

EMPIRE OF TERROR

IRAN'S ISLAMIC
REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS

Mark D. Silinsky



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“Insightful, important, and timely. . . . A virtual state within a state, [the Guards] have exerted tremendous influence on Iran’s politics, foreign policy, and economy. This is essential reading for all those who are interested in how the regime has managed to destabilize the Middle East and carve out an arc of domination known as the ‘Shiite Crescent’ from Lebanon to Yemen.”

—Ofira Seliktar, professor emerita at Gratz College and coauthor of *Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars*

“Mark Silinsky has the knowledge and the imagination to place the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a key Iranian institution, in the context of other totalitarian regimes, specifically the Soviet and Nazi regimes. The result—ever so timely in the aftermath of the Qasem Soleimani execution—is a compelling guide.”

—Daniel Pipes, president of the Middle East Forum and publisher of *Middle East Quarterly*

“Mark Silinsky combines a deep and broad knowledge of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps with a deep understanding of what is going on in today’s Iran. He makes a powerful case for greater understanding of contemporary Iranian politics in helping the West to manage a seemingly intractable problem . . . and he does so with prose that is informal and engaging.”

—Christopher Coker, director of LSE IDEAS, a think tank at the London School of Economics and Political Science

“Mark Silinsky has expertly exposed the depraved and fanatical practices of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, giving us valuable insight into their roles in international terrorism and the oppression of the Iranian people.”

—Christine Sixta Rinehart, associate professor of political science at the University of South Carolina and author of *Sexual Jihad: The Role of Islam in Female Terrorism*

“Like Nazi Germany and the USSR, the Islamic Republic of Iran is founded on an ideology that is both imperialistic and totalitarian. Mark Silinsky skillfully demonstrates the disturbing parallels between these three toxic regimes, showing how Shiite millenarian thinking makes the Iranian regime’s ideology especially dangerous. All who wish to deepen their understanding of the Iranian threat to the civilized world should read this book.”

—Joseph S. Spoerl, professor of philosophy at Saint Anselm College

Empire of Terror

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

Mark D. Silinsky

Potomac Books

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For professor and mentor Michael Howard, 1922–2019. Thank you, Sir Michael, and may you rest in peace.

“Born of the sun, they traveled a short while toward the sun. And left the vivid
air signed with their honor.”

—Stephen Spender, “The Truly Great”

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Acknowledgments

There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.

—Ernest Hemingway

This book has drawn exclusively upon primary and secondary open sources. Several resources were particularly useful. The Middle East Media Research Institute, MEMRI, is a nonprofit press monitoring and analysis organization with headquarters in Washington DC.¹ MEMRI also translates the writings of liberals and reformists in Iran and provides analysis of the Iranian news. Much of the material presented here comes from Guards-produced media outlets, giving the perspective of the Guards in their own words. I also rely upon the strong economic data and analysis provided by the Economist magazine's Intelligence Unit.

The book avoids detailed, system-specific information on Iranian orders of battle, for several reasons. First, information about a military's strength fluctuates and is sometimes inaccurate. Further, as a United States defense intelligence officer I am very cautious about giving exact numbers about foreign militaries and weapon systems. Similarly, I give only cursory attention to Iran's nuclear capabilities. It is well known that Iran has pursued a nuclear weapons capability for many years. I used only information that is available to the general public, particularly from Jane's Defence Publications.

Think tanks such as the RAND Corporation, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and the Washington Institute for Near East Studies are rich resources for the subject covered in this book. For many issues involving military capabilities and nuclear weapons development, I turned to the Congressional Record. The most dismal literature comes from the pens of the victims of the Guards, many of whom remain emotionally broken and physically crippled.

A young editor at the British journal The Guardian has disparaged correcting grammatical errors as “racialism,” opining that offending editors are likely to be “older, whiter, wealthier, or just plain academic” and accusing them of practicing “grammar snobbery.”² Perhaps she has a case. But this old, not-so-wealthy, white, wrinkled, and very plain academic has nothing but thanks to those who proofed and edited this book. As usual, my wife, Nadia, gave me indispensable help. If the book reads well, it is due, in large part, to her “snobbery,” for which I am and will always be grateful. I appreciate the corrections and revisions made by Dr. Daniel Pipes, one of the finest thinkers on the Middle East of his generation, or any other. I thank Ofira Seliktar, Joseph Spoerl, and Ronen Cohen, three of the best minds on Iran, who reviewed several chapters. My middle daughter, Leah, graced this book with selections from an article she wrote comparing propaganda in Iran to that of the Soviet Union. I am honored by her contribution.

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On a personal note, I have strong opinions about the Guards and the regime the organization protects. Few authors are likely to be neutral on the mission, tactics, goals, and activities of the Guards. However, authors can be, and in my judgment should be, objective. This book strives to be objective but not neutral. The opinions are mine and mine alone and should not be associated with any element of the United States government.

Introduction

Without a doubt, our martyrs . . . will not settle for less than the global rule of Imam Mahdi. Our martyrs inaugurated a great path. Syria and Aleppo are the temporary aims, and the main aim is a global rule, which I hope is not far off.

—Esmail Qaani, deputy commander of the Guards Qods Force, March 1, 2017

Persia! The name conjures images of exotic art, antiquities, gardens, carpets, cats, roses, and poetry. Once an imposing and respected empire, Persia declined slowly over the centuries. By the late nineteenth century, it faced dismemberment by European powers. But today, the country, now called Iran, is a mounting global menace and potentially an existential threat to its enemies. Its forces are deployed well beyond its borders. At home, legions of rage-filled, fist-clenched adherents parade the streets shouting allegiance to the revolution and its ideals. They are often led by the praetorian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Sepāh e Pāsdārān e Enqelāb e Eslāmi—the IRGC, or Guards, as they are referred in this book.

The book will focus on the Guards and, primarily, their domestic security wing, the Basij, and their expeditionary arm, the Qods Force. They work in tandem with Iran's other significant intelligence organization—the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS).¹ The men and women of the Guards are intelligence and security personnel; paramilitary land, air, and sea forces; special operators; prison guards; and interrogators. They are morality police, cyber-warriors, university professors, and business operators.

The Guards have domestic and external missions. The Basij—the Guards' morality and antiriot police—are an inescapable presence in Iran. In uniform and civilian garb, the Basij enforce the mullahs' social code. This institution was established in 1980, first as an independent agency and merged into the Guards one year later. The Ayatollah Khomeini dreamed of a twenty-million-strong

army of pious, Shia youth recruited from a tightly vetted grid of seminaries and universities, to create a “new Islamic civilization.”²

The Qods Force, the Guards’ expeditionary unit, has trained and equipped proxy groups, such as Hamas, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia insurgents, and elements of the Taliban. Some of these surrogates target Western forces in the Middle East.³ The presence of the Guards and militia under their control offers Iran prestige and power in the Middle East. They also control Iran’s most destructive military capabilities, overseeing the development of nuclear weapons and of sophisticated missiles. Finally, the Guards’ military forces could also be used against U.S. targets in a future conflict.

Iranian life today is as affected by the Guards as German life was by the Gestapo and the Schutzstaffel (SS), and as Soviet life was by the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB). Like the SS and KGB, the Guards were charged initially with protecting a newly formed totalitarian government. They were successful, and their responsibilities expanded quickly. Again similar to their better-known authoritarian counterparts, the Iranian Guards have (and continue to) arrested, imprisoned, and killed those whom they consider enemies of the state. Operating a constellation of prison camps, the German and Soviet institutions controlled the lives of political prisoners and exacted confessions of crimes real or imagined. Iranian Guards still do. Like the SS and the KGB, the Guards have prominent paramilitary roles and combat service.

Further, all three services may be characterized as heavily ideological. The SS expressed the principles of Adolph Hitler, while the KGB reflected the ethics of Lenin and Stalin. For their part, the Iranian Guards were built in the image of Ayatollah Khomeini and continue to hold him as their exemplar.

A Land in Revolution

Forty years ago, the Iranian Revolution shook the world. Initially, many left-oriented Western intellectuals were delighted by the ousting of the shah of Iran, whom they saw as an American lackey. The Soviets were more guarded but welcomed the removal of a pro-American monarch. In the early 1980s many

Western observers saw the new government as a band of overzealous reformers who would moderate their rule after their fury burned out. However, though the wholesale killings of the early years subsided, widespread repression continues, and the Guards are the primary tool of that subjugation. Today, Iranians under forty-five years old have little memory of Iran without the Guards.

The Islamic Revolution engineered a new social order based on fundamentalist Islamic family ethics and values.⁴ In present-day Iran, there is little room for political, religious, or social deviation. A woman's life is half the value of that of a man's, as stated in article 209 of Iran's Islamic criminal law. Article 1210 sets the age of adulthood for females at nine years old. Girls can be married then. Life for gays and lesbians in Iran is often unbearable. Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Baha'i are held suspect and in contempt as outsiders. Morality police patrol the streets and social haunts, on the prowl for men sporting long hair and women wearing short skirts and revealing clothing. Women must cover their hair and wear baggy clothing to avoid sexually stimulating men.⁵ Those who do not comply are beaten and imprisoned. The penalty for adultery is stoning or one hundred lashes.⁶ Brian Hook, senior policy advisor to the secretary of state and Special representative for Iran, said in September 2018, "Iran is the last revolutionary regime on Earth. It does not respect the sovereignty of its neighbors or any nation. It doesn't recognize the citizenship of other Shias who are members of other nations in the Middle East."⁷

Iran is a land of contrasts. Prominent mullahs and senior Guards leaders have enriched themselves by plundering the fortunes of the previous ruling class and by creating a vast system of patronage, sinecures, kickbacks, and monopolies. This is IRGC, Inc. But many of today's Iranians subsist in absolute poverty, while others exist on the margins of survival. Photographic images released to the world reveal the poverty of the "grave sleepers of Tehran," the penniless and the drug addicts who sleep in cartons or under bridges or in the tombs of cemeteries.⁸ Among the more vulnerable are indigent immigrants.

