aggressor—was altered toward an operational structure.”73 These narrators’ efforts became so integrated into the IRGC’s command structures at the front lines that by late 1984 it had become common practice to conduct interviews with commanders and fighters following each operation and narrators were often informed of operation plans before they were even approved.74

Between late 1984 and early 1985, the IRGC separated the War History Department from the Political Affairs Office, renamed the organization the IRGC Center for War Studies and Research, and made it subordinate to the IRGC General Command Staff with Offices of War Research set up at each of the newly established IRGC-Air Force, IRGC-Navy, and IRGC-Ground Forces Headquarters.75 With this new direct access at IRGC headquarters, along with an expanded reach into the front lines, the Center’s 206-person network sought to document the events of the war at all echelons.76

The IRGC actually began publishing books before the war broke out, but these works were mostly political in nature and were distributed by the IRGC Political Affairs Office (IRGC PAO). After the war broke out, these early publications remained focused on political or theological topics such as the justifications of the war, examining either the theological basis of

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73 Hoseyni-Nasb, 137.
74 Mohammadi, 5.
76 Ibid.
the war in Quranic teachings, or its political necessity due to the imperialist threat facing the Islamic Republic. Two years into the eight-year war, the IRGC PAO wrote its first history of the conflict, titled *Guzari bar du Sal-i Jang*, or “A Glance at Two Years of War.” No author was attributed to the work, but it was translated by the IRGC’s propaganda arm into both Arabic and English for wider distribution. The book had two explicitly stated aims. First, the IRGC wanted to record the war’s early days as a guide for future historians who would one day write a more definitive history: “the following outline is presented in the hope that [this book] may serve as a clue to a definitive chronicling of this war.” The book’s second aim gives insight into how the author(s) saw the IRGC’s role in the world as guardians of the Islamic Revolution and as Islamic revolutionaries facing global oppressors on behalf of the oppressed Third World, which could follow the Iranian model to liberation:

In order to preserve a faithful account of the multiple aspects of the Iraqi imposed war on Iran, the [IRGC Political Affairs Office] has undertaken this study . . . hoping that this war . . . would serve as a model for the salvation of all deprived people of the world from the yoke of the superpowers, and would herald an age of the revival and proliferation of the undying Islamic ideals.

After the war, the IRGC changed the center’s name again, this time to the Center for Sacred Defense Documents and Research, and has focused its efforts on organizing documents from the war, preserving and digitizing records, hosting roundtable meetings with commanders and scholars in commemoration of key events of the war, and conducting ambitious research and publication agendas to preserve and promote the memories and lessons of the war. The center’s

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79 Ibid., 11.
website lists a number of book series it has published: a sixty-volume chronology from the Islamic Revolution to the end of the war; a series of annotated maps analyzing specific battles by geographical regions; thematic analytic studies; a compilation and analysis of Ayatollah Khomeini’s statements about the war; a compilation of United Nations (UN) documents about the Iran-Iraq conflict; Persian translations of books originally in English and Arabic written about the war; biographies of martyred commanders, their families, and martyred field historians; as well as war-themed literary works and poetry. Some of these texts are assigned in courses at some of Iran’s most prestigious universities, such as Sharif University of Technology and Shahid Beheshti University. In addition to these unclassified publications, the Center’s website also claims that it maintains a classified collection of publications which are inaccessible to the general public.

In the years following the war, the Islamic Republic of Iran established a number of research centers and think tanks devoted to extracting lessons from the conflict. The IRGC Command and Staff College, the Artesh Command and Staff College, the Expediency Council, the Armed Forces General Staff Basij Affairs, and Defense Culture Directorate’s Supreme National Defense University all possess such think tanks and/or subordinate scholarly journals for academic audiences and policymakers. For example, the *Journal of Defense Policy* is published by an IRGC affiliate, Imam Huseyn University, and has published articles by IRGC commanders, graduate students, doctoral candidates, and faculty from universities throughout Iran on topics related to national defense, international relations, Middle Eastern affairs, and

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military strategy. It also includes academic book reviews of foreign works related to the Iran’s military. Early issues of the *Journal of Defense Policy* focused primarily on analyzing key military operations and political developments during the Iran-Iraq War. Following increased American involvement in the region after September 11, 2001, and especially after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the journal significantly broadened its geographical scope to analyze the region’s new strategic environment.

The IRGC Center for Sacred Defense Documents and Research has published a number of academic periodicals focusing on the Iran-Iraq War, including *Negin-i Iran, Negah, Tarikh-i Jang*, and *Pazhuhehsnameh-yeh Defa’-i Moghaddas*, which have an editorial boards staffed by graduates of the IRGC’s war college, university professors, and IRGC commanders. These publications have routinely featured articles or interviews with IRGC commanders and leading political figures who participated in the war. The majority of articles published by the Center are military topics based on events of the war, but they also include international political issues Iran faced during the 1980s; theoretical issues related to how to understand the war, its causes, and consequences; cultural and social analyses of the war’s implications; analyses of the role of the Ba’ath party and Iranian opposition groups; oral histories of commanders and martyrs; and translations of relevant English articles or book reviews.  

While Iran’s Artesh also engaged in some efforts to chronicle the war and has published materials and papers in its service publications, it never developed comparable organizations devoted to preserving war records, nor has it produced nearly as many publications as the

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IRGC. The IRGC’s Center attempted to work with one Dr. Radmanesh, a professor of history at Shahid Beheshti University, whom the Artesh had hired to write a history of the war. This joint collaborative effort between the IRGC and the Artesh did not succeed, however, and the Artesh failed to institutionalize any centralized, comprehensive collection effort analogous to IRGC Center. This disproportion of intentional fieldwork conducted by the IRGC compared to the Artesh has been mentioned explicitly in a number of interviews with both IRGC and Artesh commanders. This disparity may also be reflected in the literature of the war, which disproportionately favors IRGC actions in the war effort. However, a future comparative analysis between the Artesh’s five-volume work, *Artish-i Jumhuri-i Islami-i Iran dar Hasht Sal-i Difa’-i Muqaddas*, could potentially provide unique insights into how the IRGC’s relationship with the Artesh has developed over time.

While the IRGC Center is the main institution for the IRGC’s classified and unclassified historical records, the organization has been unable to obtain full access to war records belonging to other institutions. In a 2012 interview with an IRGC weekly publication, a former head of the Center noted that despite the IRGC’s efforts, it had not yet obtained access to war records belonging to the Supreme National Defense Council, Ministry of Defense, Agricultural Jihad, or the Ministry of Intelligence. This insularity is evident in their publications, particularly in regard to the absence of detailed information related to operations unilaterally carried out by the Artesh.

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85 Commander Dowlatabadi, “Military Commanders and Compiling War History: Capabilities and Limitation,” *Negin-i Iran* (Spring 2008), 73-74.
86 Hoseyni-Nasb, 138.
87 Ibid.
88 Muhammad Javadi’pur, *Artish-i Jumhuri-i Islami-i Iran dar Hasht Sal-i Difa’-i Muqaddas*, (Tehran: Sazman-i ‘Aqidati Siyasi-i Artish-i Jumhuri-i Islami-i Iran, Daftar-i Siyasi, 1373 [1994/1995]). According to WorldCat, the only library in the United States which has all five volumes of this history is the New York Public Library.
89 Mohammadi, 5.
Because of Iran’s domestic political turmoil in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, there were concerns from the Center’s earliest days that the war’s history would be vulnerable to distortion. In fact, “preventing distortion” of the war was a stated goal of IRGC’s War History Department at its founding. Repeatedly in the IRGC’s histories it is Iran’s turbulent domestic political environment that shaped the war, particularly in the first two years. One of the key components that contributed to Ayatollah Khomeini’s success during the revolution was his ability to galvanize a wide swath of political groups opposed to the Shah. Once the Shah was gone, however, these factions still disagreed on a single vision for Iran’s future. The IRGC was concerned that the liberals led by Bani Sadr, secular leftist and Islamic-Marxist groups and guerilla movements, and those still loyal to the Shah would seek opportunities to delegitimize the Islamic revolutionaries to consolidate power for themselves. The concern with political factions seeking to distort history of the revolution and/or the war is a theme repeated frequently in introductions to IRGC works. It was mentioned explicitly at a conference of IRGC historians, where one historian reminisced that “the general atmosphere when they began writing the war’s history was one in which there was worry that fights between Bani Sadr, the Artesh (which many saw as still loyal to the Shah), et cetera, would cause a distortion of history.”

The IRGC had to compete not only for political control, but also for control of war images and messages. By the 1980s, high quality cameras and camcorders were easily available in Iran, and the IRGC was not the only group of Iranians recording footage at the warfront. There were numerous groups of amateur Iranian cameramen and aspiring film makers in the trenches, many of whom went to the front lines because of their own ideological zeal invested in a concept of “Sacred Defense” that may or may not have aligned with the IRGC’s conception.

91 Hoseyni-Nasb, 136.
Such popular religious narratives have proven difficult to control from the top-down, such that one historian of the genre of Sacred Defense cinema noted that “there clearly exist two separate categories in this field, the Governmental Sacred Defense (defa‘i moghaddas-i dolati) and the Popular Sacred Defense (defa‘i moghaddas-i mardomi).”

Iran’s new government understood this challenge and the Office of Propaganda and Guidance undertook an elaborate effort to guide and control revolutionary narratives and war images. Posters impressed upon filmmakers their responsibility to show footage of the revolution “as it is.” By June 1981, not even a year into the war, the Islamic Republic inaugurated its first National Film Festival, which celebrated the war’s revolutionary themes through a curated selection of films in line with official narratives. State propaganda produced stamps, public murals, and posters depicting Saddam Hussein as a puppet or leashed attack dog for the United States, Soviet Union, and Israel. Iran’s Supreme Defense Council began to publish annual commemorative collections of photography from the war front, along with introductions in Persian, Arabic, and English that summarized Iran’s grievances. This series also featured introductions in Arabic, Persian and English which were notably consistent with IRGC publications, though emphasizing international grievances over details of military operations. Such efforts can be seen as state-sanctioned attempts to guide and control revolutionary and war narratives and images.

Within the IRGC, efforts to “prevent distortions” of the war’s history have taken at least three forms. First, the IRGC has actively engaged and challenged conflicting narratives by

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93 Chelkowski and Dabashi, 185.
94 Ibid., 164.
constructing and publishing coherent narratives to counter dissenters. One scholar of Iranian war
cinema pointed out the importance of maintaining cohesion in Iran’s official narratives:

Governmental Sacred Defence narratives are strongly attached to the State and follow
courses that benefit the regime and its leaders. Consequently, the governmental Sacred
Defence can always be the target of accusations that it protects its narrators and its
producers; in short, the regime. Even a small mistake in these narrative[s] can cause
great trouble for the owners of the narratives and endanger their situation.96

The IRGC began developing a revolutionary print culture by publishing monthly
magazines such as Payam-i Inqilab (Message of the Revolution) to propagate the IRGC’s
strategic messaging to a popular audience, especially for those serving in the IRGC or those most
likely to become volunteers for the Basij. Typically, Payam-i Inqilab featured editorials from
religious leaders and articles on domestic politics, foreign affairs, theological interpretations of
issues relevant to the IRGC, analyses of issues facing the IRGC, and a history section. The
magazine also featured epic tales from the war front, decorative banners featuring popular
revolutionary and war slogans, photography with revolutionary themes, and political cartoons.

A second way the IRGC has tried to “prevent distortion” of history has been through
restricting access to the organization’s information by classifying documents. According to the
IRGC Center’s website, the organization has restricted access to many of the archives stored by
the Center, records which may or may not support the official narratives.97 Limiting access to
war records is certainly not unique to the Iran, as many nations utilize classification systems.
What is more unique, however, is that other institutions within Iran appear to have used
classification procedures to limit the IRGC’s access to war records, as the Center’s leadership
has publicly expressed frustration with obtaining access to documents belonging to other Iranian

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institutions, including the civilian Ministry of Defense and the Supreme National Defense Council.98

Third, the IRGC also established or sought influence in existing organizations that could assist in creating barriers to prevent “distorted” narratives from spreading. During the war, organizations such as the War News Council—comprised of deputies from the IRGC, Artesh, and the War Propaganda Office—censored or created administrative obstacles for releasing films and documentaries that deviated from the official narratives.99 The IRGC’s most dramatic institutional influence to enforce cultural norms is seen in their current use of Basij volunteers to police moral standards and suppress dissident activities.100 The “Basij [or Mobilization] of the Oppressed” volunteer organization was incorporated into the IRGC early in the war (February 17, 1981) and was utilized as an important tool for IRGC recruitment throughout the conflict.101 Following the war, the organization’s name was changed to the Basij Resistance Forces, and the organization took on a more domestic role.102 Since then, the Basij has provided the IRGC with a vast network of deeply entrenched influence throughout Iranian society that assists in reinforcing the IRGC’s official narratives.

The IRGC has not only aimed to “prevent distortion” of the war; it has also sought to “honestly narrate” the war’s history.103 The IRGC’s idea of honest narration is more complex than merely listing and chronicling events. The Center has articulated its role in narrating the war

98 Mohammadi, 5.

For the most comprehensive study of the Basij in English, especially its role in Iranian society see: Saeid Golkar, Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Golkar is primarily concerned with developing a sociological framework for understanding the Basij; however, Chapter 2 documents the organization’s historical development.