In 2018 Iran's indigent and angry masses rose to challenge the regime, and the Guards responded with brutality. The anger is still palpable. But mullahs and Guards keep themselves in power by offering financial and social privilege.⁹ The IRGC also projects power abroad and underwrites terrorist organizations and attacks around the world. For this reason, in April 2019 the United States designated the entire IRGC as a terrorist organization. As of the writing, it still holds that status.

Who Are the Guards?

The Guards' origins, mission, orders of battle, leadership, strengths, faults, and defects are discussed in detail in subsequent chapters. Suffice it here to introduce some of the basics. The Guards were created by the leaders of the Islamic Republic in 1979 to protect the new regime. Just as Lenin and Hitler created bodyguards for their new governments, the Ayatollah Khomeini forged a shield of guardians.

While the Guards began piecemeal, cobbled together from local militias, they evolved to become a great power.¹⁰ Many founding leaders were political outlaws during the shah's tenure. Others had been rusticated to Iraq or Paris or were imprisoned in Tehran's Evin prison, which became a blast furnace of radical ideas in the 1960s and 1970s. Over time the Guards grew from a military force, which used both conventional and unconventional tactics, to a multipurpose enterprise that controls an economic conglomerate.¹¹ Today the Guards boast political and military muscle and wield control over strategic industries, commercial services, and black market enterprises. The total defense budget for 2016–17 was approximately \$9 billion. In contrast, the Guards were reportedly allocated \$4.9 billion, a 67 percent increase over the previous year, to which should be added the Basij budget of \$357 million.¹² The budget for the fiscal year 2018–19 allocated the Guards funds three times those received by the army.¹³

Comparisons of Guards to the Soviet KGB and to the Nazi SS are a leitmotif of this book. All three were created to protect radical, expansionistic, and authoritarian states. As chapter 3 shows, the early leaders of all three services were true believers, drawn from the inner circles of Lenin, Hitler, and Khomeini. Their initial efforts were focused on eliminating the remnants of the old regimes and rivals to power—the tsar's Okhrana; the German Sturmabteilung, or SA; and the shah's Sazeman-e Ettelaat va Amniyat-e Keshvar, or SAVAK.¹⁴ After domestic security was forged, all three services built beachheads of influence abroad. All comprised military or paramilitary units and economic domains.

This book argues that Iran's regime is so intertwined with and dependent upon

the Guards that is difficult to separate the two. Similarly, in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the government and the protective and intelligence services were woven of the same cloth. All three services offered (and Iran's case continue to offer) unwavering obedience to their nation's dictator. After 1934 German military, paramilitary, and intelligence and security officers took personal oaths to Adolf Hitler.¹⁵ Many, particularly SS men and women, followed Hitler until the war's end, despite his reckless and ultimately self-defeating strategy, as well as his contemptuous disregard for the lives of those who served him with blind loyalty.¹⁶ For their part, leaders of the Soviet services proved their loyalty to Stalin. But when their assistance was no longer useful, they, too, were killed on the dictator's orders. Iran's Guards, like those of Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany, swear allegiance to their leader. But they, too, are sometimes killed or psychologically ruined. As with the other services, the Guards pressure and sometimes harm the families of individuals whom they consider enemies.¹⁷

Finally, like their historical counterparts, the Guards help deceive the world about life in Iran. During the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Hitler conned the world into believing that he had peaceful global intentions.¹⁸ In the Soviet Union, Lenin and Stalin cultivated Western sympathizers, including leading intellectuals, professors, and liberal clergymen.¹⁹ The Guards' information operations churn out material to pretty-up the sullied image of Iran, obfuscating the conditions in which political prisoners, women, gays, and dissidents exist. The Guards control press media outlets and satellite channels broadcasting in many languages; their active measures in this regard include subsidizing allies, building front companies, and funding friendly mosques.²⁰

The Guard Profile

Several chapters in this book offer profiles of individual Guards and the mullahs who promote them. Three broad social-ideological cohorts comprise the Guards. Average recruits are poorly educated and hold moderate religious beliefs. For this group, the Guards provide steady, if poorly paid, employment. Another group is the opportunists who aspire to high positions in government or in commerce. A career in the Guards affords this group paths to both power and

wealth, by the standards of daily life in Iran. The third cohort is the true believers who are inspired by extreme messianic Islamist ideology.²¹ All three cohorts share a Muslim identity and hostility to the United States and Israel.²²

The Rise of the Guards

The early years of the Guards were filled with the jingoism and martial pageantry marshalled to rally support for the war against Iraq. The piety, sacrifice, and courage of the Guards and the Basij in particular during this conflict were celebrated throughout Iran. The Basij were initially an independent force that drew poor, often religious, and resolute young men to fight for the revolution. Accounts of pious boys charging into battlements armed with a rifle and a Koran filled classrooms and adorned the walls of buildings in all large cities. But this image blackened in the early 1990s. The Basij were structurally merged into the Guards and repurposed to flush out Western contaminants in Iranian society. Rough-hewn young men armed with truncheons and whips, the Basij began to brutalize their countrymen.

The revolution had designs on the world. Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the Guards to implement a phased global strategy that would eliminate domestic enemies; expand Iranian regional influence; and, finally, achieve world supremacy, as is examined in chapter 6. The Guards would have prominent roles in all three phases. In the first phase, the Basij would serve as the Guards' domestic arm to subdue and destroy enemies at home. In the second phase, the Guards, particularly the Qods Force, would infiltrate Shia communities in neighboring states. In the third phase, the Guards would project power around the globe.

From the beginning, nonconformist intellectuals in Iran faced inescapable choices. They had to either flee, support the regime, or agree not to criticize the new system. Those with sufficient resources or contacts in the West sometimes left to build new lives for themselves and their families. Some public intellectuals rallied behind the revolution. Many kept quiet, and some actively tried to subvert an authoritarian regime they grew to loathe. Other free spirits went underground or abroad. Others, still, were swept into the social whirlwind

and killed randomly by Basij.

Iranians who resisted the dour clerical rule risked beatings, termination from employment, imprisonment, or death. The Guards killed some opponents of Khomeini who lived abroad. Some Iranians killed themselves. Homa Darabi, a prominent American-trained woman physician, protested the treatment of girls and women by setting herself on fire in 1994 while shouting, “Death to Tyranny! Long live freedom! Long live Iran!”²³ Other protesters were killed in the streets or special cells in prisons. Others disappeared. The Guards and the MOIS deployed packs of assassins abroad to kill those deemed hostile to the revolution.

As the IRGC tried to eliminate their perceived enemies at home and abroad by imprisoning or killing them, they also inculcated new generations of Iranians with ideological fervor. Iranian leaders determined to develop indoctrinated and religiously committed leaders to pass the revolutionary spirit on to future generations. As children move from primary education through secondary education through higher education, they are trained and monitored by the Guards. After they leave school or university, those students who participated in Basij after-school activities and organizations are offered preferred employment opportunities. As in the Soviet Union, those who have proved the most loyal are offered fast-track positions in the government and intelligence services. These posts are often springboards for commercial prospects because the Guards control many firms.

Many Iranians want nothing to do with any element of the Guards and try to avoid them. Some resist them passively by refusing to identify political dissidents; flouting laws that the Basij enforce, particularly those connected to social behavior; watching and listening to foreign broadcasts; pretending not to hear the Basij when they shout commands in the street or giving them dagger looks; and avoiding religious centers. Some Iranians engage in active resistance, such as marching in street demonstrations, encouraging opposition on social media, proffering unorthodox religious views, and sometimes, physically attacking Iranian officials. When they are caught, they are harassed, beaten, or carted off to prison.

Iran’s foreign policy is implemented, in part, by the Guards. Ruling mullahs call Iran the epicenter of the Muslim world and feel morally compelled to spread revolutionary Shia Islam globally. The Guards Qods Force is Iran’s direct mechanism to project Iranian power in the Greater Middle East and elsewhere.²⁴

Since 1979 the Islamic Republic has supported Shia militias abroad.²⁵ By 2018, Iran controlled or heavily influenced four capitals of Middle Eastern states—Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad, and Sanaa.²⁶ Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has referred to the twenty-first-century situation in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria as signs that God favors Iran and that "God will assist you (Iranians) with victory."²⁷ The Guards control divisions of foreign fighters, just as the Soviets commanded international brigades during the Spanish Civil War and the Nazis commanded SS divisions during World War II, some of which were foreign divisions and other purely German.

The Guards control a vast economic empire. Guards Inc. is slang for the Guards-controlled charities or bonyads; docks, banking; and construction enterprises. This has suppressed an entrepreneurial spirit and mitigated against sustained, broad-sector economic growth. Today, Iran is beset by economic predicaments and social divisions.²⁸ Like leaders in the Soviet Union, the Guards control much of Iran's environmental and financial services, directly owning most of the country's natural wealth, particularly fossil fuel. The Guards also control banking, creating vast inefficiencies. As explained in chapter 6, the IRGC holds a near-monopoly of financial control in many sectors.

As in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the intelligence and security services oversee the development of Iranians from the cradle. The Basij mold children to retain a devotion to the ideals of the revolution. As grade schoolers become middle schoolers, the girls are guided toward domesticity and the boys toward martial and religious pursuits. As they grow older still, the better prospects are selected to university places and then into the Guards themselves. Following graduation, they are awarded preferential jobs. There is also a career path for laborers in the Guards and Basij.

The Father of All Bombs

Iran has become a primary threat to American interests in the greater Middle East. If armed with an arsenal of nuclear weapons, it may become a threat to America itself. For nearly forty years, the Guards and the MOIS have sponsored and commanded anti-Western terrorist organizations. Indeed, the Guards' reach

has expanded into the heart of the Middle East and to South America. Highest on Iran's enemy list are the United States and Israel, both of which Tehran threatens to annihilate. Rhetoric aside, until recently Iran did not pose an existential threat to any Western country. But, in the last decade, Iran has built a menacing arsenal of missiles and warheads that imperil cities and civilizations, leading to a debate in Western capitals about how to confront Iran's aspiring, but not yet proven, nuclear weapons capability.