102 Ostovar, 146.
as one in need of constant innovation because of how history has been—and still can be—
distorted by its adversaries to be used against Iran. An example cited by the Center is the history
of Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran. During the Iran-Iraq War, when both superpowers and the
majority of the international community were supporting Iraq financially and through arms deals,
histories in the West focused on the role of the Islamic Revolution in provoking Hussein into
invading as a way to legitimize his actions. Later, when the international community sought to
justify military action against Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, historians and military analysts
reframed history to paint Hussein as the aggressor in a territorial dispute—the very thing Iran
tried to get the UN to do during early peace talks.¹⁰⁴ For the IRGC, the process of rewriting
history—whether intentional or due to historical amnesia—necessitates that the IRGC must
engage and react with counter narratives of the war:

In the process of historicizing the war [tarikhi shodan-i jang], there are theories which continually change the reason for the war’s outbreak. Therefore, we as a Center must also change. We must consider new methods and foundations, and we must produce new information.¹⁰⁵

In a 2012 conference of former field historians hosted by the IRGC Center, Ali
Shamkhani, former minister of the IRGC and former minister of defense, encouraged IRGC
historians to think about their role in a manner similar to the original propaganda roles for which
the Center was conceived:

The religion of the Prophet of Islam is a religion of soft power, and the factory that produces soft power is ours. Imam Husseyn’s movement is a movement that produces soft power...Our Revolution is analogous to the victory of blood over the sword; it is the victory of soft power over hard power...Today, our enemy...is more dangerous than Saddam...For this very reason, your war narrators must tell society of the soft power that was produced during the war.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Hoseyni-Nasb, 138-139.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid.
¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 141-142.
This intriguing analogy of the IRGC’s main institution for historical preservation as a “soft power factory” for the Islamic Revolution places history, historians, the retelling of history, and the remembrance of history at the core of its efforts to export Iran’s revolutionary ideology.

The use of history as a form of soft power — however broadly conceived—is certainly not unique to Iran, nor is it unique to the IRGC. There is value, however, in contextualizing the IRGC’s use of history as soft power to better understand how the Islamic Revolution’s message relates to history. Following the progressively humiliating defeats of the Russo-Persian wars, the Iranian intelligentsia—many of whom were educated in Europe—became somewhat obsessed with understanding why Iran had been “left behind” by Europe. By the early twentieth century, many of the leading Iranian historians had been heavily influenced by European Orientalist interpretations of history and by German interpretations of historical linguistics, particularly in regard to race. During the Pahlavi reign, official histories concluded that Iran was at odds with both the Arabs in the region and the Islamic religion that the Semites brought to the Iranian Plateau, which had kept Iranians from modernizing like their European cousins. Iran was in stasis, held back by their Islamic religious traditions from both their glorious past and their modern future. In fact, both Pahlavi Shahs spent extravagant sums glorifying Iran’s pre-Islamic “Aryan” and Persian history in order to marginalize the clerical establishment, justify monarchical legitimacy, villainize regional Arabs, and promote European-styled modernization projects. ¹⁰⁷

During the 1960s and 1970s, thinkers such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad¹⁰⁸ and Ali Shari’ati wrote popular critiques of alienating Orientalist histories and encouraged Iranians to seek a more

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¹⁰⁸ Author of the famous book, *Gharbzadegi*, which has been translated into English as: “Westoxification,” “Westernstrickeness,” “Occidentosis,” “Westitis,” or “Euromania.”
authentic modernity within their Islamic heritage. While Khomeini was in exile, Shari’ati’s transformative interpretation of Shi’ism as an Islamic revolutionary ideology had tremendous influence among Iranian youth and religious leftists. Often referred to as “the ideologue of the Islamic Revolution,” Shari’ati synthesized Shi’i Islam, Western Marxism, Franz Fanon’s Third World anticolonial thought, and French Existentialism to create an anti-imperial, anticapitalist, and anticlerical Islamic ideology of resistance. In his vision of history, Shari’ati recast Marx’s history of class struggle in terms of a struggle between “the Oppressed” (mostaz’afin) and “the Oppressors” (mostakbarin or taghut). Shari’ati also distinguished between the false, institutionalized, static, passive Shi’ism exemplified in Iran’s clerical hierarchy with a true, active, revolutionary Shi’ism that had been since the early days of Islam. These true Shi’ites took the place of Marx’s proletariat as the main agents of revolutionary change who could prepare the way for Imam Mahdi’s messianic return and usher in a new period of justice, as opposed to Marx’s future age of utopian communism.\(^\text{109}\) Shari’ati also transformed the traditional interpretation of the Shi’i primordial myth—the Battle of Karbala—from one of quietist perseverance for otherworldly justice to a revolutionary model of resistance in the here and now, and recast Imam Husseyn into the original Third World revolutionary par excellence.\(^\text{110}\) Rather than holding Iran hostage between tradition and modernity, true Shi’ism to Shari’ati was an authenticating and mobilizing force for resistance against the superpowers’ oppression over the Third World.

When Khomeini returned from exile on February 1, 1979, Shari’ati had been dead for over a year, but Khomeini brought his revolutionary vision to life. Incorporating the Islamic

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\(^\text{110}\) Ram, 61-92.
revolutionary language of Shari’ati’s followers, Khomeini transformed Iran’s street protests into a nationwide reenactment of the Karbala battlefield and the people of Iran into followers of Imam Husseyn against their oppressor, the Shah. Those who lost their lives in opposition to the Shah’s authoritarian regime were celebrated as martyrs who followed Husseyn’s divine model as an agent of historical change. Khomeini also appropriated Shari’ati’s revolutionary language into his own vision for clerical guardianship over the state, known as Velayat-i Faqih (literally, “guardianship of the jurist”). As the Islamic Republican Party’s clerical elite consolidated power from the other factions opposed to the Shah, they continued to refashion Shari’ati’s original anticlerical vision into its opposite: an authoritarian state based on the Shi’i clerical hierarchy. Under Khomeini’s Velayat-i Faqih, the authority of the Supreme Leader is itself based on Iran’s Shi’i historical moment: guarding over the state on behalf of its true authority, the Hidden Imam Mahdi, who will return at the end of history.

All of these revolutionary visions of history—from Marx, through Shari’ati, to Khomeini—need an exploitative or oppressing adversary. With the Shah gone, Iraq’s invasion was a godsend to Khomeini, who could do with Saddam Hussein what he had done with the Shah: use him as a common enemy to consolidate the support of Iran’s domestic political factions.\footnote{Hamid Dabashi, \textit{Iran: A People Interrupted} (New York: The New Press, 2007), 167. Dabashi argues that “throughout his revolutionary career, Khomeini’s intuitive strategy, or perhaps innate political disposition, was to pick a fight with a more powerful external enemy so his less powerful domestic opponents would be intimidated.”} When the Iraqi military invaded Iran, the clerical regime’s historical frameworks were already well established for redeployment: an “Oppressed” Iranian community of true Muslims fighting against an authoritarian “Oppressor” (whether the Shah or Hussein) within a larger oppressive bipolar international order. Saddam Hussein did not merely invade a nation; he invaded a cause, a religious tradition, and a history.
In Tehran’s first Friday prayer sermon following the Iraqi invasion, Khomeini’s protégé and future successor, Ali Khamenei, called Iraq’s invasion a “reenactment” of the Battle of the Trench: 627 AD Medina was in the same position as 1980 Iran; ‘Ibn ‘Abdud’s army of infidels was now Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist forces, Ali’s warriors of Islam were just like Iranian revolutionaries, and the Muslim conquests of early Islam would be relived in Iran’s export of Khomeini’s revolution. These sorts of direct, timeless analogies to Islamic history became commonplace throughout the war, whether from the pulpit or in slogans at the front lines. History gave a divine context to the Islamic revolutionaries’ fight, transporting fighters across time to make right the injustices suffered by the followers of Ali. As the popular slogan went, “Every day is Ashura, and every place is Karbala.”

The IRGC learned well the power of history to justify authority, allegiance, revolution, or resistance. Nowhere else can the full power of the Islamic Revolution’s historical vision be seen than during the Iran-Iraq War. The IRGC weaponized history by turning the battlefield into a stage of remembrance. Fighters wore verses of the Quran on bandanas tied around their foreheads and ran straight into minefields, passing signs pointing “this way to Karbala.” And the IRGC sent journalists to the frontlines to write heroic stories connecting Shi’i history to the hardships of young revolutionaries sitting in trenches:

The desert was hot. The warm wind blew causing everyone’s face to dry out. Warm air, parched earth, with green flags flying above the trenches. It is here where the prayer of ‘the best of deeds’ (a verse only used by Shi’ites in the call to prayer) took place and where Husayn’s Karbala was remembered. Indeed, this was Karbala. The front. Husayn’s front. Each frontline trench was the locus of purity and faithfulness. The soldiers’ weapons were devotion and fidelity. Their bullets, the ambassadors of monotheism and God’s message.

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This theme of revolutionary remembrance—whereby revolutionaries’ actions on the battlefield forge past, present, and future—is a pervasive theme of the Islamic Republic’s war posters and imagery in IRGC service publications. Recurring visual elements suggest there was an effort to literally paint the Iran-Iraq War as a New Karbala: unnamed Iranian soldiers lie on the bloodied dry earth at the hands of Iraqi oppressors; a veiled Imam Husseyn interceding in the background; ancient martyrs’ hands reaching up from the earth in solidarity around the fighter’s corpse; fallen fighters in IRGC uniforms guided or carried to their redemptive paradise by Imam Husseyn or headless martyrs; soldiers running through the gates of Karbala to reach Jerusalem; Iraqis as the Yazid “Other”; Iranian child soldiers as the innocent party of Husseyn.114

“Remembering Karbala,” said one historian of Iran’s visual culture, “is not only about recollecting what happened but also emulating it.”115 There was a redemption of the past in Iran’s present suffering in the trenches: Husseyn’s martyrdom could be vindicated and Islam—and through Islam, the world—could be liberated from injustice and corruption, and so prepare the way for the end of days.116 It was this redemptive suffering that was referred to in the popular war slogan, “Victory of blood over the sword.”

Beyond the IRGC, the Iranian state more broadly also seeks to “prevent the distortions” that come as direct memories of the 1979 revolution and the war of the 1980s are passing into indirectly received cultural memories. Intergenerational conflicts over Iran’s past have shown


how flexible post revolutionary cultural representations of martyrdom can become; and therefore, how crucial it is for the state to define the terms of religious narratives and to control the spaces where images of martyrdom proliferate. As a result, state-backed institutions such as the massive Martyrs’ Foundation are committed to memorializing the war through educational initiatives, publications, film, museums, and public visual art projects.\textsuperscript{117} In 2006, Basiji students with coffins on their shoulders pushed through protesting crowds of students to bury the recovered remains of unnamed martyrs of the Imposed War on the campus of the nation’s most prestigious university, Sharif University of Technology. This conversion of public space into a revolutionary shrine was part of a much larger effort to permeate public spaces with the symbolic, figurative, and quite literal death of martyrs of the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War.\textsuperscript{118}

Three years later, following the contested reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian state found itself on the wrong side of the martyrdom narrative when a video captured the death of a young unarmed female, Neda Agha-Soltan, shot during a street protest in which many sources claimed she was not even participating. As antiprotest forces scrambled to control any public space where her death could be memorialized, cyberspace was transformed into a new revolutionary stage: the ninety-second clip of Neda’s death went viral and the language of martyrdom, sacrifice, and oppression was applied against the authoritarian regime.\textsuperscript{119} That both generations—and that groups representing both state and society—employ


the culture of martyrdom for their political purposes, indicates the importance of understanding how these narratives change over time to meet contemporary challenges. Although particular interpretations of the martyrdom narrative may become stale, when roles are recast in the story, they can generate remarkable mobilizing power. The IRGC Center sees this challenge clearly and has developed a publishing agenda seeking to fuel its own revolutionary flames for the next generation, often using the memories of the Iran-Iraq War as kindling.

While the IRGC’s publication agenda can certainly be thought of as propaganda in the sense of “organized persuasion,” there are four particularly notable features of the Center’s publications that set them apart from conventional forms of propaganda. First, there is an intentional effort to publish—both online and in print—copies of primary source documents from the war, even decorating some of the Center’s quarterlies with scanned images of orders signed by high-ranking military commanders.

Second, with the exception of the literary genre and the graphic compilations, the citations provided in the majority of the Center’s works are extensive, sometimes numbering in the hundreds per chapter. More interestingly, the Center’s authors do not merely cite from material published internal to the IRGC or even Iran, but cite Western media and Western scholarship throughout their narratives alongside their own sources. The Center’s narratives clearly favor Iran in general, and the IRGC in particular, but rather than wholly ignoring outsider views, their publications often opt to directly engage foreign media and scholarship. The most common example of engaging Western sources is the extensive citation of Western media sources incorporated into their narratives. Second, IRGC historians often raise a disparaging

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viewpoint or theory for the purpose of direct critique, such as one IRGC history that devotes an entire 70-page chapter to articulating interpretations of prominent Western academics and political leaders. A third example are the translations of articles by Western scholars, journalists, US military strategists, or political leaders that are published in journals such as Negin.

Third, there appears to be an intentional effort to engage conflicting views of the war and to facilitate debates over competing opinions about the war, both within Iran’s elite and by engaging foreign perspectives. For example, Negin’s placement of interviews with Hashemi Rafsanjani next to interviews Mohsen Rezaei—two power players known for their disagreement over when to continue and when to end the war—does not suggest an attempt to orchestrate an artificial, unified opinion within the regime, as one might expect from a propaganda effort to retell why and how hundreds of thousands of Iranians lost their lives. Still, the official historical narratives appear to be tightly controlled. Even within IRGC publications commanders have raised concerns that both censorship and retaliation over dissenting opinions are problems within the armed forces and the IRGC. In a 2008 interview, Brigadier General Nasrollah Ezzati mentioned that even at military academies or military headquarters “security agencies . . . implement serious restrictions not just in writing the history of the war, but even in speeches.”

The extent to which the Center is directly engaging foreign scholarship and outside critiques is surprising. For example, the Center published an entire series of critical analyses of the war seeking to ask the following: “Was the war inevitable?” “Should the war have continued following Iran’s victory at Khorramshahr?” and “Should the war have ended as it did with

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122 Nasrollah Ezzati, in “Military Commanders and Compiling War History: Capabilities and Limitation,” Negin-i Iran (Spring 2008), 71.
Resolution 598?” The first book in this series lists and explains the main critiques of authors and critics—many of them foreign or even dissident groups—who have written about the Iran-Iraq War. Another example is a series titled Jang az Negah-i Digaran [The War from the Perspective of Others], which is a compilation of translations from foreign authors writing about the war. One translator’s introduction to a translated history of the war written by Egypt’s Minister of Defense during the conflict, Abd al-Halim Abu Ghazala, mentions that the book was important for Iranians to read precisely because they considered Abu Ghazala’s perspective to be representative “of the opposing camp.” While it should be mentioned that Abd al-Halim’s overall analysis actually favored Iran, the Center nonetheless used this publication as an example of its attempt to provide alternative analyses of the war for Iranians who lived through it and wanted to achieve a more holistic perspective.

Fourth, the Center’s publications display a creative effort to analyze the war in multiple temporal and spatial scales, as well as through a variety of narrative forms and theoretical frameworks. In terms of varying temporal scales, the Center has published histories contextualizing the Iran-Iraq War with regard to the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Persia, the reordering of the Middle East after the Sykes-Picot Agreement following the First World War, and even a study looking at causes of war in the region over millennia. In the six-volume series titled Sayri dar Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq (An Overview of the Iran-Iraq War), the first five

126 Abu Ghazalah, 8-9.
128 Muhammad Durudiyan, Ijtinab Napaziri-yi Jang [The Inevitability of War] (Tehran: Sepah Center for Sacred Defense Documents and Research, 1391). Durudiyan mentions in the conclusion that this is a part of the book’s analysis.
volumes analyze the war by breaking the war into five periods of time, separated by major battles as turning points that drive the narrative. The last book in this series analyzes the war by looking at eight twelve-month periods of time, whereby each period received a chapter designed around answering the most crucial question that Iran faced during that time.129

Though unstated explicitly in the histories reviewed, it is reasonable that the IRGC’s innovative methodology of using multiple temporal scales of analysis is related to how the organization’s historians understand the reasons for the war itself. On the one hand, the IRGC is clear that the fundamental catalyst for the war was the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and not Iran’s border disputes with Iraq. At the same time, their publications also acknowledge that the war had deeply entrenched historical antecedents which were shaped on multiple layers of power projection: tribal/ethnic, sectarian, Ottoman-Persian Empires, Anglo-Russian imperialism, US-Soviet Cold War competition, the Iran-Iraq nation-states.130

The Center has also published histories structured around varying spatial scales, looking at the war through the unique perspectives of single cities, single provinces, and particular foreign countries through a regional perspective131 and in the global context of the two Cold War superpowers.132 The variety of geographical scales should not merely be interpreted as a creative way of analyzing war. Rather, there is a relationship between the IRGC’s spatial scales of analysis; the IRGC’s interpretation of local, regional, and global aggressions; and the unique objectives that Iran’s adversaries had in carrying out those aggressions. A former head of the Center made the relationship between spatial scales of analysis and the Revolution itself:

130 Hoseyn Ardestani, Jang-i Iran va ’Iraq, Ruyiarui-yi Istratizhi-ha, 175.
“Because the Islamic Revolution had repercussions at the national level (Iraq), the regional level (Gulf States), and the international levels (United States, Europe, and Russia), the causes and objectives for attacking Iran should be studied in relation to the objectives at each of these levels.”

IRGC histories also exhibit a variety of conceptual frameworks. Nearly every issue of the Center’s main quarterly publication, Negin, has a section discussing the advantages and disadvantages of theoretical frameworks. Additionally, the Center has published stand-alone works that apply particular methodological approaches to the Iran-Iraq War, such as various international relations theories, Game Theory, and Just War Theory.

On September 22, 2017, the thirty-seventh anniversary of Iraq’s invasion of Iran’s Khuzestan Province, Iran tested its newest ballistic missile: the Khorramshahr missile, named after the city in Khuzestan that was liberated by the IRGC in what their histories consistently describe as one of the greatest victories—if not the greatest victory—of the eight-year war. Despite these clear references to the Iran-Iraq War, English media reported the missile test as a clear act of defiance against President Trump’s speech at the United Nations three days prior, often without a single reference to the war during which Iran’s indigenous missile program was created. The omission of IRGC publications from the English historiography exacerbates such decontextualized analyses by American journalists and Iran analysts.

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Sources written by IRGC field historians and histories published by the IRGC Center for Sacred Defense Documents and Research necessitate careful reading and nuanced inclusion into the existing historiography. The IRGC Center’s origin as a political entity and its role in fulfilling some of the regime’s propagandist objectives should not—and need not—be ignored. However, the near total disregard for these documents from the existing English historiography is unjustified. Exclusion of these records contributes to an unbalanced and highly biased historical record that exacerbates the deep lack of empathy and understanding between English-speaking nations and the Islamic Republic, especially considering the inclusion of Baathist Party records into the most recent English-language histories of the conflict. IRGC histories may provide narrow representations of history, but they also reveal limitations in the existing literature that informs Anglo-American policymakers and English journalism.

Chapter IV.
Imposed War

One of the most common ways that the Islamic Republic refers to the Iran-Iraq War is with the term Jang-i Tahmili, or the “Imposed War.” Typically, the term “Imposed War” is interpreted in English historiography as merely referring to Iran’s claim that the war was imposed onto the Islamic Republic by Iraq when the latter invaded the former on September 22, 1980. While this interpretation is accurate, it is too simplistic and cannot account for the multidimensional ways that IRGC historians have written about the conflict or applied the term. IRGC historians use the theme of imposition in a variety of ways, depending on which of Iran’s various opponents is viewed as the imposer. This chapter examines the theme of imposition and “Imposed War” in IRGC publications in order to consider the IRGC’s preferred framework for understanding Iran’s international context, scapegoating of “the West,” and the organization’s self-perceived relationship to Iranian society in the face of regional and global challenges.

It should not be surprising that Iranians would demand explanations and scapegoats for why their government waged an eight-year war, why it cost hundreds of thousands of lives and billions of dollars, and why it yielded no territorial gains or additional resources. On the surface, there is nothing unique about framing a war which took place along a national border in terms of an “imposing aggressor” and an “imposed defender.” But when the war began in September 1980, no one had any idea that it would last eight years or demand so much from the Iranian people. Even after Iran continued the war onto Iraqi soil in 1982, the IRGC continued to push the theme that the war was “imposed” upon them by outside aggressors. While Iran is always cast as the “defender” in the official narrative, the role of the “aggressor” is more complicated. Iraq was not the only aggressor in the war, and not always the most relevant. Even as Iran seeks to influence current events in Iraq today, Iranian state news agencies continue to publish dozens of
articles every day which employ the term “Imposed War” as one of the war’s two main naming conventions (the other being the “Sacred Defense”). Iranian military commanders still regularly employ this phrase in public speeches. Why did this name, “Imposed War,” take hold during its earliest days? How has it changed over time? And how is it used in the press today?

One of the clearest themes in IRGC’s histories is that the Iran-Iraq War was not merely “imposed” upon Iran by Saddam Hussein, but also by both Cold War superpowers—especially the United States—and even by the international community as a whole. This framing is a product of the historical context into which the Islamic Republic was created, and it is rooted in the ideological framework of the Islamic Revolution. The story of the Iran-Iraq War is the story of a Third World nation that dared to challenge the Cold War order and how the two superpowers tried and failed to regain that exploitative order when Iran thwarted their schemes, whether in the form of coup attempts, foreign-backed domestic dissidents, economic sanctions, trade embargoes, or even proxy militaries.

The IRGC’s histories, particularly in its earliest publications, use the language of Cold War binaries between Eastern communism and Western capitalist imperialism. Groups opposed to the consolidation of clerical rule following the revolution are spoken of as “lackeys” seeking to manipulate Iran from the inside, whether of the US-backed liberal variety or the Soviet-backed leftist camp.138 Over time, corresponding with the drawdown of the Cold War, IRGC narratives focus less on finding a third way between the superpowers and become increasingly anti-American, though much of the language of “the West” and “the East” is still reflected in public discourse today.

When dealing with the war’s outbreak, almost none of the IRGC histories reviewed begin with Iraq as their starting point, as one might imagine in a war over territorial rights. Rather, these histories consistently frame the conflict in terms of how the Islamic Revolution of 1979 upset the global balance of powers in the region and the US and the Soviet incentives to reestablish the prerevolutionary order, or at least to limit the Islamic Revolution from spreading beyond Iran: “The main issue,” to quote former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, “is not the concept of war, nor of conflict. The main and most urgent objective was to overturn the revolutionary government ruling Iran, or to constrain [the revolution], in order to restore the old order.” With the loss of the Shah, the United States lost a number of strategic advantages in the region in terms of both access to resources and as a buffer state against the spread of communism. The Soviets, on the other hand, while benefiting geopolitically from the collapse of the American-backed Shah, were threatened by the possibility of the Islamic Revolution spreading to its Muslim-majority states to its south. IRGC histories have argued that it was the potential threat of Iran’s religious ideology that necessitated the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This analysis actually corresponds to the Soviet archival material, which revealed the Soviet assessment that Iran’s “spark of religious fanaticism all around the Muslim

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142 Ibid.
East was the underlying cause of the activation of the struggle against the government of Afghanistan.”

This global framing extends beyond merely the fact that the Iran-Iraq War occurred during the late Cold War. According to the IRGC histories detailed below, the Imposed War that broke out in the 1980s was in fact preceded by layers of impositions that never fully healed. Particularly important to the IRGC’s historical framework is the relationship between the Imposed War of the 1980s (as framed within the larger American-Soviet Cold War) and the Anglo-Russian “Great Game” that shaped Persia’s nineteenth century.

The late Hosseyn Ardestani, a former director of the IRGC’s premier history office, contextualized the Iran-Iraq border conflict into the longer story of Anglo-Russian impositions for access to extract resources and penetrate markets. For Ardestani, Iraq’s Imposed War against Iran could not be understood fully apart from the larger imposition of Anglo-Russian imperialism that shaped the legacy of Ottoman conflicts left for the nation of Iraq to resolve. The logic of Ardestani’s argument is as follows: because of border disputes between the Persian and Ottoman Empires, the Russian and British Empires could not take full advantage of the concessions they were obtaining for the region’s natural resources, nor could their merchants sell British or Russian goods in the region freely. For this reason, in 1847, the Russians and British pressured the Ottomans and Persians to the bargaining table in the Second Treaty of Erzurum.

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144 Ardestani, 27.
which would become the basis for twentieth century Ottoman-Persian and Iraq-Iran treaties
dealing with water and land rights along the Shatt al-Arab and the Iran-Iraq border region. When
the treaty proved insufficient to resolve border disputes, the Russians and British again pressured
the Ottomans and Persia into signing more detailed agreements (in 1911, 1912, 1914, and 1937)
that eventually gave full control of the Shatt al-Arab river to the Ottomans. With the collapse of
the Ottoman Empire after World War I, these territorial rights—and their contested bases—were
in turn granted to the British mandate of Iraq, and later the British granted full control of the
Shatt al-Arab to the nation of Iraq in 1937. 145 According to Ardestani, the history of these border
conflicts followed a particular pattern in which imposed treaties begot imposed wars:

The sheer number of treaties and the amount of time these disputes have continued are
indicative of how deeply rooted Iran’s border disputes are with its western neighbor. And
this is evidenced by the fact that not one of the treaties ever addressed all aspects of the
two sides’ views. [Rather], generally unequal conditions have been imposed (tahmil
shodeh ast) on one side or the other. And for this reason, the aggrieved side has imposed
(tahmil kardeh ast) war at the first available chance, whether by acquiring more power or
whenever the other side became weak or dysfunctional.” 146 (Emphasis added)

At a more local level, despite the fact that both the Ottoman and Persian Empires
consistently claimed ownership of the region surrounding the Shatt al-Arab since the early
sixteenth century, the area’s Arab tribal leaders had long disregarded either empire’s authority.
In fact, the Port of Khorramshahr on the Iranian side of the river had functioned as an
autonomous state for over a hundred years before Reza Shah Pahlavi claimed it as part of the
Iranian province of Khuzestan in 1936. 147 Beyond the imposing of power from above onto the
tribespeople of the region from Ottomans, Persians, and British oil companies, imposition took a
new Westphalian form in 1920 with the British Mandate of Iraq, and later the independent nation

145 Ibid., 38-49.
146 Ibid., 44.
147 Saskia Gieling, Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 13-14; Peter
Hunseler, “The Historical Antecedents of the Shatt al-'Arab Dispute,” in The Iran-Iraq War: An Historical,
of Iraq in 1932. For the first five years following Iraq’s independence, the young nation fought with Iran over their national boundaries until they signed a 1937 agreement along the Shatt al-Arab’s deep water line.\(^{148}\)

This history of imposition forms the backdrop for not only the IRGC’s early explanations of the territorial disputes and national sovereignty, but also for Iran’s domestic political struggles. The introduction to a 1982 IRGC history published on the second anniversary of the war’s outbreak picks up the history of imposition by tying the 1953 US-backed coup of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh to the IRGC’s ongoing domestic political struggles with then President Abol Hassan Bani Sadr’s liberal faction:

Liberals were those who, in 1953, paved the way for the victory of the U.S. in a sinister coup. In 1953, the legal government of Prime Minister Mossadegh (who nationalized the oil company and took away most of the Shah’s power) was toppled by a gang of thugs who were paid by the U.S. Embassy in Tehran to return the defunct Shah to power.\(^ {149}\)

Through this framework of imposition, it was the West that put Mohammad Reza Shah into power when his father (Reza Shah) showed German sympathies, and it was the West that secured his power when Mossaddegh threatened to give Iran’s wealth and autonomy back to the Iranian people. Now that the Islamic Revolution had liberated Iran from foreign domination under the authoritarian Shah, the United States was back at its old efforts for regime change. In multiple works, IRGC historians refer to the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran as “the Second Revolution,” noting that the “First Revolution” removing the Shah would merely lead to a repeat of Mossadegh’s coup in 1953.\(^ {150}\) When the US government allowed the Shah to enter America for cancer treatment, the revolution took on a new phase against the United States directly.