In addition to the missile threat, the Guards have an elite conventional army, naval, and air forces, just as the German SS and the Soviet NKVD/KGB had in World War II. In the last two years of the war the SS order of battle held nearly one million men. The NKVD soldiers were engaged alongside Red Army soldiers and sometimes deployed as independent units. Similarly, the Guards have independent services that are, like the SS and NKVD, more prestigious and better supplied, as is shown in chapter 7.

Some observers compare elements of contemporary Iran to those of the early Third Reich. Michael Oren, an Israeli statesman, has noted that in the 1930s Western states were drained and nearly insolvent. Only belatedly did they challenge the growing menace of Germany and Italy, both of which aspired to regional and global domination. Like the Nazis, Iranian leaders have built their military capabilities to execute their policy ambitions. The Guards are the primary tool to achieve these goals. The scope of their power continues to grow. When Iranian-sponsored and Guards-supplied Houthi rebels captured the Yemeni capital in September 2014, an Iranian parliamentarian boasted that it was "the fourth Arab capital on its way to following the Iranian Revolution."²⁹

Some American observers believe that Iran is already at war with the United States. Andrew McCarthy, the former assistant U.S. attorney who prosecuted the 1995 World Trade Center attackers, said, "If we are not going to win, we are going to lose."³⁰ Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari, former commander of Guards, has bragged that the Iranian juggernaut is prepared to meet any military challenge the United States might present.³¹ Amir Ali Hajizadeh, another general of the Guards, claims the Islamic Republic has developed the "father of all bombs," a ten-ton bomb that has the blast power of America's "mother of all bombs."³² The head of Iran's navy, Rear Adm. Hossein Khanzadi, has promised to "fly the Iranian flag in the Gulf of Mexico."³³

As of this writing, leaders of the Guards are concerned that social murmurings

and restlessness within Iran could boil over into near rebellion. The economy could tilt into free fall. Ten years ago the Guards were deployed to quell disquiet that had devolved into open riots.³⁴ In terms of domestic challenges, 2020 may portend the most significant year of threats to the regime since 2009. In early 2018 crowds chanted in Persian rhyming “Reza Shah, bless you.” Reza Shah was the shah of Iran from 1925 to 1941 and the father of Mohammad Reza Pahlevi, the shah who was overthrown in 1979, as discussed in chapter 1. Other rhymes were “Not Gaza, Not Lebanon, my soul for Iran.” The protests in Iran escalated in 2019. Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli claimed that by fall 2019 as many as two hundred thousand people had taken part in demonstrations during the year.³⁵ Today, Iranians pound the street in support of and in protest against the ruling government and the Guards who support it.

Trump vs. Rouhani

Presidents Donald Trump and Hassan Rouhani dislike each other intensely and revile the political system the other leads. President Trump has called Iran’s government a “corrupt dictatorship” that “exports violence, bloodshed, and tears” and called upon the world to isolate Iran.³⁶ In his judgment, those who suffer the greatest are the Iranian people, who are denied a comfortable standard of living because of the country’s oil revenue fund is given to international terrorist groups: “They’re a nation of terror. . . . I’m not looking to hurt that country, but they can’t have a nuclear weapon, it’s very simple.”³⁷

In 2020 President Trump put muscle behind his words when he ordered the assassination of the charismatic leader of the Qods Forces. The Pentagon explained that Major General Soleimani orchestrated attacks on coalition bases in Iraq in late 2019, adding that the killing was “was aimed at deterring future Iranian attack plans.”³⁸ The president, then, threatened to hit fifty-two Iranian sites if the country retaliated. In turn, the chairman of the Iranian parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy Commission promised that “we will hit a number of U.S. targets that will be as many as the number of the verses (6,236) of the Holy Quran, and we will target 124,000 of them that stands equal to the number of 124,000 prophets.”³⁹

All this has panicked some young American men. The website for the United States Selective Service crashed the day after the strike amid fears that young men would be drafted for a war against Iran. As of this writing, there is not a hot war with the Islamic Republic. But hostilities loom, and the Guards are active around the world. And this is the subject of this book.

Events and Ideas behind the Guards

I am Cyrus, who founded the Empire of Persia and was King of Asia. Grudge me not, therefore, this monument.

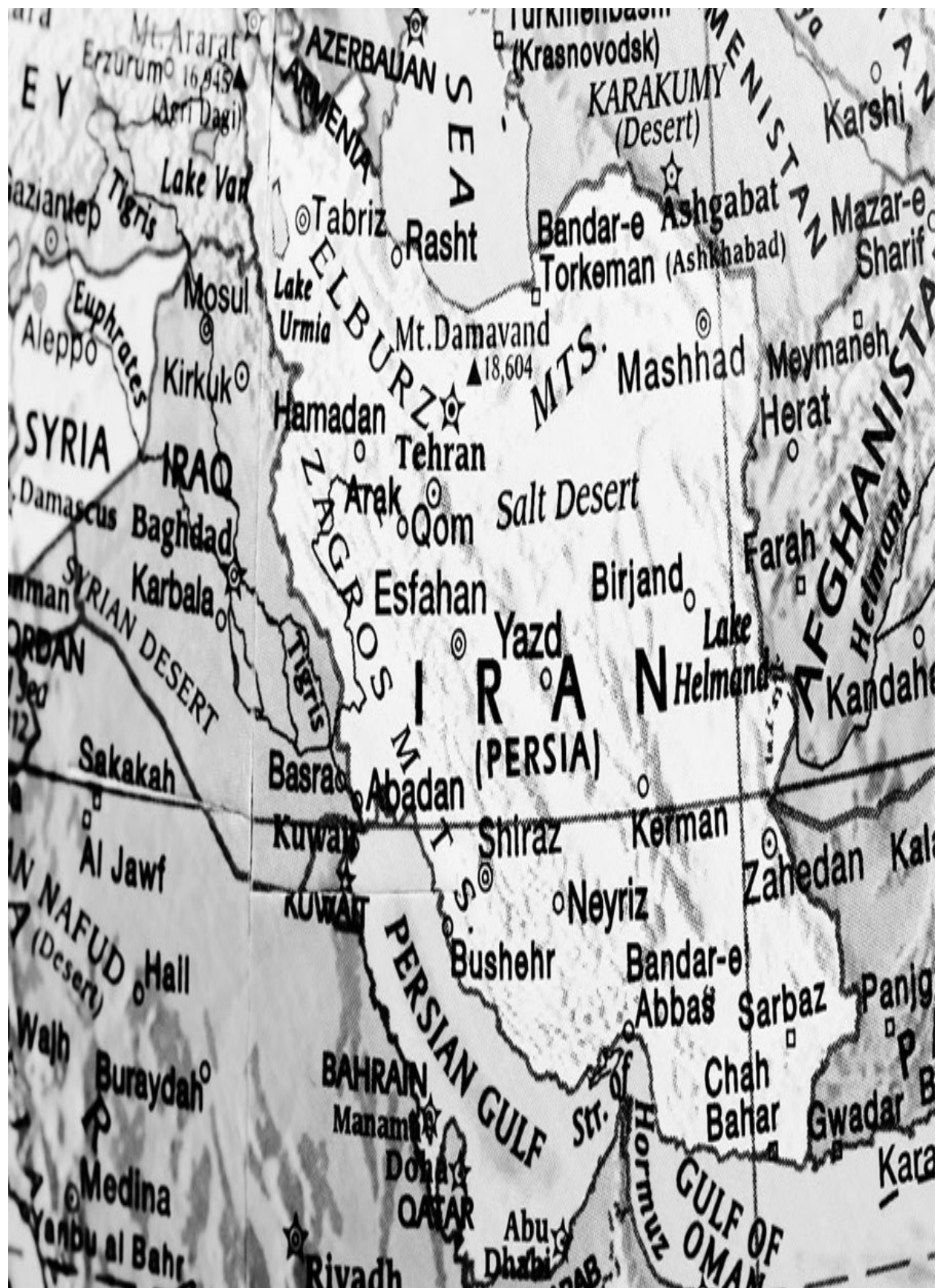
—Inscription on the tomb of Cyrus the Great

Iran rests at the strategic center of the greater Middle East. Once boasting the most powerful kingdom of its day, Iran's influence waned over the centuries. By the nineteenth century, its military and industrial capabilities could not match those of Western empires. In the twentieth century, many powers courted Iran, until Iranian leaders broke from the Western orbit to create a unique political philosophy rooted in fundamentalist Shia Islam in 1979. A newly formed praetorian guard would try to export this philosophy to the world.

Iran is perched between two large oil fields in and around the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf and is awash in fossil fuel resources. In land size, it is second only to Saudi Arabia in the greater Middle East. It is twice the size of Texas and has a population of over seventy million. Iran has been linguistically and ethnically diverse for many centuries. Persian is the mother tongue of only half of Iran's population; one quarter is ethnic Azeri; the other quarter is composed of Arabs, Baloch, Kurds, Turks, and others. Iran is a mountainous country, and its rugged terrain has served as a strategic barrier to would-be invaders.

The earliest traces of human civilization in Iran date to about 8,000 BCE. Cyrus I established the Achaemenian dynasty and laid the foundation for the Persian

Empire in 630 BCE. His grandson, Cyrus the Great, conquered much of Greece. In the fifth century BCE, Persia was a global superpower. Many Iranians are proud of their ancient heritage and travel to King Cyrus the Great's tomb, in southwestern Fars Province, to pay their respects to this legendary figure.¹



[Map 1. Iran. Courtesy of iStock/Getty Images.](#)

Greeks referred to “the West” as all land west of Persia, and the Greeks and Persians clashed with each other for decades. The ancient Greeks forged many of their democratic freedoms in response to the Persian challenge. The Greek dramatist Aeschylus wrote *The Persians* in 472 BCE, which cast a civilized Greece against an authoritarian Persia. In 338 BCE Alexander the Great’s army reached Persepolis and was astounded by its beauty. Nonetheless, he leveled much of the city in revenge for the torching of the Parthenon years earlier.