\(^{148}\) Gieling, 13-14; Hunseler, 20-37.
According to the IRGC PAO, it was out of fear that the history of imposition would repeat itself—with another American-led coup attempt—that Iranian revolutionaries stormed the US embassy in November 1979. 151

A look at the early IRGC literature shows that this framework of imposition was applied to all kinds of challenges facing the early Islamic Republic. In the summer of 1980, the IRGC PAO published a collection of communiques, including one dated May 31, 1980, titled “The U.S. Conspiracies Against Iran’s Islamic Revolution.” Issued one month following Operation Eagle Claw (President Jimmy Carter’s failed attempt to rescue the hostages at the Tehran embassy), this statement used the timing of counterrevolutionary events in the Islamic Republic to suggest that “the U.S. military invasion of Iran” was not merely attempting to rescue the embassy hostages, but was rather an attempt to bring about regime change through military force. A key component of this argument focused on the timing of counterrevolutionary events in Iran and their escalation toward violent uses of force, including efforts to influence universities to create ideological clashes; threatening economic sanctions; Western propaganda efforts against Iran’s new leaders or their Islamic themes; bombings in Khuzestan and Tehran; reorganizing Iranian dissidents and old SAVAK (Iranian secret police) members; and US Navy maneuvers around the Strait of Hormuz and in the Persian Gulf. 152 A later 1982 IRGC publication built upon this theme and argued that a number of developments proved that the superpowers were conspiring to impose the prerevolutionary order: the April 1980 Operation Eagle Claw; the Nowjeh Coup attempt of Iranian military officers (July 1980); confidential

negotiations between Iraq and the superpowers; and domestic political struggles between Soviet-backed leftists and US-backed liberals.\(^\text{153}\)

In the latest installment of this “Great Game” for control of Iran between the Anglo-Americans and Russians/Soviets, the superpowers saw an opportunity in Saddam Hussein. By September 1982, the idea that Hussein was a proxy had become explicit in IRGC publications: “World imperialism forced its mercenary, Saddam, into the war fields, dreaming it could create another Israel here.”\(^\text{154}\) Later IRGC histories articulated the US-Iraq relationship as an alignment of interests:

“The removal of Hassan al-Bakr and the rise of Saddam Hussein was the turning point in Iraq’s domestic developments which put it on the path toward war. Because of the changing internal developments of both countries (ie., Iran and Iraq), and because of America’s fading hopes for moderates to rule in the region after the seizure of the American embassy on [November 4, 1979], Iran-Iraq relations became the victim, and America changed its policy from one of ‘wait and see,’ to one of ‘antagonize and intervene.’ . . . The emergence of a new situation intensified and facilitated the alignment of American and Iraqi interests: [During Summer/Fall 1980], the effects of this alignment were made manifest. After the failure of the Nojeh coup detat (during [July 1980]), when America gave up hope of changing the government via coup d’état, it was only a matter of time until military power was used against Iran and Iraq would attack. And so it happened that on [September 22, 1980], Iraq invaded Iran by land, air, and sea.”\(^\text{155}\)

While contextualizing the conflict into a wider temporal frame, IRGC historians claimed that this latest turn in the history of imposition against Iran signified something new and more sinister than a political move to protect the superpowers’ interests. More than a war over mere territory or material resources, this was a war against the Islamic Revolution and Iran’s new Islamic national identity. In the Anglo-Russian imposition, treaties were imposed upon Iran in order to extract resources and penetrate markets. In the era of the American-Soviet imposition,


the imposition had become spiritualized: to destroy the Islamic national identity, to prevent the
spread of the Islamic Revolution, and to restore as much exploitative hegemony as possible.
Such sentiments are reflected in the dedication of one of the IRGC’s earliest publications, a 1981
doctrinal training text for its new recruits, which introduces the war as “Iraq’s Imposed War, by
the command of the global leader in blasphemy and international arrogance, America, against
Islamic Iran.”\textsuperscript{156} This was a war that had been “organized for the purpose of overturning Iran’s
revolutionary government and destroying the Islamic Revolution” and thus was meant to restore
the global order advantageous to the superpowers.\textsuperscript{157} In order to prevent the spread of the Islamic
revolutionary message, the superpowers sought to “create a situation whereby the revolution . . .
would remain dependent and subordinate to Western and Eastern power interests.”\textsuperscript{158} Such
conspiratorial efforts included US espionage operations following the revolution, the December
1979 economic sanctions, the April 1980 Operation Eagle Claw, the July 1980 Nowzeh coup
attempt, and ethnic counterrevolution protests in Kurdistan and Gonbad, and when all of these
failed, only then did Iraq invade Iran.\textsuperscript{159} The IRGC published an entire book—which in turn
formed the basis of an entire series of books—articulating a theoretical framework that
connected the revolution to the war in order to understand “Iran-Iraq relations in the context of
the Superpowers’ policies.”\textsuperscript{160}

\textsuperscript{156} Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, \textit{Artish-i Maktabi}, (Tehran: Sipah-i Pasdaran-i Inqilab-i Islami,
\textsuperscript{157} Ayatollah Khamenei in Muhammad Durudiyan, \textit{Sayri dar Jang-i Iran va ’Iraq, Jild-i 6: Aghaz ta Payan}
[Survey of the Iran-Iraq War, Vol 6: Beginning to End] (Tehran: Markaz-i Mutala’at va Taghqiqat-i Jang,
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{159} Supreme Defense Council: War Information Headquarters, Introduction to \textit{The Imposed War: Defence
vs Aggression} (Tehran: Sipah-i Pasdaran-i Inqilab-i Islami, 1983); Muhammad Durudiyan, \textit{Ijtinab Napaziri-yi Jang}
\textsuperscript{160} Muhammad Durudiyan, \textit{Naqд va Barrasi-yi Jang-i Iran va ’Iraq: Ijtinab Napaziri-yi Jang [A Critical
Analysis of the Iran-Iraq War: The Inevitability of War]} (Tehran: Sepah Center for War Studies and Research, 1382
By framing the war with Iraq as a conspiratorial plot against the Islamic Revolution that was designed and supported by the secular superpowers (especially the United States), the IRGC’s narratives transform the war into a global and spiritual war against Iran and its sacred revolution. From this perspective, the Iran-Iraq War was not only a war imposed upon Iran by Iraq, but it was a war to reinpose the exploitative conditions overturned by Iran’s “First Revolution” to oust the US-backed Shah and by its “Second Revolution” to close the US embassy. For this reason, IRGC’s publication have often referred to the Iran-Iraq War as “The Third Revolution.” In a sense, the Islamic Revolution had gone global: Iran against nearly the entire world. All subsequent support for Iraq would be viewed through—and confirm—this conspiratorial perspective that the war with Iraq was imposed upon Iran by the superpowers in order to stop the Islamic Revolution.

In addition to seeing Iraq’s invasion of Iran as an American-Soviet imposition, the IRGC also frames the war’s continuation during the summer of 1982 as an imposition of the UN and the international community. According to a former director of the IRGC Center, the ratification of UN Resolution 514 on July 14, 1982, called for Iran to participate in unconditional negotiations toward a cease-fire, which intentionally disregarded Iran’s conditions to label Iraq as the aggressor in the conflict and to require Iraq to pay reparations. Had the UN recognized these demands, the IRGC claims that the war would have ended during the summer of 1982. Because of US influence upon the UN Security Council, according to Ardestani, this resolution was intended to keep the war from ending in any way that would be advantageous to the Iranians:

From the Americans’ perspective, any end to the war which gave Iran a military or political advantage would be submitting to the Islamic Revolution . . . [and] the whole

161 Sipah-i Pasdaran, Guzari bar Du Sal-i Jang, 22.
162 Muhammad Durudiyan, Aghaz ta Payan, 68.
aim of the Imposed War was to prevent the Islamic Revolution from spreading. So ending the war when Iran was ahead would be contrary to this goal.\footnote{Hoseyn Ardestani, 
\textit{Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq, Ruyiarui-yi Istratizhi-ha} [Confrontation of Strategies in the Iran-Iraq War] (Tehran: Sepah Center for Sacred Defense Documents and Research, 1388 [2009/2010]), 129.}

According to IRGC historians, UN Resolution 514 was not concerned with achieving peace, or else it would have been ratified during the previous 20 months of fighting.\footnote{Ibid., 129-130.} Rather, this resolution was passed in response to a series of sweeping victories from September 1981 to May 1982, during which Iran drove the majority of Iraqi forces out of the war’s southern sector and regained control of Iraq’s two main points of leverage for negotiations: Abadan and Khorramshahr.\footnote{Ibid., 101; In fact, UN Resolution 479 had aimed to negotiate a ceasefire on September 28, 1980, but was essentially a formal request to resolve differences through peaceful means and included no acknowledgement of Iraq’s invasion.} Therefore, UN Resolution 514 “was more concerned with rescuing Iraq’s regime and buying time until Iraq could regroup and rebuild its military to counter Iran.”\footnote{Ibid., 130.}

In response to what the IRGC interpreted as an international imposition of violence against Iran, on July 14, 1982—two days after Resolution 514 was ratified—it launched Operation Ramadan on Iraqi soil: “By carrying out [Operation Ramazan], Iran not only officially rejected the [UN Security] Council’s new resolution, it defied its injustice.”\footnote{Ibid.} IRGC historians articulated the continuation of the war as “inevitable,” in the sense that Iran was left with no choice but to take offensive action onto Iraqi territory in order to defend itself. Saddam Hussein was not to be trusted, and any cease-fire would be designed by the US-led international community to allow Iraq to regroup its forces and strike again in the future after it had amassed even more foreign weapons. This idea that Iran was forced into offensive action as a means of defense is reflected in some of the phrases used to describe this turning point: invading Iraq as “punishing the aggressors . . . [as] an act of self-preservation,” or “aggressive action against the
aggressors.”\textsuperscript{168} Rather than taking on the role of the aggressor, IRGC historians wrote about Iran’s invasion of Iraq as a “Punishment of the Aggressors,” which is also a title of one of its books on this turning point in the war.\textsuperscript{169}

Some IRGC histories acknowledge that when Iran invaded Iraq in July 1982, there was no clear vision for how the conflict would end.\textsuperscript{170} Some of these works also acknowledge the often dramatic differences of opinions that emerged concerning whether Iran should take the fight onto Iraqi soil and how such operations should proceed.\textsuperscript{171} Still, gradually a consensus emerged between military and political leaders: the only option for peace would be to carry out an operation so successful that Iran could use it as leverage in negotiations with Iraq.\textsuperscript{172} The IRGC would have to go on the offensive to fight for peace, and Operation Ramadan was referred to as the first attack under such an “honorable peace strategy.”\textsuperscript{173} In effect, IRGC historians wrote about the war after the summer of 1982 as a conflict to transform a war imposed upon Iran into an advantageous peace deal it could impose upon Iraq.

IRGC historians not only used a framework of imposition to explain when the war began and ended but also to explain the challenges that it faced while fighting Iraq. As early as September 1982, IRGC historians were contextualizing its challenges with Iraq within a framework of “global” imposition led by the United States and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union and Israel.\textsuperscript{174} This global imposition consists of at least four key components: restricting

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 130-131.
\item \textsuperscript{169} Hoseyn Ardestani, ed. \textit{Tanbih-i Mutijaviz: Tajziyah va Tahlil-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq} [Punishing the Aggressor; Analysis of the Iran-Iraq War] (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 2005/2006), vol. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{170} Muhammad Durudiyan, \textit{Aghaz ta Payan: Salnama-yi Tahlili} [Beginning to End: A Year-By-Year Analysis] (Tehran: Sepah Center for War Studies and Research), 70.
\item \textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 75-76.
\item \textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 70-71.
\item \textsuperscript{173} Hoseyn Ardestani, \textit{Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq, Ruyiarui-yi Istratizhi-ha}, 132.
\end{itemize}
Iran’s military and economy; supporting Iraq’s military and economy; providing Iraq with intelligence; and later in the war, directing US action against Iran in the Persian Gulf to pressure Iran into a disadvantageous peace deal.

First, the United States and its allies restricted Iran’s warfighting options by imposing economic sanctions and by placing embargoes on the weapons and spare parts Iran needed. The efforts by the United States to constrain Iran’s military capabilities have been well documented in English-language histories and news media, and IRGC historians often cite mainstream American newspapers and US congressional testimonies regarding the arms sales, embargoes, and their relations to US foreign policy. IRGC historians interpreted US economic policies through the lens of the Imposed War narrative—manipulating oil prices to put Iran at a disadvantage—or through efforts taken under Operation Staunch to prevent, delay, degrade, or raise the cost of arms that Iran tried to purchase from abroad. Another oft-repeated challenge was that, before leaving Iran, US military advisors destroyed the digital inventory data that documented Iran’s armaments and spare parts, which made it difficult to locate the parts Iran had available and nearly impossible to obtain technical information for purchasing spare parts. As will be discussed in Chapter Five, the challenges associated with obtaining and maintaining technical weapons contributed to the conflict between the IRGC and Artesh regarding how to

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176 Ardestani, Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq, Ruyiarui-yi Istratizhi-ha, 141. Ardestani argues that the United States pressured Saudi Arabia to overproduce its oil in order to lower the global price of oil as an effort to diminish Iran’s purchasing power.

fight the war most effectively, as the “classic” warfighting doctrine advocated by the Artesh made Iranian forces more dependent upon reliable supply chains than did the IRGC’s guerrilla tactics.

Second, the international community imposed war onto Iran by enabling Iraq’s economy and military. While Iran struggled to obtain the weapons that it needed, nearly the entire international community supported Iraq through arms sales, financing, and political support (especially in the UN Security Council). IRGC historians detail the many international arms purchases granted to Iraq, as well as actions taken to free up Iraq’s economy for the war effort, such as removing Iraq from the US terrorism list so that lines of credit for grains and cereals could be issued. In this regard, IRGC narratives are largely in line with those of English-language histories of the war. One point of consensus by most historians outside Iran is that the outcomes of the Iran-Iraq War—especially following July 1982—were largely determined by arms sales and supply logistics that were beyond the control of either Iraq or Iran. Where IRGC histories are unique are in their efforts to connect the arms trade and economic policies with the superpowers’ refusal to allow Iran to emerge from the conflict victorious, and how those very attempts undercut their own long term objectives in the region and created instability. Often IRGC narratives connect the timing of Iran’s successes with efforts by the international community to financially support and arm Iraq, especially following the liberation of Khorramshahr (May 24, 1982) and Iran’s occupation of the Faw Peninsula (February–March 1986). In doing so, they also point to the conundrum that the superpowers and Gulf States

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179 Muhammad Durudiyan, Aghaz ta Payan, 72
180 Razoux, 481. “Without a reactive and well-developed supply chain and colossal stockpiles of ammunition, the Iraqi army would probably not have held the front throughout the war. Iranian offensives failed because the Pasdaran ran out of ammunition at the decisive moment, just as their adversary was weakening.”
created for their long-term regional objectives: in arming the Iraqi military to defeat Iran, “Iraq became a threat to the region, especially to Saudi Arabia and Israel.”

Third, an important theme in IRGC histories is the role of “Western” and “US” intelligence sharing, which gave the Iraqis an advantage throughout the conflict, particularly in anticipating mass ground assaults. By September 1982, IRGC publications were citing arms agreements for the delivery of AWACs to Saudi Arabia and the provision of US pilots and technical support personnel in support of Iraq. Later publications assert that intelligence provided by Iranian dissident groups, “the West,” and particularly the United States, actually formed the basis of Iraqi leaders’ decision to invade Iran in September 1980. Similarly, IRGC historians point to “the help of senior Soviet military advisors and . . . U.S. military and intelligence assistance” as key factors which allowed Iraq to come back from near defeat during the last months of the war. In general, information dominance is interwoven into the narrative of the United States and the Soviet Union working to impose its conditions upon Iran.

The theme of imposition reaches its apex in how IRGC historians recount the period between the “heroic” Karbala-5 Operation (January–February 1987), when Iranians nearly took Basra, and July 1987, when the Ba’athists were on the verge of collapse. It was during this period that the United States decided to impose direct military action against Iran in the Persian Gulf to pressure the Iranians to accept UN Resolution 598. Within its overall “strategy of imposing war” (istratizhi-yi tahmil-i jang), the United States realized that the behind-the-scenes approach of its “crisis management” strategy was insufficient and decided it was necessary to

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182 Ardestani, Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq, Ruyiarui-yi Istratizhi-ha, 182-183; Durudiyan, Aghaz ta Payan, 195.
183 Sipah-i Pasdaran, Guzari bar Du Sal-i Jang, 127.
184 Durudiyan, Aghaz ta Payan, 31-32.
185 Ibid., 173-174.
directly involve itself in ending the war. As one former IRGC Center director phrased it, “From that point on, [the United States] would be involved, not merely as a supporter of Iraq, but as Iraq’s military partner.”

The narrative of the Tanker Wars of 1987 is told in terms of the United States using direct military force to impose peace upon Iran under conditions that would deny them from gaining any advantage: “On the same day that UN Resolution 598 was ratified, the U.S. reflagged Kuwaiti oil tankers and entered the Persian Gulf with U.S. warships.” In the event that Iran would not sign the resolution, the US military was prepared to dramatically escalate conflicts in the Persian Gulf. Even though it occurred two weeks prior to ratification of UN Resolution 598, one IRGC history uses similar logic to explain why the USS *Vincennes* shot down Iran Air Flight 655, an Iranian passenger plane carrying 290 people: “During this time, the Americans shot down Iran’s passenger flight with two missiles shot from the [USS] Vincennes, a U.S. navy [cruiser] stationed in the Persian Gulf. This incident was a clear and decisive message that if Iran did not take steps to end the war, America would intensify the war.”

Noticeably absent from the IRGC narratives examined in this study were references to Iran’s tactics, strategies, or even responsibility for countering US military aggression in the Persian Gulf. It was due to “bad luck” that a Kuwaiti oil tanker (reflagged as SS *Bridgeton* during Operation Earnest Will) struck a mine near Farsi Island, with no note of how these mines got there. Iran is depicted as reacting against American aggression in the Gulf and as being forced to move its initiative away from the warfronts in the borderlands to defend itself in the

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188 Ibid., 168.
189 Ibid., 181-182.
190 Durudiyan, *Aghaz ta Payan*, 188.
Persian Gulf. There is also an interesting use of active and passive language that elevates US aggression and diminishes Iranian attribution: Americans attacked Iran’s oil platforms, as opposed to when “a U.S. oil tanker was hit by a Silkworm missile.”

After eight years of war, the Islamic Republic was again presented with an opportunity to end the war through negotiations, and this time UN Resolution 598 included some of the preconditions that prevented Iran from negotiating previously. Considering the spiritualized rhetoric used to elevate the IRGC’s revolutionary fervor and to legitimize the war, coupled with the costs Iranians had suffered, it is understandable that there were conflicting reactions to the opportunity that UN Resolution 598 presented for peace. On the one hand, the UN Security Council was potentially offering what Iran had from the beginning of the war: to name Iraq as the aggressor and provide reparations. Within Iran, public support for the war was waning, prices rising, and revolutionary rhetoric was losing its appeal to urban dwellers suffering missile attacks during the so-called War of the Cities. On the other hand, this was perceived by many in the IRGC as the latest imposition orchestrated by the US-led Security Council: “Resolution [598] was a cover to make up for a decade of the United States’ failures to effectively counter the Islamic Revolution and its leaders.” Like previous attempts to pressure Iran to the negotiation table, Resolution 598 was numerous referred to as America’s desire for an “imposed peace” (solh-i tahmili) when the Imposed War failed to reestablish an order favorable to the

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192 Ibid., 170.
193 In fact, UN Resolution 598 only acknowledged that there was a violation of peace and that sanctions would be imposed. Rather than naming Iraq as the aggressor in the resolution itself, it established a committee to determine fault.
194 Ram analyzed the theme of martyrdom seeking in Tehran Friday Prayer Sermons given during the war and argued that as early as late 1983 prayer leaders were diminishing their use of explicitly extolling martyrdom and martyrdom-seeking. Rather, in order to revive revolutionary zeal from the fatigue of Iran’s war rhetoric, prayer leaders elaborated on direct analogies of the Karbala paradigm for mobilization and support. See Ram, 76-78.
195 Ardestani, Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq, Ruyiarui-yi Istratizhi-ha, 169.
superpowers. This term, “imposed peace,” connotes the famous phrase often attributed to Ayatollah Khomeini that “an imposed peace is worse than an imposed war." 

Khomeini summoned the assessments of the leading political, economic, and military officials. The IRGC’s top commander, Mohsen Rezaei, detailed what would be required to win the war: an additional three to seven years, up to five times as many IRGC members, twice as many Artesh troops, 300 planes, and some 3,000 tanks. Despite these staggering requirements, Rezaei still argued that the IRGC was prepared to fight until victory—a confidence that Khomeini rebuked as representing nothing more than one of the IRGC’s slogans. After eight years of such slogans, Khomeini decided to accept Resolution 598.

IRGC histories do not shy away from the tensions, contradictions, and feelings of disillusionment that the acceptance of Resolution 598 caused within the IRGC. Their publications have cited both foreign and internal interpretations of factors contributing to Khomeini’s decision to give up on his vow to “fight to the last drop of blood and to the last breath” and to “drink the poison chalice” that God had prepared for him and end the war. These histories also dealt with the more intimate effects that Khomeini’s decision had on the IRGC’s morale: “People were amazed; and at the same time, their sorrow caused a wave of grief, 

as well as a kind of confusion and perplexity.” 199 There was an enormous chasm between the celebratory revolutionary myth propagated by the regime and the stark realities of waging war against a far more equipped adversary. This gap was “the most important factor for understanding the people’s spiritual and psychological state” when Iran’s imagined narrative and Iran’s actual circumstance met in UN Resolution 598. 200

In an effort to gain the upper hand in negotiations, Iraqis carried out attacks three days after Iran’s acceptance of UN Resolution 598 and successfully regained lands north of Khorramshahr. 201 In response, many Basij volunteers begged Khomeini to reopen the battle fronts so they could stand up to the Iraqis, and some IRGC fighters actually fought Iraqi occupiers apart from any official combat organization. 202 After nearly a decade of using ideology to mobilize Iranians for war, acceptance of Resolution 598 presented a new challenge to the regime: demobilizing its revolutionaries for war and remobilizing them for reconstruction.

This imposition narrative bestows a special prestige upon the IRGC—and especially its martyrs—that stands as an institution dedicated to the preservation of the very revolution that the world tried to destroy through the United States’ military proxy, Iraq. During the war, the IRGC engaged in the most heroic fighting and sacrificed the most losses, in comparison to the Artesh. It was only through these sacrifices and the martyrdom-seeking bravery that Iran was able to thwart the superpowers’ schemes. That the IRGC emerged in the decade of postwar reconstruction as the most powerful nonclerical institution in Iranian society fits well into this narrative: as an organization, it embodies the slogan “victory of blood over the sword.”

199 Ibid.
200 Ibid., 190-192.
201 Ibid., 191.
202 Ibid, 192.
This narrative also transfers responsibility away from the regime and onto the “aggressors” and “oppressors” who seek to destroy or contain the Islamic Revolution. The debates surrounding Iranian political elites’ decision to invade Iraq, the sermons and writings justifying offensive action as defensive jihad, and the careful language used to describe the period following Iran’s July 1982 advance into Iraqi territory all show how the regime was concerned with being cast as an aggressor itself.

At the same time as it exonerates the regime, the narrative of imposition casts and recasts the oppressors that are needed to perpetuate the Islamic revolutionary ideology. Hamid Dabashi has argued that the paradox of the Islamic Republic is that clerics gained legitimacy by refuting political authority, but once in a position of power themselves, they lost the legitimacy that comes with revolutionary fervor. In this sense, the IRGC’s historical narratives of imposition are crucial for the regime to maintain the authority and popular appeal that come from its anti-elitist origins. The IRGC recast familiar frameworks of oppression used against the Shah against the global elite. From this perspective, many of the IRGC’s failures in war could nonetheless draw upon the cultural power that came with their martyrdom within their global revolutionary framework.

The narrative of imposition is not without its disadvantages, which became particularly clear in the decision Iran faced during the summer of 1982. For nearly two years, as Iran tried to regain its occupied areas from Iraqis, the narrative of imposition was a simple story: push Iraqi invaders out of Iran. However, in July 1982, following a series of victories that regained occupied lands of Khuzestan, Tehran prayer leaders were committing to take Iran’s Islamic

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203 Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 216-233. Dabashi argues that this paradox of legitimacy is a theme of Shi’i history in general and of the Islamic Revolution in particular. “…the central paradox of Shi’ism as a state ideology – that it is legitimate only to the extent that it is in opposition, and that it loses its legitimacy the instant it assumes power – is finally catching up with the Islamic Republic. …Islam (Shi’ism in particular) cannot be in power without instantly discrediting itself.” (217)
revolution all the way to Jerusalem through the “gate” of Iraq.\textsuperscript{204} It soon became clear, however, that not as many Iraqi Shi’ites wanted to be liberated from their Ba’athist oppressors as Khomeini had anticipated, or at least it did not result in substantial popular support for Iranian troops. By invading Iraq, Iran was now in the position of the very “aggressor” it wished to demonize in the conflict. Creative discourses emerged from Tehran’s Friday pulpit to justify Iran’s offensive defense, especially regarding offensive jihad versus defensive war.\textsuperscript{205} IRGC histories paint Iran’s decision to invade Iraq as necessary to prevent Iraq from crossing the border again by “punishing the aggressor.” This shift toward justifying the war in Iraq out of necessity to defend the Iranian homeland had another effect: strengthening nationalist sentiment.

Despite the IRGC’s repeated emphasis upon connecting the war’s outbreak to the revolution, by framing the war as a global phenomenon against the Islamic Republic, IRGC historians place the nation-state at the center of the story. Similarly, the IRGC histories reviewed have articulated Iran’s role in the war after July 1982 as an effort to “impose peace” on Iraq by gaining significant leverage they could use in international negotiations to end the Imposed War. Intriguingly, this pragmatic narrative is somewhat at odds with the transnational pan-Islamic vision Khomeini developed in reaction to the Shah’s secular nationalist campaigns.\textsuperscript{206} Invoking Islam to mobilize popular support and justify Iran’s war in Iraq as punishment aiming to prevent future border conflicts effectively undermined Khomeini’s original vision of velayat-i faqih for a universal Islamic basis for society that subverted the imperialist Westphalian order.\textsuperscript{207} Instead,

\textsuperscript{204} Ram, 212.
\textsuperscript{205} Ram, 2.
\textsuperscript{206} This dichotomy should not be pushed too far because nationalism was always a part of Iran’s revolutionary story. The point is raised to posit that IRGC war literature contains explanatory power for relating Khomeini’s thought to the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy frameworks. For a more theological example of the same argument, see: R.K. Ramazani, “Khomeini’s Islam in Iran’s Foreign Policy,” in A. Dawisha, ed., Islam in Foreign Policy (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 18.
\textsuperscript{207} See Ram, Chapter 7, “Nationalism and Islamic World Order,” 195-227.
Khomeini’s vision merged with Iranian nationalism.\textsuperscript{208} This merger was reflected in both the editorials published by mainstream Iranian newspapers during the early days following the revolution and in public statements by Friday prayer leaders and then-President Khamenei, who began distinguishing between “positive nationalism” and “negative nationalism.”\textsuperscript{209}

IRGC histories provide examples of how flexible the narrative of imposition can be. By recasting characters into this multilayered framework of imposition, the IRGC can retell Iranian history through the domestic, regional, or international interests of its adversaries who aim to either take advantage of Iran’s resources or destroy its Islamic Revolution. Such narratives provide cohesion to modern Iranian history that connects the legacies of imperialism, the World Wars, the creation of Israel, the Cold War, the Iran-Iraq War, and the post–Cold War order. These histories provide opportunities for the IRGC to mobilize against a variety of actors, so long as the IRGC convincingly defines the Iranian people as imposed victims and effectively claims the banner of the people’s champion.

\textsuperscript{208} Annie Tracy Samuel, “Guarding the Nation: The Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Nationalism and the Iran-Iraq War,” in Constructing Nationalism in Iran: From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic, Meir Litvak, ed., (London: Routledge, 2017), 248-262. Samuel has examined IRGC histories in relationship to their nationalist themes, showing how revolutionary, Islamist, and nationalist themes have merged during and since the war period. \textsuperscript{209} Ram, 199-201, 204; Samuel makes the same point by reviewing IRGC literature and commanders’ statements, as mentioned previously.
Chapter V.
From “Classic Warfare” to Revolutionary Warfare

The IRGC’s actions during the Iran-Iraq War were shaped primarily by the international arms embargo and the domestic political turmoil of the postrevolution period. The IRGC effectively used ideology and history as tools for mobilizing popular forces to make use of Iran’s greatest advantage: a much larger populace. While the IRGC’s doctrine was the product of its historical context in which pragmatism and survival ultimately determined policy, ideology was not inconsequential to the formation and development of this pragmatic doctrine. Because the Islamic Republic failed to develop a lasting revolutionary political party, Iran’s military institutions – as with other domestic economic, welfare, and development institutions – failed to merge. The result was a highly factional and contentious domestic sphere of institutions competing for revolutionary legitimacy and popular support.