A Glorious Past

The ravages of the Greek army did not extinguish Persia’s artistic and literary beauty. The stories of Omar Khayyam and iconic Persian poetry, such as Ferdowsi’s “*Shahnameh*,” recall the glories of pre-Islamic Persia. In the arts, the Parthians shone in miniature painting and carpet weaving.² The Mongols ravaged all lands in their grip, including Persia. But the artistic creativity survived and thrived, and works authored by Rumi and Hafez are still praised for their magnificence. Within Iran today, the works of the golden age are censored and redacted by the Guards to protect moral piety.

The Persian Empire declined and was conquered by Arabs in the seventh century and its inhabitants converted to Islam. But Persians retained their language and much of their culture. By the nineteenth century, the West became militarily, economically, scientifically, and technologically dominant throughout the world. Britain and Russia expanded their imperial and commercial reach to the borders of Persia.

Persia’s oil reserves made the country an essential focus for international relations from the early twentieth century. Western oil firms tapped the country’s petroleum wealth, and Western cultural influence developed a higher profile

there. During World War I, rival Western powers competed for the support of Muslims. As part of the “Kaiser’s Jihad,” Germans spread the rumor that Kaiser Wilhelm had converted to Islam. For their part, the British circulated a story that an ancient Muslim holy figure would reemerge to lead Muslims in the battle against German armies.

Some Iranians took sides in Western jockeying for power, but many more avoided foreign meddling. The more pious Persians tried to fend off the advance of European and American values by retreating into Islam, as well as mysticism. To escape harassment by Iranian authorities, leading ayatollahs quietly moved to Najaf, in newly created Iraq. They, as well as nationalists, embraced a romantic nostalgia for a long-lost empire and prestige. Some intellectuals turned to Western dictatorial philosophies, such as those found in Nazi Germany.

National Socialism challenged British imperialism, promoted anti-Semitism, and boosted the status of the Aryans to racial supremacy. Fritz Grobba, Berlin’s envoy to the Middle East, was often called “the German Lawrence of Arabia” because he promised a Pan-Arab state stretching from Casablanca to Tehran. He built ties between Persian elites and the Nazi foreign office. One of those smitten by the pomp and power of the Third Reich was Reza Pahlevi.

Reza and Mohammad Pahlevi

“Machine Gun” Reza Pahlevi was a marginally educated, six-foot-five-inch, Russian-trained Iranian soldier, who had served in a Cossack brigade.³ He created a two-generation dynasty in Persia, returning the country’s name to “Iran.”⁴ An authoritarian and pragmatic leader and, in some ways, a modernist, Pahlevi grabbed power in a coup. He anointed himself shah and tried to modernize the country. He also kept his country from deteriorating into patches of European empire. This semiliterate autocrat promoted nationalism and founded the University of Tehran.⁵ The shah’s nationalism took inspiration from Iran’s pre-Muslim past while turning to Western models of sustained economic development.

While Pahlevi sponsored Western-oriented progress, much of the economic

development was uneven.⁶ The secular nationalism of Kemalist Turkey inspired Reza Shah to introduce reforms on the Turkish model. As Atatürk abolished the fez and replaced it with Western hats, the shah outlawed the veiling of women and other religious garbs.⁷

He loved coronations, crowns, jewels, and sycophancy.⁸ He became pro-German and connected with the hyper-masculinity and martial pomp of the Third Reich.⁹ When World War II broke out, Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Germany vied for influence in Iran. Iranians were overwhelmingly pro-German, as some mullahs and future Iranian leaders empathized with the Nazi hatred of the British.

The British forced the shah from power in 1941 because he was an admirer of Hitler.¹⁰ He fled to South Africa, where he died. But he was not forgotten. Young Iranians who were born half a century after he died have saluted his legacy while cursing the Guards of their day.¹¹ After the war, the British placed Machine Gun Reza's son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in power because he had a domestic following, he was Western-educated, and the British thought he would be friendly to Allied interests.

Like his father, the younger Pahlavi tried to modernize Iran, using oil-generated revenues to build universities, boost education, develop medical facilities, and lay infrastructure and transportation systems. But he didn't have his Cossack father's charisma or strength and never showed muscular decision-making or iron leadership. Many Iranians saw the shah as weak, decadent, and cosmopolitan. Perhaps as a reflection of perceived weakness, he built an intelligence and security service to monitor enemies and rivals. Known as SAVAK, it was founded in 1957 under the guidance of American major general Herbert Norman Schwarzkopf Sr.¹² It was built to monitor, infiltrate, and eliminate threats from opposition groups, mainly the communists.¹³

In the late 1940s and 1950s, the first significant band of terrorists attacked government figures. The Fada'ayan-e Islam attacked the shah's supporters and employees and killed Prime Minister Ali Razmara.¹⁴ Under the leadership of Navvab Safavi, the Fada'ayan-e Islam hoped to unify Shia and Sunnis, in what Safavi called a "rapprochement of the schools."¹⁵

Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and Kermit Roosevelt

In the early 1950s Mohammad Mossadegh, a popular nationalist reformer, challenged the shah's developmental and social policies.¹⁶ Once elected prime minister, Mossadegh passed a law nationalizing the oil industry. He also tried to wrest control of Iran's military from the shah. But Mossadegh's nationalistic jingoism hit a discordant note in London and Washington. British and American leaders determined to rid Iran of Mossadegh and replace him with the shah. This task fell to a swashbuckling American aristocrat, Kermit Roosevelt, known as "Kim" to his friends.¹⁷ He was the grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt and was a high-level CIA operative.

Operation Ajax, the removal of Mossadegh, worked almost flawlessly.¹⁸ Street demonstrations and court intrigue forced Mossadegh from his position as prime minister, and the shah returned to reclaim the Peacock Throne.¹⁹ Nonetheless, in death, the starry-eyed Mossadegh achieved the respect and fame that eluded him in life. If Kermit Roosevelt is mostly forgotten, Mossadegh's image endures as that of a victimized and quixotic nationalist. Many Iranians rallied around him and saw him as the personification of a wronged Iran, although the very devout loathed him. The often-repeated meme that the CIA controlled Iran from 1953 until the demise of the shah resonated in the Third World, among the international left, and in circles of American and Iranian intellectuals, where it still festers. Seventy-five years after Ajax, Iranian president Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif complained on Twitter that "the U.S. overthrew the popularly elected democratic government of Dr. Mossadegh, restoring the dictatorship and subjugating Iranians for the next 25 years."²⁰

Ideas behind the Guards

Rumblings of reform and revolt had been in the air well before the last days of the shah. As elsewhere in the world, twentieth-century Iran teemed with radical thought, and these ideas would prompt a revolution. In turn, this revolution would create the Guards.

Some misty-eyed Iranian romantics gazed backward to the country's imperial glory, espousing a philosophy of "quietism," in which religious leaders were to be kept away from government affairs.²¹ Some hoped to reinvigorate Iran with modern technology and management systems, while other quietists blended Persian nationalism with Islam. Discontented midcentury Iranians had earlier thinkers to inspire them, for example the early Islamist nationalist Jamaledin Asadabadi, an Iranian political activist who dreamed of creating a stable, modern European-style state under an enlightened despot. His ideas had played a crucial role in inspiring the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in 1905.

Others, still, were animated by new, more exotic ideas, some of which came from Egypt and some from Europe. Some of these beliefs redounded to Iranian intellectuals, filtered through the lens of nationalism and Shia Islam. Four sets of often-overlapping political ideologies would compete for adherents in twentieth-century Iran: Islamism, communism, fascism, and Shia revivalist Islam. Elements of these belief systems would animate the Guards from 1979.

Iran's Shia Revivalism

For over five hundred years, Shia Islam has been Iran's dominant religion. By the mid-twentieth century, strains of nationalism were fused with Shia fundamentalism in many mosques. The Shia "Twelvers," the majority branch of Shia Islam in Iran, believe that the twelfth successor to Mohammed never died. Instead, he is hiding in "occultation" and will return to bring universal triumph to Shia Muslims throughout the world.²² Revivalists believe they can set the stage for the return of the Twelfth Imam by committing acts of violence.²³ Some of these end-of-days writings are opaque, but they rally millenarian fervor. A young revolutionary guard who later became president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, said, "The most important task of our revolution is to prepare the way for the return of the Twelfth Imam."²⁴

Iranian clergy have long held an important role in civil society and in the government. Without the confidence and support of the clergy, Iranian leaders could not rule smoothly, as the last shah discovered. Preachers traditionally praised the shah in their sermons and, in turn, received support from the state.²⁵

But this began to change in the twentieth century. Many clerics and lay clergy shopped for new ideas and for religious and civil associations that were more attuned to the common man and woman. They liked what they found in the sermons of Ayatollah Khomeini, and some turned to him with wide-eyed reverence. They began to share Khomeini's breezy indifference to Iran's Persian past and to root their primary, and sometimes exclusive, identity in unrefined Shia Islam.

Most Iranians were never drawn to fascism or communism, being repelled by the atheism inherent to both ideologies. Many Iranians were also skeptical of the Sunni and the Saudi connection to Islamism. Khomeini despised the Saudis because they controlled and still control Islam's holy sites. Arabs leveled tombs of the Shia imams, and these violations remained unforgiven for centuries. In 1943 Khomeini attacked the Saudi Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam in a tract titled *Secrets Unveiled*, and repeatedly called Saudis "the camel-grazers of Riyadh."²⁶

Islamism

Another set of ideas was anchored in Islamism, or political Islam, which began in Egypt and quickly found an audience among Iranian intellectuals and nationalists. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I signaled the nadir of Muslim prestige and power in the world.²⁷ In response, some Muslims rallied to revitalize and politicize Islam. Most of the more important leaders were Sunnis, including the Indian-Pakistani Abdula Maududi and the Egyptians Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb.²⁸ Their ideology and strategies gained traction in the early to mid-twentieth century.