This chapter examines the relationship between IRGC historiography and this intra-elite competition by examining a politicized debate over military doctrine between the IRGC and the Artesh, in which the IRGC emphasized popular mobilization, support of the people, and leadership of the Supreme Leader. Two distinct ways of warfighting (“classic” and “nonclassic”) are repeatedly juxtaposed in IRGC publications, IRGC affiliated websites like Fars News Agency and Defa Press, and IRGC commanders’ public speeches hundreds of times by a variety of authors and speakers. By examining the terms and contexts used in IRGC publications to articulate what methods of fighting were and were not legitimate, authentic, or effective, this chapter examines how the politicization of military doctrine helped to distinguish the IRGC from Iran’s other main defense institution, the Artesh, and how popular mobilization and revolutionary commitment provided the IRGC with institutional legitimacy lasting beyond the war period.
One of the most consistent features of IRGC publications and IRGC commanders’ statements is the distinction between “classic war” (jang-e kelasik) and the new way of war that Iranians developed during the conflict. Often, the term “classic warfare” is used to merely refer to “conventional war” between two nation-states, as opposed to unconventional warfare (jang-e gheir-e kelasik, literally “nonclassic war”). Sometimes classic warfare is used by IRGC commanders to describe parity, as opposed to asymmetric warfare, as in IRGC Commander Mohsen Rezaei’s description of classic warfare: “one tank against one of the enemy’s tanks, one individual against an adversarial individual, and the same for other equipment and weapons.”

Often, as is demonstrated below, IRGC narratives juxtapose the term “classic warfare” in opposition to a number of ideas and groups (especially the Artesh, the Iraqi military, and Western military traditions) in ways that serve to distinguish the IRGC’s “nonclassic warfare” as something new and revolutionary.

In the IRGC’s war literature, classic warfare most often refers to the conventional military doctrine that the Artesh inherited from the days of the Shah. These histories consistently refer to classic warfare as the “old” way of war, as fought by professional service members in a “military aristocracy.” Classic warfare refers to the way of fighting advocated by President Bani Sadr, who forged political alliances with the Artesh in order to sideline the IRGC from ascending in influence, and hoped to eliminate the IRGC following the conflict. In classic warfare, combatants went on the offensive after defeating an adversary’s defensive positions through firepower and armor. Classic warfare was dependent upon heavy armor, artillery, and technology. As such, it required steady supplies of arms and replacement parts—something that

212 Durudiyan, Aghaz ta Payan, 34.
213 Ibid., 46.
Iran did not have—and was thus called “dependence-oriented.” Classic warfare was referred to as a “defeated strategy” because it failed to liberate Iran’s occupied areas early in the war and destroyed the morale of the armed forces. Classic doctrine was too rigid and formalized, could not quickly adapt to new developments in the war, could not incorporate innovative ideas, and failed to apply lessons learned in battle. The IRGC sometimes wrote about classic warfare as an inauthentic way of fighting: “the classic methods . . . were basically a translation of the U.S. military’s regulations.” It was an outside model imported to Iran: a “Western management of military forces.” In IRGC narratives, classic doctrine and conventional ways of thinking are repeatedly identified as a source of conflicts between IRGC and Artesh commanders throughout the war.

Early IRGC publications quickly began to distinguish themselves from the Artesh in terms of military doctrine: “After it was clear that we could achieve nothing in classic warfare, the IRGC . . . could rise to the occasion only if it negated definitively the dependence-oriented classic war, and also demonstrated the efficacy of its propounded alternative strategy.” In opposition to the Artesh’s classic way of war, IRGC histories place references to the “new,” “non-classic,” “revolutionary,” “popular,” “irregular,” “guerrilla,” “innovative,” and “asymmetric” ways of war. Such juxtapositions have remained in use ever since the early 1980s, though they have become more sophisticated.

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Where classic warfighting was embodied in the Artesh’s four big failures during the first year of the war, this new revolutionary way of war was embodied in Iran’s four big successes during the second year. Where Bani Sadr’s classic warfare failed, Khomeini’s popular approach succeeded. Citing IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaei, one history claimed that it was only when the IRGC was released from the confines of the Artesh’s “classic tables” of doctrinal procedures that the revolutionary forces were able to succeed in their popular war. Where the classic approach destroyed the military’s morale, this new warfare placed “revolutionary fervor” and “the spirit of martyrdom-seeking” at the center of the approach. Classic warfare focused on destroying the enemy’s defensive lines through artillery and the infantry played a secondary role, but this pattern was reversed in the new way of war: infantrymen were sent in successive operations, while the Artesh’s heavy armor would serve a supportive role. Where classic warfare was developed for an army of professional soldiers in a foreign aristocratic hierarchy, the new warfare employed rankless revolutionaries of all ages and from all strata of society. Classic warfare relied on technology and advanced weapons systems, but nonclassic warfare relied on

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222 Ibid.


227 Sipah-i Pasdaran, *Guzari bar Du Sal-i Jang*, 74. The IRGC articulating the mass assaults of the Southern Sector: “the active presence of the people in all fields resembled a seething river which engulfed you and swept you along its course. This was a community in which people were trying to serve and make sacrifices.”
military strategy and innovation.\textsuperscript{228} Classic war glorified the leaders at the top of the chain of command, especially Bani Sadr; nonclassic war glorified popular participation. This was a people’s war, and the institutions responsible for leading this popular resistance were the IRGC and the Basij.

The assessment of classic doctrine as negative and foreign has remained in use over time, though it has become more sophisticated. In January 2017 address, Major General Mohammad Ali Ja’fari, commander of the IRGC, identified classic warfare as the reason that Iran failed to defend itself from Iraq’s invasion during the first months of the war, noting that “classical military sciences were based on non-revolutionary principles.” However, when “Iran used military tactics based on revolutionary principles, Iran’s military was able to defend the country against the Iraqi military and emerge victorious.”\textsuperscript{229} Similarly, during a May 2017 speech at Imam Ali Officer’s College, Major General Yahya Safavi, the Supreme Leader’s special advisor on military affairs, pointed to “the adoption of a revolutionary war strategy to counter the Iraqi military’s classic war strategy” as a determining factor of Iran’s wartime successes.\textsuperscript{230}

Classic warfare was not only the Artesh’s preferred method, it was also the way that the Iraqi military fought. Whether used by the Artesh or the Iraqi forces, classic warfare is consistently blamed for failures on both sides of the battlefield. Likewise, the IRGC’s nonclassic attacks and methods were explicitly identified as the main factor in Iraq’s defeat during its successive operations that liberated the occupied areas.\textsuperscript{231}


\textsuperscript{231} Ardestani, \textit{Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq, Rayiarui-yi Istratizhi-ha}, 101.
Perhaps more importantly, classic warfare was the way the Iraqi military anticipated that Iran would fight. The IRGC sought to identify and exploit the assumptions that made Iraq’s classic framework vulnerable. IRGC operational histories, such as Durudiyan’s From Khorramshahr to Fao, detail the many innovative ways they tried to take advantage of the element of surprise: conducting extensive nighttime operations, nighttime reconnaissance missions, and nighttime minesweeping operations to make Iraqi forces believe an operation was underway and to keep Iraqi forces from sleeping prior to ambushes planned for the following day; taking advantage of both Iranian and Iraqi routines in operations planning; using terrain and camouflage; choosing intentionally risky objectives over more obvious ones; and employing denial and deception tactics to counter intelligence operations that the United States was conducting on behalf of Iraq.232 In this history, IRGC operations were successful because “the enemy was trapped by classic thinking.”233 By contrast, the author sees constant innovation as a key aspect of the IRGC’s defense: “Because of our experience and our mindset of nonclassic warfare, it took the Iraqis some time to adjust to the new situation, which gave our forces the time and opportunity to inflict damage upon the enemy.”234

In some ways, the story of the IRGC itself mirrors the trajectory of the relationship between classic and nonclassic—conventional and unconventional—warfare in Iran’s military forces. After the revolution and a number of coup attempts, the future and leadership of the Western-trained Artesh were unclear, as many of Khomeini’s supporters doubted the military’s allegiance. Realizing the weak state of the Artesh when many of Iran’s highest-ranking officers

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232 Mohammad Durudiyan, Khorramshahr ta Fao (Tehran: Sepah Center for War Studies and Research, 1988). The element of surprise is a theme throughout this text, it is listed in nearly every military operation as a key objective, and is the first reason listed as to why Iran was successful in taking the Fao Peninsula in Operational Val-Fajr-8.

233 Ibid., 163.

234 Ibid., 104.
were purged, Saddam Hussein seized the opportunity and Iraqi forces invaded Khuzestan Province in September 1980. The Artesh’s defenses were so ineffective that one of the greatest challenges for Iraqi forces was that they did not know where they were supposed to stop advancing. However, contrary to Hussein’s hopes that the large numbers of Iranian Arabs in Khuzestan would offer Iraqi forces their support, it was the popular resistance—not the Artesh—that kept Iraq from taking full control of Khuzestan’s urban centers. For the first year of the war, the Artesh continuously tried and failed to make any substantial progress in liberating these areas.

Meanwhile, the developing networks of religious militias that were eventually consolidated under the umbrella of the IRGC were defending the revolution against ethnic separatists and counterrevolutionaries. Islamist intellectuals-turned-revolutionaries, most notably the Berkeley-trained physicist and engineer Mostafa Chamran, began consolidating and applying tactical concepts from guerrilla raids by Palestinians in southern Lebanon and the guerrilla wars of South America to the mountains of Kurdistan and Iraqi-occupied regions of Khuzestan. As such, IRGC fighters were developing tactics and gaining fighting expertise against rebels and urban skirmishes, but these tactics that were not congruent with those used by the Artesh.

Iraq launched another invasion north of Khuzestan in order to prevent a counterattack that could threaten its oil resources in Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk. This time, Iraqis attacked Iran’s Kurdish regions, where the IRGC had been fighting to suppress ethnic rebellions. In this northern front, the IRGC continued their asymmetric and guerrilla fighting until the end of the war, due to

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the mountainous terrain that made mass wave assaults unfeasible and heavy armor difficult to maneuver.237

By the summer of 1981, the Artesh had attempted and failed in four large “classic operations” in the areas surrounding Dezful, Hoveizeh, and Abadan. During these operations, and until September 1981, the IRGC and popular resistance forces were largely kept uninformed of the Artesh’s strategies and objectives.238 IRGC leaders, led by Mohsen Rezaei, demanded that the IRGC be allowed to lead a strategic change in the war: “A new strategy of Hezbollah forces . . . a revolutionary war [through] a series of limited operations.”239 Between March and September 1981, the IRGC planned and conducted twenty limited operations that saw tremendous success. In this new way of nonclassic warfare, infantrymen served the primary role, while the Artesh’s heavy artillery and armor served as fire support.240 Typically under the cover of night, teams would ambush Iraq’s defensive position, tanks, or small towns controlled by Iraqis in successive limited operations, and then return to their positions. Rather than relying on the Artesh’s professional soldiers, the IRGC began utilizing the popular resistance in September 1981 and incorporated them into their operational plans on a larger scale later that autumn.241

As the IRGC expanded, and as the war effort began to rely on the IRGC’s innovations, the scale of their unconventional tactics began to necessitate the very conventional structures against which the IRGC had distinguished themselves.242 IRGC historian Muhammad Durudiyan noted that the IRGC’s numbers and capabilities increased nearly ten times between September

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239 Ibid., 45.
240 Ibid., 45-46.
241 Ibid., 47, 50. In Operational Samen al-Aemmeh and Operation Tariq ol-Qods
1981 (Operation Samen al-Aemmeh) and May 1982 (Operation Beit ol-Moghaddas). As these numbers increased, Durudiyan begins to incorporate attempts by the IRGC to bring structure to the combat organization of this popular war. By March 1982, in Operation Fath ol-Mobin, the IRGC established a brigade and a headquarters to better incorporate popular forces into its command and control, a development that Durudiyan saw as “the most significant feature and outcome of the operation.” During Operation Fath ol-Mobin, the IRGC formed conventional infantry units made up of the popular resistance forces they had recruited through the Basij. Following the operation, the IRGC also began to stand up artillery units. Some accounts differ slightly, but the trend remains consistent toward a more developed force structure to account for rapid expansion. Conventional units and chains of command became all the more important as the IRGC began the tumultuous task of coordinating with the Artesh for joint operations.

While the IRGC’s nonclassic innovations were effective in mobilizing Iranian Shia populations to assist in liberating Iran’s occupied areas in the Southern Sector, Iranian forces fell into the same trap that Iraqi forces had: the assumption of local support. As it turned out, Iranians were no more effective in convincing Iraqi Shi’ites to mobilize against Iraqi forces as Iraqi forces had been in convincing Arab Iranians to support them. However, the failure to mobilize the Iraqi Shi’i populace was a bigger challenge for the Iranian forces for two main reasons. First, it discredited the appeal of Khomeini’s call to export Iran’s revolution abroad. Second, the

243 Durudiyan, Aghaz ta Payan, 54.
244 Durudiyan, Aghaz ta Payan, 52.
IRGC’s nonclassic liberation operations on Iran’s side of the border had in part relied on popular resistance forces to infiltrate Ba’athist positions and to secure positions following their limited operations. Between July 1982 and mid-1983, IRGC leaders attempted to apply their nonclassic strategies to offensive operations on Iraqi soil. Without local popular support from Iraqis, however, this strategy essentially took the form of extremely costly human wave attacks that gained very little ground.