Hassan al-Banna, an Egyptian schoolteacher, created the Muslim Brotherhood to fill material and spiritual voids in civil society. Along with other pious Muslims, he was crestfallen at the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924. Much like Shia clerics in Persia, he saw Islam threatened by atheism, imperialism, and the ever-expanding scientific gap between the West and the Islamic East. Al-Banna was a Sunni Muslim, but he had no argument with the Shia, whom he saw as fellow Muslims. Instead, he advocated a solid Shia-Sunni Islamic front against

non-Muslims, and he particularly detested the British. Iranian Islamic revolutionaries praised the Brotherhood and mourned al-Banna when he was killed in 1949.

After al-Banna's death, the Egyptian intellectual Sayyid Qutb, sometimes spelled Sayeed Qutb, became the theoretician of the Muslim Brotherhood until Egyptian ruler Gamal Abdel Nasser ordered him executed in 1966. In the late 1940s Qutb attended a teachers' college in the United States and penned a phantasmagorical account of his experience titled *The America I Saw*. He loathed America, describing its women as vixens, its men as vulgar, its society void of religion, and its cultural tastes as unrefined and salacious. Iranian mullahs echoed his descriptions of the Americas. Qutb was not a cleric, and his commentary on Islamic scripture does not hold authority among the more pious. But he shone as a general strategist and opinion maker for the Muslim masses.²⁹ Future supreme leader of Iran Ali Khamenei translated Qutb's works into Persian.³⁰

The Persian activist-intellectual Said Jamaledin Asadabadi, sometimes called Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, was a principal architect of the first wave of religious revivalism. Revolutionary Iran's founders, including ayatollahs Ruhollah Khomeini and Khamenei, were profoundly influenced by the militant Navvab Safavi, who promoted the work of Egyptian Brotherhood leaders, notably Qutb.

It was the Iranian Ali Shariati who is often called the ideologue of the Iranian Revolution. He promoted Islam as a complete lifestyle and advocated purging Iran of all nonreligious elements. This appealed to the religious, weak, and alienated of Iran.³¹ Shariati took avant-garde leftist designs of social justice and wedded them to Shia Islam. Shariati was influenced by the radical, trendy ideas popular in Paris, where he lived during the 1950s, earning a doctorate in religious studies from the Sorbonne. His prose was fluid and energetic. Said a friend, "He was a Gramsci, Guevara, Fanon, Malcolm X and Iqbal rolled into one."³²

Stirred by the revolutionary zeal he found in Europe's progressive salon set, Shariati sought to revitalize Shia Islam. He wrote of two versions of Shia Islam—a "red" or authentic Shia and a "black" Shia, which was stagnant and worn. Shariati was part nationalist, Islamist, and revivalist, and his message inspired scores of activists during the 1960s and 1970s.³³ Above all, he was an advocate of Shia Islam. He believed Shia Muslims should stop passively waiting for the return of the Twelfth Imam. Instead, they should create conditions that would

hasten his return, writing, “Every day is Ashura; every place is Karbala.” He argued that the role of the clergy was to guide society by a confection of Islamic values and left-oriented activism.³⁴ His work remains foundational in Iran today.

Khomeini, like Shariati, was part Islamist and part revivalist and wrote with flair and verve. He defined himself primarily as a Muslim and secondarily as an Iranian, demanding that the 1979 Revolution be principally Islamic, not Iranian or Shia.³⁵ He loathed the West, mainly the British, Americans, and Israelis, and excoriated Iranians whom he considered collaborators. Khomeini shared Qutb’s view of nationalism as idolatry. If Qutb vilified Nasser as the “Pharaoh,” Khomeini saw both Pahlevis as anachronisms and impediments to valid Islamic rule. Khomeini included these ideas in his manuscript *The Jurist Guardianship—Islamic Government*, which circulated widely in the 1970s.³⁶ Years later, the Guards would project these ideas abroad and use them to rally Shia in the greater Middle East.

Communism

The second set of ideas popular in the lead-up to the Iranian Revolution is attached to communism. While some Iranians hoped to recast elements of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in a Shia mold, secular intellectuals looked to the Soviet Union for inspiration. The Communist Party of Iran, the Tudeh, was founded in 1941, and a rival, a harder-left group, the Jangali party, was established in 1920. Internal bickering split the Jangali movement and atomized it into small hard-left factions. It collapsed in 1921, but the Tudeh Party endured.³⁷

Additionally, some left-oriented opinion-makers were independent of communist organizations. Novelist and essayist Jalal Al-e Ahmad was not a communist, but his ideas and literature resounded with progressives, as well as nationalists. His influential 1962 pamphlet *Westoxication* and his short stories argued that Iranians must control all elements of wealth, power, and culture.³⁸ This was layered on the works of Marx, Lenin, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Frantz Fanon and debated on university campuses and coffee houses.³⁹ Khomeini wrote favorably about Al-e Ahmad, who analyzed Iranian society through a Marxist lens.⁴⁰

Khomeini saluted the mobilizing capacity and revolutionary zeal of Marxists, including Castroists and Maoists, though he did not share their view of religion.⁴¹ Similarly, in the twenty-first century, leaders of al Qaida tried to lay the foundations for an alliance between radical Islamism and Western leftism.⁴²

Elements of socialism were harmonious with Shia Islam. But communism never took deep and broad root in Iran, despite the efforts of Soviet-supported Iranian Marxists. Tudeh's statement of principles, driven by atheism and its vaporous message of dialectic materialism, confused most Iranians.⁴³ As with other Marxist groups, members of Tudeh snickered at religion but were willing to partner with clergy to forge a tactical front against a common enemy. Islamic radicals and Iranian communists shared a common enemy in the shah.

For this reason, the Tudeh supported Khomeini and the clerical regime in the aftermath of the revolution, though they saw Khomeinism to be little more than platitudes and abstractions. But Khomeini destroyed the party when he no longer had a use for it.⁴⁴ The leftist Islamic group Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) declared an armed struggle against the system in 1981. Nonetheless, the left was partially undone by internal bickering and its inability to solidify a base.⁴⁵ Many Iranian communists were ethnic Armenians and were deeply suspicious to any connections to Russia.⁴⁶ By 1984 hard-left organizations were no longer capable of shaping forces for political change in Iran.⁴⁷ Many of the leaders have been imprisoned, shot, exiled, or subdued.

Fascism

Most Iranians were uncomfortable with communism, though some were smitten with National Socialism and Italian fascism, which is the third set of new ideas examined here. During World War II, some Western intellectuals opined that fascist and communist regimes held similar goals. Journalists of the influential Times of London referred to the Soviet Union as a fascist country.⁴⁸ However fascism was defined, some Iranian intellectuals liked it.

Fascism was born in Italy during World War I, emerging out of the ideas of political philosopher Giovanni Gentile.⁴⁹ His slogan was, "All within the state,

none outside the state, and none against the state.”⁵⁰ At its most successful, totalitarian states could eliminate thought crimes, a term coined by George Orwell in 1984. The first fascist movement to gain power was Mussolini’s Blackshirts in Italy in 1922. For observers of fascism, such as Orwell, it was not easy to fit Germany, Japan, and Italy in the same political framework.⁵¹

Fascist elements that attracted some Iranian intellectuals were the glorification of violence, fetishized masculinity, and mass mobilization. They were also taken by the theatricality and fixation on enemies. Iranians applauded German fascism because it was hostile to British colonialism.⁵² The elder shah admired Hitler, National Socialism, and elements of the Aryan race concept, admiring and respecting Germany’s agenda in general.⁵³ When Persia changed its name to Iran, Hitler reciprocated by making Iranians honorary Aryans.⁵⁴

Hitler’s totalitarianism was predicated on an absolute identification with the community and the renunciation of individual rights or obligations to religion; indeed, in Hitler’s words, “We do not want to have any other God—only Germany.”⁵⁵ Some Iranian intellectuals liked what they saw in Hitler’s collectivist and socialist philosophy. Some sympathy for Nazism continues today in Iran. Khomeini advocated for a dictator to lead an Islamic government and ensured that fascistic principles would be enforced by the Guards, which has similarities to Hitler’s bodyguards, the SS.⁵⁶ For all that, the philosophy that held the most significant and most enduring pull for most influential Iranians was a resurgent and commanding Shia revivalism.

Table 1 presents the four critical political ideologies that would form the basis of postrevolutionary Iran. It offers the core principles, initial leaders of the ideologies, the stated enemies of those ideologies, the strategies to achieve and hold power, and the current status of those ideologies in Iran.

[Table 1. Selected totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century](#)

Islamism	
Core principles	Political Islam; all agencies of the government enforce Sharia or Islamic law
Leaders	Al-Banna, Qutb, Safavi, and Mawdudi.
Enemies	Any person or agency that tries to impede the growth of Sharia or Islamic law

Strategies	Promote and penetrate civil society; work from within; once in po
Status	Very pervasive in parts of the Islamic Brotherhood.

Ideological Convergence

As can be seen from the above discussion, elements of Islamism, communism, fascism, and Shia revivalism—the four sets of twentieth-century totalitarian ideas present in Iran—overlap. Communism and fascism are both authoritarian and atheistic. Islamism and Shia revivalism both want to build global Islamic law. Furthermore, the four ideologies all converge on seven points.

First, all four share antidemocratic ideals, seeing democracy as either hostile, misguided, weak, or ignorant of the importance of healthy leadership. Islamism and Shia revivalism see all man-made law as invalid because the only valid code is sharia. In Iran, the Guards enforce sharia and punish those who transgress it. Of all political and bureaucratic cohorts in Iran, few have shown more contempt for democratic norms than the Guards.

The second point of convergence is a sense of victimization. The German and Italian fascists of the 1920s accused the treaties ending World War I of being unfair. They professed that the borders of their states were irrational and needed to be revised to reflect ethnic and racial collective identities. Communists focused on class warfare and drew inspiration from images of Spartacus liberating slaves in imperial Rome. Islamists and Shia revivalists argue that Muslims have been victimized by Western, non-Muslim forces, to explain the relative backwardness of Muslim states and societies. Shariati and Qutb spoke about the master-and-slave relationships under imperialism. Khomeini accused the West of imposing an unjust economic order, thereby dividing the Muslim people into two groups: the oppressors and the oppressed.

The Guards have long underscored the victimization of Muslims, Iranians, and non-Europeans. Their publications assail the historical colonial practices of European powers, particularly of the British, and attribute many of Iran's current maladies to past injustices. They blame the teeming poverty and the relative underdevelopment in Iran on policies of the shah's regime and the current practices of the CIA and President Trump's reimposition of financial sanctions.

Third, all four philosophies have a sharp focus on implacable enemies. Adherents of each of the four idea sets see themselves in a pitched, unrelenting war with enemies. The Soviets declared capitalists, wreckers, and subversives to be their enemies.⁵⁷ The enemies of the Nazis were lower races that needed to be purged from a collective gene pool in the German-controlled territory. The Iranian enemies are the United States, Israel, and world Jewry.⁵⁸ According to Shariati, all of history was a struggle between two religions—God’s doctrine of justice and man’s worship of greed and injustice. The Soviets and Nazis were threatened by Western liberalism and social license, which they saw as subversive. Islamists, notably Qutb, and Shia fundamentalists see the West as immoral and hostile to Islamic values. In line with these ideas, the Guards have been charged with unmasking, imprisoning and, sometimes, executing prisoners.

Fourth, all four ideologies are anchored in contempt for nonconformism and the conviction that the individual must be subordinate to the collective. This collective may be the larger racial grouping, in the case of Nazi Germany; the economic class, as in the case of the Soviet Union; or the religious body, as in the case of Iran. The Basij, truncheon in hand, stroll the streets to discourage and penalize social nonconformity. The Guards use cyber operations to block Iranians from receiving political and cultural messaging from the outside world.

Fifth, all four are utopian. Communists imagined elements of a pure and primitive prehistory that contrasted to the materialism and corruption of the European industrial revolution.⁵⁹ The perfect future would have an equal distribution of wealth, no want, and medical health and education for all. There would be no war because there would be no human conflict.⁶⁰ For National Socialism, utopia was a racial order; the Nazis looked back to a time of imagined racial purity and hoped to recreate it by eliminating existing contaminants.

Islamists and Shia revivalists pictured a utopia of first-generation Muslims conducting a perfect society. Khomeini held that Mohammad’s Mecca and Imam Ali’s caliphate in the first generation of Muslims were models to emulate.⁶¹ Khomeini also anticipated a planetary conflagration that would establish Allah’s kingdom with the return of the Mahdi. His advent could be hastened by creating the right set of circumstances and a sufficient set of nuclear weapons.

The Twelver Shia believe that the first twelve imams who succeeded Muhammad were sinless and selected by God to be models for future generations of Muslims. In their historical narrative, these imams were hounded

and killed by the Sunnis, except for the twelfth, who disappeared and has been in hiding ever since.⁶² Each year millions of Shia make a pilgrimage to a well in the village of Jamkaran, which is near the city of Qom, to pay homage to the Mahdi.⁶³

The Twelfth Imam will return as the Mahdi, or savior, and reveal himself. Then, Jesus will return to earth to battle the forces of evil. Good will triumph over the wicked; Jesus will die and be buried alongside Muhammad in Medina. Then comes judgment day when the world's inhabitants will ascend to heaven or descend to hell.⁶⁴ Utopia is found in that Islamic heaven.

Sixth, all four ideologies are driven by a mandate for change, compelled to crush existing societies and craft new ones. Those who obstruct this plan are enemies. Khomeini agreed with al-Banna, and Qutb, that reviving "true Islam" was imperative to establishing God's sovereignty. The Guards lead Iranian efforts to change the old order in the Greater Middle East.

The seventh, and final, point of convergence is deep, generalized hatred, particularly anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism. Karl Marx's literature was profoundly anti-Semitic but had no racial component. National socialism was profoundly racist, with lethal implications. Muslim leaders in the twentieth century, such as Qutb, justified anti-Semitism by pointing to the Koran and other sacred texts. Khomeini wrote that "it is the Jews who were the first, to begin with, anti-Islamic propaganda . . . the Jews and their foreign accomplices are fundamentally hostile to Islam."⁶⁵ Guard leaders regularly and loudly promote anti-Semitism.

Ideological Divergence

While all four ideologies converge on seven points, they diverge on three issues, namely, the role of religion, the distribution of wealth and property, and the nature of utopia. In terms of the first, communism is atheistic, and fascist ideologues tolerated Christianity out of political necessity. In Islamism and Shia revivalism, religion defines legal and social norms in all elements of life. As an example, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad reserved a special place for the

Twelfth Imam at his weekly cabinet briefings.⁶⁶

Another point of divergence is the distribution of wealth and property. Communism demands an equal distribution of wealth and property ownership. Fascism and Islamism do not make that requirement. Shia revivalism makes appeals to aid the poor but does not require that the means of production be placed in the hands of producers of capital. As Fredrick Kagan has remarked, “The Islamic Republic’s ideology has virtually no significant economic component. It is an amalgam of anti-colonialism . . . anti-Zionism, Persian nationalism, and adherence to an idiosyncratic form of political Shiism.”⁶⁷

Finally, the ideologies diverge on the nature of utopia. While all four are utopic, their images of heaven are very different. Fascism saw utopia through the lens of racial and national power and purity. Both Islamic ideologies have found utopia in the first generation of Muslims, as recounted by sacred Islamic script.

Khomeinism and a New Golden Age of Islam

What finally emerged in 1979 was a political and religious revolutionary philosophy that fused Islamism with Shia revivalism and with elements of fascism and socialism. Known as Khomeinism, it echoes Qutb’s view that today’s world is one of ideological darkness, as well as Shariati’s rebuke of a materialistic world. Khomeini was an aggressive rebel within a mostly quietist clergy who became an autocrat in 1979.⁶⁸ When he came to power, his countrymen likened him to the prophet Abraham, who “smashed idols, was willing to sacrifice his son, and rose against tyrants.” Once in command of Iran, he crafted religious practices to create a “New Golden Age” of Islam.⁶⁹

Like Islamism, Khomeinism is political Islam. Khomeini lectured that Islamic governance is the only valid system of rule because of conditions outlined in the Koran and the canonized history of Mohammed. He wrote, “An Islamic government is based on the laws and regulations of Islam and can, therefore, be defined as the rule of divine will over humanity.”⁷⁰

At the heart of Khomeinism is the concept of velayat-e faqih, or Islamic rule

under guardian jurists. Though he was anticommunist, Khomeini promoted the distribution of wealth under the slogans “Islam is for equality and social justice” and “Islam will eliminate class differences.”⁷¹ He also opined that leaders are duty-bound to provide employment for workers, farmers, and laborers. However, the rights of workers to strike can be circumscribed by the jurists.⁷²

When he came to power, Khomeini seized private monies and placed them in the hands of bonyads, vast charities under religious leadership, which will be discussed in chapter 8. Many of these organizations are controlled by the Guards. Many care for the indigent and war handicapped. Constitutionally, the bonyads stand above the law and are answerable only to the supreme leader.

In Khomeinism, the clergy rule by divine revelation. According to Shia Islam, Mohammad vested the duty and responsibility of guiding and leading the community to the clergy.⁷³ The purpose of the state is to implement Islamic law. Khomeini, as other believing Muslims, held that all scriptures are free of error because they are the exact word of God. At the same time, Khomeini did not believe that Muslims could go directly to the text to understand scripture the way many Protestants think they can bypass a church hierarchy.⁷⁴ Khomeinism is a theocratic autocracy.

While Khomeinism holds rudiments sympathetic to fascism, the ideology differs from Italian or German fascism on issues of race and religion. Khomeinism demands conformity and obedience to authority. It sees democracy as weak and arrogant. As in fascist societies, Khomeinism holds an inflexible leadership principle. Finally, Khomeinism holds elements of Shia revivalism. Both despise all religions and ideologies that diverge from Shia fundamentalism. Khomeini declared that every non-Shia system was a form of idolatry.⁷⁵

The presence of the various ideological strands within Khomeinism explains why U.S. policymakers did not know what to make of Khomeini initially. Observers of Iran recalled years later that “few U.S. policy makers knew much about him other than that he was.”⁷⁶ Because Westerners could not understand Khomeini, they could not adequately understand the collective mindset of the Guards.

From Khomeini to Khamenei

Khomeini's legacy, revolutionary zeal, and philosophy would be passed to his successor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He was born in 1939, into a poor, religious family of eight siblings, three of whom became clerics. Khamenei recalls in his autobiography that he loathed the shah and the British and was inspired by the radical Islamist Navvab Safavi, later killed by the shah's security forces, after he spoke at Khamenei's school. He studied in Qom, sometimes spelled Qum, from 1958 to 1964 under Ruhollah Khomeini.⁷⁷ Few were surprised when he was given the mantle of national leadership after Khomeini died. Fewer still were surprised when he bolstered the strength of the Guards.

Khamenei's view of leadership is sometimes called principlism, an umbrella term used to refer to many types of religion conservatism, by Iranian leaders. In summer 2018 a Guards-affiliated journal encapsulated principlism as "an anti-hegemony, anti-aristocracy and pro-dispossessed revolution. Whoever embarks on this path will have the revolutionaries behind him."⁷⁸ For revolutionaries the author could have substituted Guards. Subsequent chapters will focus on how the Guards try to protect Khomeini's revolution at home, or principlism, and export it around the world.⁷⁹ Former IRGC commander Major General Jafari claimed that Khomeinism is solid in Iran, and now "we are on the path that leads to the rule of Islam worldwide." Jafari promised to use the Guards to "shape the picture of the Islamic world."⁸⁰ Jafari's successor, Major General Salami, has openly shared this vision of transforming Iran into a global player.⁸¹

Summary

Iran has a multi-religious and imperial past. Its fortunes faded after being conquered by Alexander and then, the Arabs. But Iranians held fast to their language and built a literature of poems and songs that they still adore. The short-lived Pahlevi dynasty tried to modernize Iran but alienated religious leaders of civil society. The shah tried, too late, to appease both liberal and radical opponents and lessen the incendiary atmosphere. In the early days of the revolution, some reformers were optimistic. Abbas Milani, a former political prisoner, recalls his release from Evin prison: "The gate opened, and with a

strange sense of hesitation and exhilaration, I walked to freedom.”⁸²

Within several years, the new regime vaporized civil freedoms. Gone was the salon set’s chirpy romanticism for ancient Persia and the love sonnets of its poets. Great works of the Western canon were turned to pulp or burnt to ashes by the Basij. By the mid-1980s, they were read secretly in the shadows, if at all. What remained was the primitive religious architecture of the mullahs.