The failure to recruit a large-scale movement of Iraqi sympathizers was not from a lack of effort. Iran has a long history of exploiting Iraq’s ethnic diversity to achieve its goals. Under the Shah, Iran supported Kurdish dissidents and used this support as a bargaining chip in negotiations for the most recent border treaty, the Algiers Accords of 1975. But while proxy influence was not new, it was more crucial to the IRGC’s preferred style of warfare than it had been for the Artesh. Khomeini continued support for Iraqi Kurds, and the IRGC’s publications have explicitly pointed to the IRGC’s Ramazan Headquarters (HQ) as the focal point for the effort to influence Kurdish dissidents in Iraq and other anti-Ba’athist groups, such as the Badr Brigades. Under the command of Mohammad Baqer Zolqadr, one of the missions of the Ramazan HQ was “to conduct guerrilla operations on Iraqi soil and coordinate with Iraqi Kurdish dissident forces.” The IRGC’s relationships with Kurdish dissidents became particularly important during the first half of 1987, after Iranian fighters suffered heavy losses in their failed attempts to capture Basra. The Ramazan HQ allowed the IRGC to shift the fighting

northward so that the Southern Sector could regroup. By late March 1987, the IRGC top commander, Mohsen Rezaei, wanted to use the Ramazan HQ as a launching point to move the war into northern Iraq by mobilizing and enabling Iraqi dissident groups to threaten Kirkuk’s oil economy. This new strategy included sending arms to the Ramazan HQ by way of “another brigade like the Badr Brigade of Iraqi mujahedin” with the aim of developing and consolidating Iran’s influence among these groups so that Iran could conduct “Iran’s military operations in the region within the framework of a civil war conducted by outside-connected groups.” The IRGC also sent many of the commanders who had fought counterrevolutionaries in Kurdish areas of Iran to the Ramazan HQ because they had experience with “irregular wars.”

As referenced above, the IRGC also developed its influence among Shi’i dissident groups, as Khomeini sought to influence Iraq’s Shi’i clerical establishment to oppose the Ba’athists, despite Najaf’s historically more quietist stance. According to the IRGC-affiliated Defa’ Press, which published an interview with a former intelligence official at Ramazan HQ, Mohammad Ali Rahmani, the IRGC developed relationships with leaders in the Dawa Party, the Islamic Action Organization, Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and the Badr Brigade. At the same time, the IRGC made use of both Shi’i refugees fleeing Ba’athists in Iran, as well as Iraqi troops who were captured by Iranian forces, but would agree to fight against the Ba’athists in an organization like the Badr Brigade. Probably referring to Karbala-2, Rahmani claimed that some sixty former Iraqi prisoners of war were martyred in a single operation against the Iraqi forces near Hajj Omran.  

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251 Ibid.
252 Ibid.
253 Ibid.
Despite their occasional successes, the war forced a consensus among Iran’s military leadership to realize that faith and ideology could not make up for the lack of competent professionalized military forces. Here the IRGC’s assessment aligns with the majority of the English-language literature on the war, citing the lack of sustained coordination between the Artesh and the IRGC as one of Iran’s greatest tactical failures. In the IRGC’s recounting, this failure was born out of Iran’s domestic political struggles and how military doctrine became politicized from the top echelons of the government down to the battlefield. As IRGC commander Ja’fari stated, “There was a problem with coordination between the Artesh and the IRGC so long as [President] Bani Sadr was there. Bani Sadr was a proponent of the classic concept [of war], meaning that he would not accept the popular revolutionary mindset in the war.” Such politics related to whether, or to what extent, the IRGC should be included in the war effort is a common theme in IRGC publications and in IRGC commanders’ public recollections.

Coordination did eventually improve, though never adequately or consistently. The first improvement came following Bani Sadr’s impeachment and the IRGC’s subsequent leadership in the war effort in late 1981. But interservice rivalries and poor communication remained a key weakness throughout the conflict. According to Major General Ja’fari, it was “the differences in tactical—and even strategic—perspectives” that caused the Artesh and IRGC to conduct operations separately following Operation Val-Fajr-1 in April 1983, when the IRGC insisted on employing mass wave assaults. Another key component to this conflict was that it was never

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257 Ibid.
clear during the war that both the Artesh and IRGC would exist in the postwar environment, as each service considered the possibility that it could be replaced by their counterpart.

Following the war, rather than demobilizing either the IRGC or the Artesh, or integrating one into the other, Iran’s postwar strategy opted to maintain both. The IRGC Ministry and the conventional Ministry of Defense merged to create the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL), which supports the entire armed forces. Operational chains of command for both the IRGC and Artesh remained separate, though both were placed under the AFGS for coordination. Under this parallel arrangement, the Artesh would remain Iran’s conventional defensive military force, while the IRGC rebranded itself as a publicly and privately funded military and security force with a diverse array of both domestic and foreign missions.

According to an article published by the IRGC-affiliated journal *Negin-e Iran*, one of Iran’s main postwar strategic defense objectives was to “equip, modernize, and professionalize the armed services as much as possible.” In terms of equipping and modernizing Iran’s military in the short term, this meant that Iran needed to negotiate with foreign countries to obtain more advanced weapons systems, aircraft, and naval vessels. After obtaining such systems, Iran’s MODAFL and its subordinate defense industries would, in turn, reverse engineer these technologies and optimize their legacy systems where possible.

Iran’s military leadership also set out to professionalize both the Artesh and the IRGC as “an essential [component of] Iran’s post war defense strategy” by “emphasizing specialization, training, military exercises, and military discipline.” Before winning the presidential election

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258 Hosseini, 39.
259 Ibid., 34.
260 Ibid., 37-38.
261 Ibid., 38.
in 1989, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani began pushing for military professionalization and specialization as the war drew down. In the summer of 1988, the IRGC Ground Forces stood up 21 infantry divisions, 15 independent infantry brigades, 21 air defense brigades, 3 combat engineering divisions, and 42 armored, artillery, and chemical defense brigades. Two years later, the IRGC implemented a four-tiered rank system, with 21 military ranks on their newly designed service uniforms—an enormous step for a revolutionary organization that had long spurned the Artesh’s aristocratic hierarchy as a Western model incompatible with the IRGC’s revolutionary and egalitarian ideals.

The tremendous cost of waging war through the IRGC’s mass tactics convinced the Iran of the need to develop indigenous defense capabilities, equipment, and spare parts. US and Western arms embargoes prevented the availability of advanced weaponry and key spare parts, while regional competitors were spending “hundreds of billions of dollars” to access advanced military technologies during and following the war. In an international arms market that could be manipulated by Iran’s opponents, Iran made self-sufficiency one of the top three priorities within its postwar defense strategy: “self-reliance and self-sufficiency in the military sector; equipping, modernizing, and professionalizing the armed forces as much as possible while instilling faith and motivation in the military; and attaining deterrent capabilities.”

The IRGC’s call for self-sufficient and self-reliant military capabilities began long before the war ended. In IRGC narratives, the Artesh’s reliance upon foreign equipment and methods is often blamed for Iran’s failures during the first year of the war. The IRGC’s new way of war

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262 Ibid., 38-39.
263 Ibid., 39.
265 Ibid., 34.
266 Durudiyan, Aghaz ta Payan, 37.
was posed as the antidote for this dependency: faith over firepower, tactics over technological dependency, and creativity over “reliance upon classic tables of how to wage war.” As the IRGC developed as an organization and learned from its mistakes, its narratives show increased planning, specialization, and more technological innovations, but the commitment to self-sufficiency strengthened and mass tactics took on more sophisticated and institutional forms.

During the last year of the war, Khomeini directed Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was serving as the acting commander in chief for the war effort, to focus upon Iran’s military industrial and procurement capabilities. Following the war, the IRGC commander, Mohsen Rezaei, remained in command, but recast himself as a technocrat, writing public editorials championing technical expertise, entrepreneurship, and innovation. The emphasis upon specialization and expertise during President Rafsanjani’s postwar reconstruction efforts coincided with the IRGC’s permeation of the Iranian economy.

Within the first year of his new position as Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei decreed that the IRGC could be used to implement Rafsanjani’s postwar redevelopment efforts. Under Iran’s first Five-Year Development Plan, the IRGC was permitted to receive funding in two ways: first, through the regular budget, and second, through government and private contracts for goods and services. Rather than fully privatizing the war economy of the 1980s, the postwar environment created a pseudo-privatized, or “public nongovernmental” sector, where firms aligned with the IRGC could often evade taxation and auditing, receive subsidies, and accumulate private gains off of massive no-bid public contracts. So while some IRGC members traded their rankless

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267 Ibid., 75-76; Annie Tracy Samuel, “Perceptions and Narratives of Security: The Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Iran-Iraq War,” International Discussion Paper #2012-06, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, May 2012. Samuel coined the phrase “faith over firepower” to describe this theme in the IRGC’s work.

268 Durudiyan, Aghaz ta Payan, 189.

269 Kevan Harris, “All the Sepah’s Men: Iran’s Revolutionary Guards in Theory and Practice,” in Businessmen in Arms: How the Military and Other Armed Groups Profit in the MENA Region, eds. Elke Grawert
guerilla-styled fatigues for newly styled uniforms, others exchanged them for business suits and established firms tailor-made for postwar reconstruction. Both groups found that self-sufficiency initiatives could present lucrative opportunities for personal and organizational gain.

To help finance these projects, the IRGC established credit unions and cooperatives that eventually grew into large banks, and even converted its Cooperative Foundation—originally designed to support veteran housing projects—into a financier for the IRGC’s hundreds of no-bid government reconstruction and development contracts. By 1990, the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters—a conglomerate of IRGC-owned or -affiliated engineering, manufacturing, mining, communications, and construction companies—was a dominant player in both the public and private sectors. 270

During and since President Hassan Rouhani’s reelection campaign during the summer of 2017, Rouhani has criticized the IRGC’s outsized role in Iran’s economy. Rouhani has argued that companies affiliated with the IRGC have taken advantage of Iran’s privatization efforts that began during the postwar reconstruction era, to the detriment of the private sector. In a highly contentious speech in June 2017, Rouhani publicly stated that his administration “has been committed to the real transfer of the economy to the private sector,” as opposed to the “part of the economy that was . . . given to the armed government, which is not [true] privatization.” 271

In response, top IRGC officers have responded with justifications of the IRGC’s economic initiatives, as well as criticisms of Rouhani. In July 2017, the IRGC commander of

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270 Harris (2016), 108-117; Harris (2017), 46-79; Wehrey et al., 55-75. It should be noted that public sector competition is a distinguishing feature of Iran’s government and parastatal apparatus that is not limited to the IRGC, nor to Iran’s redevelopment efforts.

Khatam al-Anbia Construction Headquarters, Ebdollah Abdollahi, specifically criticized the Rouhani administration when the South Pars Phase 11 Contract was awarded to France’s Total S.A., without allowing the IRGC to bid on the project. In Abdollahi’s critique—as with other top IRGC leaders’ comments—self-sufficiency was cited as a key justification for IRGC participation in the private sector, including the oil sector. It appears that to many leaders within the IRGC, “self-sufficiency” is now both a cause that transcends arms acquisition and defense industries and a cause that the IRGC claims some degree of exclusivity.

What relationships exist between such drives for self-sufficiency, the IRGC’s mass tactics, and popular mobilization? And how do these realities shape Iran’s current political environment? It is important to remember that the antagonism described earlier in this chapter between the Artesh and the IRGC is consistent with a larger and more general phenomenon of institutional parallelism in post-revolutionary Iran. Analogous revolutionary committees developed in a broad range of revolutionary institutions that paralleled the existing institutions left over from the Pahlavi monarchy. Not all of the revolutionary fervor was directed toward the warfront. Using much of the same rhetoric and antagonisms against existing institutions, millions of Iranians were also mobilized in new revolutionary institutions to provide basic healthcare and educations to rural and impoverished areas. Abrahamian, and more recently Harris, has called the new makeshift system a “martyrdom welfare state” because it was born out of the Iran-Iraq War and utilized this revolutionary and wartime martyrdom rhetoric to determine who in Iranian society was worthy of social welfare benefits and opportunities for social mobility through

access to higher education. Much like Skocpol’s analysis of the United States following the Civil War, war veterans and their families became a rallying cry for new social welfare institutions, albeit within an Islamic revolutionary branding.

The war also taught the IRGC how important popular mobilization could be and how to secure manpower for a “people’s war.” As discussed previously, early IRGC publications indicate the intense postrevolution competition within the government between Khomeini’s Islamist factions and secular leftist factions, who were also attempting to mobilize the masses. IRGC magazines quickly became tools for propagating a reformulated Islamist rhetoric that incorporated language and images from leftist and Third World movements to champion the poor and “dispossessed,” the same loyalties that secularists were attempting to mobilize for their own purposes. As a result, one of the most consistent themes in IRGC publications is the celebration of the Iranian people—the masses—as the true heroes of the war, the ones who fought Iraqis in order to defend the revolution. As shown in Chapter Four, IRGC narratives repeatedly connect the revolution to the war and, in doing so, identify popular participation in the war and support for the IRGC’s fighters as the most legitimate expressions of revolutionary fervor. Following Khomeini’s consolidation of power, this celebratory theme of popular participation continued as a means to legitimize Iran’s leadership, just as the IRGC narratives employ popular heroism as a means to put itself forward as the institutional expression of revolution.

274 Theda Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
One of Iran’s few advantages over Iraq was its larger population, which outnumbered Iraq’s by nearly three-to-one. But to make use of its numbers, the IRGC needed to learn how to recruit and train on a mass scale. Soon after the invasion, the Basij began recruiting for the IRGC, though Basij members themselves were not permitted to participate in the war during its first year. By 1985, the Basij stood up 10,000 recruitment offices strategically placed to pull recruits from all strata of Iranian society.\textsuperscript{276} Using ideological indoctrination, the Basij recruited up to two million Iranians over eight years—more than 75 percent of Iran’s estimated total force—provided them minimal training, and deployed them to the war front to serve between 45 and 90 days.\textsuperscript{277}

The theme of “the people’s revolutionary spirit” as “Iran’s hidden power” is a consistent theme throughout the IRGC’s histories.\textsuperscript{278} This “hidden power” is typically revealed in two ways: popular mobilization to fight war, and popular support for fighters and for the regime. When the Artesh proved incapable of defending against Iraq’s advances, “the popular and revolutionary resistance forces, especially those in the cities, compensated for many of the military’s shortcomings” and prevented the Iraqis from capturing key urban centers.\textsuperscript{279} Following a year of Iraqi occupation in Khuzestan, the turning point that turned the war in Iran’s favor came during Operations Samen al-Aemeh and Tariq al-Qods, when popular forces were

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{276} Another recurring theme of the IRGC’s literature is the classless nature of the “fighters of Islam.” Both narratively in its publications and structurally in its recruiting, the IRGC appears to focus on emphasizing itself as a movement “from all strata of Iranian society.” Again, this theme is consistent with IRGC narratives in direct competition with leftist propaganda.
\item \textsuperscript{278} Durudiyan, \textit{Aghaz ta Payan}, 31-32.
\item \textsuperscript{279} Ibid., 30-31.
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included as an integral part of Iran’s operations. As the IRGC began to lead the war effort, the popular mobilization of fighters enabled Iran’s unconventional human wave attacks.