In 1944 George Orwell ventured, “Of all the unanswered questions of our time, perhaps the most important is: ‘What is Fascism?’”⁸³ Thirty-five years later people would ask, “What is Khomeinism?” There was no quick answer. The question bedeviled successive generations of Iranians and Iran watchers because Khomeinism changed the world. Islamism, communism, fascism, and Shia revivalism overlapped on some points and some elements found their way into Khomeinism. However it is defined, Khomeinism struck the world like lightning. The shock troops of the Revolution were the Guards, who rooted out dissent and home and juttied out the spear of the mullahs throughout the greater Middle East.

The Guards as a New Tool of Power

A Revolution is like Saturn, it devours its own children.

—Prussian dramatist Georg Büchner commenting on the carnage of the French Revolution

Iran remained largely independent and ignored by the West in the aftermath of World War II, as European empires unraveled. By 1945, as the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the world's dominant powers, Britain began to divest itself of its colonies and distant obligations, announcing that it would dismantle its military presence in the Persian Gulf and the Far East by 1971.¹ As the British moved out, the United States, mired in Vietnam, was strapped for military resources and could not fill the security void they left behind.²

The West Wobbles and the Shah Falls

By the early 1970s, the shah's hold on power was tenuous. Earlier, he had tried to foster reform and promote sustained economic development; indeed, in the 1960s his White Revolution program brought some basic social services—hygiene, sanitation, and health care—to many thousands of villages. Literacy rose from 5 percent to over 60 percent.³ But this boost in learning allowed

Iranians to read writings hostile to the shah and supportive of his enemies.

Making matters worse, it increasingly appeared as though the shah had lost touch with the common man and woman, many of whom found his tastes effete and exotic. For example, in 1971 he held an extravaganza at the ancient ruins of Persepolis, in which he portrayed himself as the heir of Cyrus. Soldiers were dressed up as ancient Medes and Persians. Laborers built a tented city with marbled toilets to house foreign dignitaries who dined on food flown in from Europe.⁴ Criticism was not long in coming. The shah's Persepolis spectacular was satirized among Muslim traditionalists and was seen as kitsch by the Western audience he was trying to impress. His promotion of Western culture only divided the country further.

Empress Farah Pahlavi became an icon of the modern Iranian woman.⁵ She held avant-garde tastes, which attracted progressives but estranged traditional Muslims. When she opened an exhibit at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art that included a picture of naked couples on a bed, a scandal ensued.⁶ She built a collection of works by Americans Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol, and after the revolution they languished in storage in the museum's basement.⁷

In her effort to promote modern values, the empress created a bureau of national culture. In response, traditionalist vigilantes attacked international bookstores and art-house movie theaters. Some of the attacks were lethal; for example, in August 1978 arsonists torched the Rex Theatre in Abadan, killing over three hundred people. Khomeini blamed government agents.⁸ Of the more than five hundred movie theaters in Iran in 1979, approximately two hundred were burned down.⁹

Clerics disparaged cinema, which prompted some acts of arson. According to Khomeini, Westernization included modern theatre, dancing, and mixed-sex swimming. He denounced what he termed the "culture of idolatry," based on his belief that Western capitalism worships materialism instead of God.¹⁰ When he seized power, he directed the Guards to root out and destroy all elements of this Westernization.

Following his father's model, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi tried to replicate the American model of higher education and funded thousands of young people to study abroad. He also promoted equality between the sexes: "If a woman wants to become a physicist, she should have the opportunity to do so, regardless of

sex.”¹¹ Iranian universities produced scientists, engineers, historians, and philosophers. They also served as cauldrons of revolutionary thought.¹² Many of those students animated by revolutionary fervor would serve as Guards in the 1980s.

Young Turks and Angry Iranians

Several Western-educated Iranian economists, called the Young Turks, advanced successful developmental policies during the 1960s, which would later be called the “Golden Decade.” During this period, Iran enjoyed high economic growth and low inflation. From 1960 to 1976, the rate of growth of Iran’s national income was unsurpassed in the world. But by the end of this period, some of these same economists warned the shah that the economy could not absorb the volume of investments the shah demanded.¹³ They predicted social unrest, and their forecasts were correct.

The problem was that the shah’s modernization program involved massive spending, which led to inflation, which in turn eroded the living standards of average Iranians. Increasing unemployment in the 1970s widened an already deep economic chasm between rural and urban residents. Years later, observers of Iran speculated as to why so many Iranians wanted the shah removed when he was determined to better their lives. Much of the answer lies in the divide between economic classes. Despite a rising middle class, there was mass destitution. At the end of the 1970s, the slum dwellers of Tehran were desperate and had little to lose from any regime change. A similar picture would reemerge decades later when Iranians protested desperate economic conditions under the mullahs’ rule.

Compounding the problem, in the late 1970s there were about one hundred thousand Iranian university students abroad. Over one-third of those were studying in the United States, making Iranians the highest number of students in the United States compared to any other country.¹⁴ For many, the contrast between domestic living standards and those outside Iran led them to be smitten by the charismatic Khomeini, as they came to regard the shah as feckless and unresponsive the needs of their countrymen at home.

The shah's situation weakened as merchants, shopkeepers, and business owners—known as bazaaris—joined their religious countrymen in protest nationwide. Workers and university students followed, and strikes began to cripple oil production. Strike leaders organized through neighborhood committees, or komitehs, and the neighborhood mosques were centers of revolutionary organization.¹⁵ Iran's diverse ethnic groups, social strata, and education cohorts found a common language in the words of Khomeini. His sermons stirred a renewed sense of Islamic identity and unity. The students were estranged and angry; the clergy were disappointed; and the bazaaris were fatalistic. The shah no longer controlled the megaphone of popular opinion, which increasingly became concentrated in the hands of the Ayatollah Khomeini.¹⁶

There were competing philosophies and organizations to Khomeini's leadership as the Tudeh Party resurfaced and enjoyed renewed popularity. As the army began to disintegrate, communist activists promoted mutiny. Revolutionary elements attacked police stations and captured armories and weapons depots. The once-proud military began to collapse from within. Mass defections of all ranks sapped the military's capabilities. Some army leaders changed sides, including the top commanders of the Imperial Guards.¹⁷ Police deserted the streets and their stations were ransacked by street demonstrators and the komiteh, which were likened to the committees led by Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917–21.¹⁸

Perhaps because of this communist aspect, left-wing Western intellectuals were initially sympathetic to the revolutionaries. They were less attracted to the Islamic elements in Khomeini's religious philosophy than they were to his anti-Americanism. With the toppling of the shah, whom they saw as a satrap of Washington, Western progressives celebrated the street demonstrations as marches against imperialism, repression, and capitalism. French philosopher Michel Foucault went as far as writing that revolution was a "magnificent political creation."¹⁹

This Western apologia for the Iranian revolution would not disappear even after its Islamist direction became irrevocably entrenched; indeed, over the years, American hard leftists and some Muslims would continue to laud the events of 1979.²⁰ Leading a delegation of the Nation of Islam to Iran to mark the anniversary of the Revolution in 2016, Louis Farrakhan expressed the opinion that "the black people of America are in the mud of civilization," while Iranian mullahs were at the head of a force of liberation.²¹ Today, Guards-run media

celebrate Western intellectuals who lambast their countries and praise or exonerate Iran, leading to a seemingly absurd situation in which the former mayor of London Ken Livingstone has praised Iran's Press TV as the only station that offers him regular time on air.²²

At the same time, many Westerners saw the revolution as a disaster and regarded the shah as a misunderstood and tragic leader. Sir Anthony Parsons, London's last envoy to the royal court, wept at his last meeting with the shah.²³ The shah's future biographer Abbas Milani opined that Mohammad Reza Pahlevi was neither a hero nor villain. Rather, he was an Iranian tragedy and, in Milani's paraphrase of Shakespeare, "one that lov'd not wisely but too well."²⁴ The social edifice he and his father had built crumbled quickly, reflecting the many cracks in its foundation.

In the wake of the revolution, diplomats, intelligence professionals, politicians, journalists, and many others in Washington tried to make sense of what happened. Ironically, it was the shah's last appeal to liberalism that gave Khomeini the opportunity to organize and scoop up newly released political prisoners. The "King of Kings" and his family fled. Bulldozers leveled the first Pahlevi shah's mausoleum. In place of Machine Gun Reza Shah's tomb, the revolutionary regime built public toilets.²⁵ The U.S. embassy, from which fifty-two American hostages were abducted, faced a different fate. Called the "den of spies," it became a museum. In the entrance stands a painted-bronze plastic statue of a United States Marine surrendering to Iranian students.²⁶

The Shah and the Ayatollah

The Iranian Revolution had some similarities to its Russian predecessor, which pitted the Russian tsar against an obscure, anger-spitting revolutionary. The vacillating tsar lost his throne and his life, which changed the world. After Ayatollah Khomeini drove Shah Mohammad Pahlevi from Iran, the world would change once again.

Mohammed lived in his father's shadow, as he did not have the charisma, shrewdness, or luck of his progenitor. The younger Pahlevi made choices that

would haunt him, including an alliance with the United States.²⁷ He made enemies in the Islamic world by inviting Israeli scientists and educators to help him modernize his country. He was part of an international jet set and felt at home in Europe, which provided fodder for his opponents, chief among them Khomeini. Much like Nicholas II, Pahlevi was often aloof and indecisive.