The second form of the “hidden power” of the Iranian masses connects popular support for Iranian fighters to popular legitimization of the regime. IRGC commander Hossein Allaei ends his history of the war, noting that “without a doubt, the unconditional support of the people for combatants at the warfront and also for the nation’s decision-makers should be considered among the most basic components of Iran’s success in the Imposed War.” Similar assessments of the war’s strategic outcomes typically mention that the war brought about a stabilization of domestic politics.

Following the war, instead of attempting to demobilize warfighters back into society, Iran worked to institutionalize popular mobilization through the Basij, which now has an estimated total membership of at least three million members. According to a doctoral thesis republished in one of the IRGC’s journals, Iran’s postwar defense strategy was based in part upon the principle that “special attention should be paid to the presence and participation of popular forces in establishing the country’s security and defense by raising the popular mobilization’s quantitative and qualitative capabilities.”

Instead of charging the front lines of mass ground assaults, Basij members today have well-entrenched domestic functions. One former University of Tehran professor who has written

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280 Ibid., 47, 50.
281 It should be noted that the term “human wave” attacks was only seen in IRGC publications in reference to how Western writers referred to these mass ground offenses, see Durudiyan, Aghaz ta Payan, 15, 51.
the first English-language history of the organization referred to the Basij as a “parallel society” of insiders, informers, propagandists, which can be deployed as riot control for the regime.285 Since the 1980s, Basij bases have established student, professional, and community networks in nearly every sector of Iranian society: in high schools, universities, the manufacturing sector, the healthcare industry, the arts, women’s groups, sports, professional organizations, quasi-labor unions, and local neighborhood organizations.286

As revolutionary slogans have aged and ideological fervor has waned, the Basij used “material dependency and social mobility as a lure” to mobilize popular support.287 While the Basij still uses ideological indoctrination, many now join for the material benefits and opportunities for social mobility. The Basij’s professional organizations have increasingly replaced labor unions, making it more difficult to fire Basij members and easier to sideline political dissidents. Student Basijis receive assistance for college preparatory examinations, obtain reductions in mandatory military service, and take advantage of quotas reserved for Basij members. The Basij provides job training to students and the unemployed, and some women join seeking a chance at social mobility in a competitive male-dominated job market.288

As the IRI has institutionalized popular mobilization through the Basij, the IRGC has incorporated the organization into its military and security doctrines. Soon after his appointment as commander of the IRGC, Major General Ja’fari expanded the role of the Basij and placed the Basij directly under his command.289 Developed during his time at the Center for Strategic Studies, Ja’fari instituted the Mosaic Doctrine, or the “Defensive Mosaic Plan,” which

286 Ibid., 37, 46.
287 Ibid., 193.
288 Ibid.
strengthened IRGC-Basij relations and decentralized command to provincial levels in the event of either an attack a foreign power or a coup attempt from within.\textsuperscript{290} According to Ja’fari, the idea is to “counter threats from within and from without” by “divid[ing] the country into defensive mosaics,” so that “anywhere throughout the country where a threat occurs, the same [type of] defensive mosaic can be used to counter it.”\textsuperscript{291}

This strategy proved beneficial following the 2009 protests sparked by the reelecton of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, when the Basij proved to be instrumental agents for riot control. Following suppression of the popular protests, the commander of the Basij, Hossein Ta’eb, was reassigned as deputy commander of IRGC Intelligence Organization, potentially positioning the Basij for even further utilization.\textsuperscript{292} Such developments indicate that the IRGC has learned that popular mobilization is not only crucial against technologically superior foreign armies but can be tailored to address many of the IRI’s domestic security challenges as well. Lured by increasingly rare opportunities for social mobility, the IRGC is effectively diminishing the power of dissenting collective action, replacing labor unions, professional guilds, civic associations, and providing a buffer to suppress mass protests and support the ruling regime.

Logistically, the IRGC’s new methods of warfighting were born out of the necessity for self-sufficient strategies to counter Iraq’s “classic” military forces within the confines of Iran’s material constraints: lack of steady supplies and arms, a struggling economy under sanctions, intense domestic turmoil, and technological inferiority. Ideologically, the IRGC’s methods were


also developed in reaction to the Artesh’s “classic” military strategies, which were interpreted as imports of Western management techniques and incompatible with Iran’s new revolutionary identity. Despite their initial lack of coordination, supplies, and arms during Iraq’s invasion, popular resistance forces were more successful in fending off advancing Iraqis than the Artesh. The IRGC’s inclusion of these popular forces allowed them to leverage Iran’s numerical advantage over the technologically superior and better resourced Iraqi military. But institutionalizing the mobilized participants also allowed the IRGC to establish itself as champion of the Iranian people, the most legitimate institutional expression of the revolution, and appropriate martyrdom frameworks from Iran’s earlier revolutionaries to the IRGC. Toward the end of the war, the IRGC’s Ramazan HQ was even able to apply popular mobilization tactics to the Iraqi context, despite ideological and ethnic differences.

For all of the IRGC’s triumphant narratives touting the superiority of its nonclassic warfare over Western-derived classic warfare, the reality was much more complicated. Some Artesh units fought against ethnic resistance movements alongside the IRGC in the northwest. Many of the IRGC members actually learned their tactics from Artesh commando forces, some of whom had themselves received training in London or the United States. Similarly, the IRGC engaged in conventional operations alongside the Artesh early in the war when Artesh commanders were still leading the effort to liberate Iran’s Southern Sector. Despite the IRGC’s original anti-hierarchical sentiments, the IRGC has steadily professionalized its force since the 1980s and has transformed into a conventional military force in its own right. So much so, that

295 Ibid.
the Commander of the IRGC has warned that the IRGC is “facing the threat of bureaucratization.”

The distinction between classic and other—more revolutionary—ways of warfare remains in common use today. Classic warfare is still identified by IRGC commanders as a key weakness during the war’s early years. That does not mean that the IRGC will refrain from future development and use of conventional warfare if IRGC leaders consider it within their interest to do so. In fact, top IRGC commanders have claimed that the IRGC has the ability to fight classic wars in addition to asymmetric wars. At the same time, those same commanders often point to the distinction between classic warfare and nonclassic warfare to deflect questions regarding overlapping responsibilities or conflicts between the IRGC and Artesh. For example, when asked about whether conflicts of interest exist between the IRGC and the Artesh in regard to budget priorities and mission responsibilities, IRGC commander, Major General Ja’fari claimed, “The IRGC’s warfare is not classic warfare; we fight asymmetrically.”

For nearly four decades, political and economic struggles—foreign and domestic—have pressured the IRGC to make pragmatic decisions and to take better advantage of whatever opportunities presented themselves. The IRGC’s military doctrine itself has not been immune from these challenges, as is reflected in the politicization of “classic” and “non-classic” warfare. The institutional legacies of the IRGC’s reliance upon mass mobilization tactics and rhetoric to fight Iraq are seen most clearly in the transfer of the IRGC’s self-sufficiency impulse to its

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contentious permeation into the economy and the Basij’s redeployment from the war front to the domestic sphere. While competing to advance its own interests, the IRGC can simultaneously claim popular legitimacy through its permeation of society and tout its divine legitimacy through its mission to support the Islamic Revolution and the Supreme Leader.
Chapter VI.
Conclusion

The IRGC’s narratives recounting the Iran-Iraq War do not merely provide historians with an opportunity to better understand this organization or the eight-year war that shaped its development. These narratives provide insight into how popular mobilization has shaped the Islamic Republic since its revolution. Through the lens of its histories, the IRGC is a space where divine legitimacy and popular legitimacy meet: devoted to the Islamic Revolution and the most authentic institutional expression of its legacy.

Understanding the trajectory of the often contentious relationship between the IRGC and Artesh could help scholars consider the relationships between Iran’s numerous parallel economic, developmental, health, and social welfare institutions that developed during the revolution. As Harris has recently demonstrated, popular mobilization during the war period played a crucial role to the story of the Islamic Republic’s development of a patchwork of overlapping and competing social welfare institutions, and populist promises have remained an important aspect of Iranian politics. In Harris’ narrative, the Iran-Iraq War provided the economic constraints that shaped this parallel structure, and the war’s language of “martyrs” and their families became bureaucratized social statuses determinant of social welfare benefits and cultural capital. IRGC histories both compliment and complicate this story: providing a link between the appropriation of “martyrdom” from Islamic revolutionaries to war veterans, while also delegitimizing institutions which infringe on the IRGC’s interests. Likewise, Golkar’s recent ethnographic examination of the Basij as a “parallel society” of increasingly specialized insiders within the larger Islamic Republic also has unexamined roots apparent in IRGC histories.

Golkar’s argument that the Iranian regime has used “material dependency and social mobility as

a lure” while simultaneously linking Basij members’ social mobility to the survival of the regime mirrors the trajectory examined by the IRGC itself.300

Common frameworks identified in IRGC narratives have relevance in current foreign policy issues. One of the IRGC’s most prolific authors, and a former director of the Center for Sacred Defense Documents and Research, Muhammad Durudiyan, argued extensively that the war’s inevitability rested upon the determination of superpowers—especially America—to not allow the Islamic Revolution to spread. Therefore, so long as Iran’s revolutionary regime exists, America would seek to constrain and destroy it. According to this narrative, the war was never merely a territorial dispute between nations; this was a proxy war against Iran and her revolution.301 Moreover, the Center has published numerous books of legal history documenting the perceived injustices of the UN, which failed to respond to Iraq’s verified use of chemical weapons or to recognize Iraq as the aggressor in the conflict.

This reinforcing framework that the Imposed War was proof of America’s maleficence is reflected in IRGC commanders’ statements, which often draw direct comparisons between the Iran-Iraq War and the Islamic Republic’s present-day threats. The idea of history repeating itself and the necessity of remembrance are common themes in IRGC commemoration speeches. By naming Iran’s battles of the 1980s after those fought in early Islamic history, such speeches feature powerful rhetoric that transforms Iran’s national conflicts into timeless conflicts under the banner of Islam itself.

301 This is a theme throughout Durudiyan’s work, but for the most explicit theoretical argument, see: Muhammad Durudiyan, Naghd va Barrasi Jang-i Iran va ’Iraq: Ijtinab-i Napaziri-i Jang [Critical Study of the Iran-Iraq War: The Inevitability of the War], (Tehran: Sipah-i Markaz-i Mutala’at va Tahghighat-i Jang, 1382), 198-201, 255-256, 283-285.
In a speech commemorating Operation Karbala-5, one IRGC commander blended seventh-century Islamic history and twentieth-century Iranian history in his accusation of America as being “behind all of the world’s crimes” and used America’s support of Saddam Hussein in the 1980s to suggest American support of Sunni extremist groups today (often referred to as *takfiris*). Intentionally vague about whether referring to the 1980s or the battles of early Islam, the commander argued that remembrance of the Iran-Iraq War (or, “Sacred Defense”) is an existential issue:

> We must retell the epics of the Sacred Defense so that it is preserved in history, so that all will know that if the enemy imposes war upon us, we will impose peace upon them. . . . Although the eight-year Imposed War has ended, defense of this [country] remains, and there are more Khorramshahrs before us. . . . Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran is again in the situation of Badr and Kheybar, and the great nation of Iran is heir to Ashura and the 230,000 martyrs [of the Iran-Iraq War].

In a similar speech that blurred history between the 1980s and Iran’s current-day involvement in the region, Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, a senior defense advisor to the Supreme Leader, used the theme of “history repeating itself” to argue that Iran’s existential threats demand “the urgency of preserving the history and memories of the Sacred Defense” among Iranian youth. “If Iran’s 52 percent of the population under the age of 30 forget[s] this history,” he claimed, “then it is possible that history will repeat itself.” In the speech, Safavi weaves between recounting the stories of combat engineers setting up pontoon bridges during the Iran-Iraq War and Iraq’s current-day Popular Mobilization Forces fighting over Mosul’s bridges against the Islamic State. The blood of Iran’s engineers “laid the foundation for the school of resistance” that spread to Lebanese Hezbollah, to fighters in Syria, to Yemen, and to Iraq. As in the 1980s, it is America and the West who are the true powers working to destroy Iran and limit her sacred role in the region: America “has organized the 90,000 terrorists from Da’esh [the

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Islamic State], al-Nusra Front, and the other Takfiri groups in opposition to Islamic Iran. . . If the [Supreme Leader] and Iran’s military advisors had not wisely led the countries of the Islamic world, Baghdad and Damascus would have already fallen.” Just as Iran had persisted during most of the 1980s, it was this “school of resistance in Syria [that] taught [Syrian fighters] how to resist the infidel’s terrorists for 68 months.”

From a secular perspective, it may be tempting to dismiss such remarks as mere religious fanaticism and propaganda. However, that the IRGC clearly remains committed to preserving and appropriating these narratives to both domestic and foreign challenges suggests that they accomplish something deemed important to the organization. Both divine and popular authority are important aspects of Kermi and Safavi’s comments above, as they are important themes in IRGC histories more broadly. To the extent that the IRGC successfully recasts its adversaries into these divine and historical narratives, the IRGC is able to provide itself with divine legitimacy. To the extent that Iranians participate in the IRGC’s institutions and incorporates its rhetoric, the organization is also provided with popular legitimacy. For the IRGC, history and the retelling of history is a space where these two forms of authority seem to intersect, and remembrance or neglect of these narratives become suggestive of future outcomes.

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