Also like the Russian tsar, the Iranian shah was haunted by his choice of wives, particularly his third. Empress Farah, skied in St. Moritz and circulated with Western royalty. But many Iranians believed she promoted cultural corruption and hoped to rid the country of her. The shah, however, promoted her efforts as part of his general plan to modernize Iran's society and economy.

In the last few years of his life, the shah was stricken with cancer and bewildered by events that he could no longer control.²⁸ His last recorded words were "I wait upon Fate, never ceasing to pray for Iran and for my people. I think only of their suffering."²⁹

If the shah shared many personality traits of Russia's last tsar, his chief nemesis Khomeini, wholly dedicated to the revolution, might have found a similar soul in Lenin. Like the Soviet leader, Khomeini was relentlessly driven to destroy his enemies and forge an unforgiving radical system. Both men scowled often, and it is difficult to find pictures of either man smiling. Both men generated emotional lava among their followers. Like Lenin, Khomeini spoke of smashing his enemies. In one sermon in 1964, he threatened to "smash parliament up" and "punch" its deputies "in the mouth."³⁰ Like Lenin, whose speeches evinced a profound hatred for Nicholas II, Khomeini called the shah a "wretched, miserable man."³¹ And if memories of the Russian revolution conjure up images of Lenin giving fiery speeches, inciting his followers with an angrily raised fist, the popularity of Khomeini's political philosophy of Velayat-e faqih owed much, if not everything, to his exceptional oratory skills.³²

In vindictiveness, too, Khomeini mirrored Lenin, settling scores after he took power with a long list of enemies, including secularists, Jews, the Baha'i community, Israel, and the United States.³³ Like Lenin, he created an intelligence and security service to identify and eliminate enemies at home and abroad. In his ten-year rule, Khomeini killed many times more prisoners than did the shah in his thirty-seven-year reign, much as Lenin was responsible for the deaths of many thousands more people than the allegedly Bloody Nicholas.³⁴ Nonetheless, when Khomeini died, he was, like Lenin, hailed as a national hero and is still

mourned by millions.

Khomeini's Three-Phased Plan of Action

As Iran's revolutionary leaders stepped up to fill the power vacuum that emerged after the shah fled, Khomeini promised support for democracy, but this was a ruse.³⁵ As in the Russian Revolution and the Nazi seizure of power, the man who would rule as Iran's dictator for the next ten years moved quickly to consolidate control. Lenin eliminated all those whom he considered a threat to Bolshevism, including noncommunist reformers. Hitler immediately targeted internal enemies and built concentration camps after he took total power in 1933. Khomeini, too, issued a flurry of arrest warrants, rounding up his enemies and killing or imprisoning them. Just as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union infiltrated neighboring states to ferret out rivals and exert power, so did Khomeini. Both Lenin and Hitler held ambitions for international conquest; here, too, Khomeini tread in their footsteps.

Khomeini's agenda upon seizing power may be distilled into three phases: eliminating domestic enemies and purging Iranian society of non-Islamic elements; expanding Iranian regional influence; and establishing world supremacy. The Guards would have prominent roles in all three stages. In the first, the Basij would subdue and destroy enemies at home. In the second, the Guards, particularly the Qods Force, would infiltrate Shia communities in neighboring states. In the third, the Guards would project power around the globe.

Phase One: The Guards at Home

During the domestic stage, in which all remnants of the shah's rule were expunged, Khomeini ordered all non-Islamic elements purged from Iranian society. "Death to America" was promulgated as a unifying national slogan.³⁶

The Guards targeted known associates of the shah and those suspected of harboring an antirevolutionary agenda. Values that did not accord with the mullahs' vision of Islam were to be eliminated, as this first phase of Khomeini's plan pursued persons deemed enemies of the revolution. The Guards, particularly the Basij, would extirpate the country of its alleged Westoxification. They were the soldiers in the supreme leader's war on Western culture.

Iran's Cultural Revolution, which started in 1980, was the first step in the Islamization of Iran's educational system. The first targets were universities, which Khomeini intended to cleanse of students and professors who criticized the new regime. Authorities locked down the universities in 1980 for two years while the new revolutionary regime purged disloyal faculty members and rewrote the curriculum to conform to the new philosophy of the revolution.³⁷ Once reopened, the universities were ordered to fill the ranks of students with zealous revolutionaries. This initial restructuring was followed by a second wave of Islamization in 1994 and a third one following the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election. This last wave reflected the fact that, a quarter century after the revolution, Iran's new president expressed full solidarity with the Guards and opposition to liberalism: "Some people keep saying that our revolution is aimed at establishing democracy. No. Neither in the Imam's statements nor in the message of the martyr . . . has any such idea been considered."³⁸

The Islamization came from below, as well as above. Guards leaders indoctrinated children, young adults, and the middle aged. This was loosely parallel to the Nazi seizure of all rudiments of culture during the mid-1930s, via "Nazification," or Gleichschaltung, a process that involved the removal of anyone or anything judged undesirable by the state. Among the first targets were the free spirits and satirists. Nazis feared the Berlin cabaret as weaponized humor against the state, and the police and Gestapo pursued out-of-favor jesters.³⁹ Similarly, the early Soviets labeled political satire "a disease" that undermined the state's effort to create an obedient citizenry. A joke to the wrong audience could send a funnyman to prison under article 58 of the Soviet criminal code.⁴⁰ In Iran, antiregime jokes came to target the Guards and Basij, with punchlines centering on the Basij's prudery, ignorance, and hypocrisy.⁴¹ They also target the prissiness of the regime and Ayatollah Khomeini's commandment: "There is no humor in Islam. There is no fun in Islam."⁴² Such sentiments too were and continue to remain suspect. From the early days of the Islamic Republic, the Guards, the MOIS, and the Basij established networks to infiltrate

dissident groups.

During the first phase of Khomeini's rule, Iranian intelligence and security services closed down newspapers and arrested intellectuals. As technology evolved, particularly in the sphere of information technology, the Basij confiscated satellite dishes and disrupted Internet traffic, when that means of communication developed. Attempting to harness culture and art, the regime created the Committee for Cultural Revolution, giving it a mandate to police all kinds of art and cultural activities.⁴³ This was a central mission of the Basij.

The services determined to cleanse poetry, the most loved literary genre in Iran, of un-Islamic contaminants.⁴⁴ As a young man, Khomeini composed gloomy, as well as light-hearted, poems.⁴⁵ But his love of romantic verse waned. The new leaders of Iran forbade poems that did not promote their view of Islam. They were particularly hostile to New Poetry of the 1950s and contemporary verse.⁴⁶ Later, resistance poetry that painted the Islamic Revolution in dark tones and which the mullahs declared subversive could result in death sentences for its authors.⁴⁷

Art and the Guards

Bolsheviks and Nazis both tried to harness the potency of the cinema to forge new, authoritarian orders. Lenin opined, "Of all the arts, the most important for us is the cinema."⁴⁸ Nazi minister of propaganda Joseph Goebbels said in 1941, "It is my ultimate goal to establish the German film as the dominant cultural world power."⁴⁹ Both the Soviets and Nazis sponsored and controlled movie production. Iranian revolutionaries, too, saw the power of film.

The Iranian New Wave Cinema, or Film Farsi, flourished from the early 1960s until the revolution of 1979.⁵⁰ Film Farsi offered gritty social realism found in British films of the same period. Other movies had a simple and upbeat, if well-worn, story line about a poor boy who becomes successful and wins the heart and hand of the girl he loves, to the approval of her family. But some edgier films, toward the end of the 1970s and early revolutionary period, moved into uncharted territory.⁵¹

Iranian revolutionary leaders demanded a reworking of classic Iranian culture, as well as Film Farsi. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which some Iranians quietly refer to as the Ministry of Censorship, issued guidelines to the Guards and Basij about what types of art was permissible and what was forbidden. But guidance was often confusing, and it was sometimes difficult to anticipate what work or genre would be prohibited or exalted. Many of the new restrictions on artist expression were cavalier. Flirtations between a leading actor and actress in movies and plays that were socially innocuous one year earlier could suddenly be considered scandalous and criminal.⁵² By the late 1980s only the mullahs' puritanical court bards could shoot films and compose verse without fear.

The epic poem "Khosrow and Shirin," a classic of Iranian literature for over half a millennium, was eviscerated by state censors.⁵³ Iranians were forbidden from playing or listening to Iranian pop music that combined traditional rhythms with Western instruments.⁵⁴ In fact, many musical styles were proscribed, including Iran's sophisticated and ancient classical tradition tracing back to the pre-Islamic Sassanian Dynasty. In July 2019, Tehran sentenced in absentia two members of an Iranian rock band to fourteen years in jail and seventy-four lashes.⁵⁵

Iranian leaders, like those of early Third Reich and Soviet Union, understood early on the power of visual art and determined to harness it. In Iran today art is monitored by the Guards and the MOIS. Iranian leaders have used nationalist imagery to boost morale. During the Iran-Iraq War, murals with nationalistic themes stirred patriotic sentiment and underscored the Islamic component to the war. Islamic motifs were often drawn next to Quranic verses and religious figures.⁵⁶

Hitler broadcasted to a crowd, "It is not the mission of art to wallow in filth for filth's sake."⁵⁷ The Soviets, too, had a distinct aesthetic that served political purposes. Many early Soviet artists were radicals and proffered images of a socialist utopia. Many artists in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were eager to serve the state and did so. In the Nazi and Soviet eras, the state security services—the Gestapo and the SS in Germany and the NKVD and its successor the KGB in the Soviet Union—were tasked with unmasking creative deviancy. This a job of the Guards in Iran today. Shown in table 2 are elements of the totalitarian aesthetic.

Table 2. Committed arts—the totalitarian aesthetic

	The Soviet Union
Media	Placard art; handbills; cinema.
Themes	Celebrate the Revolution; praise Lenin and Stalin.
Purpose	Art serving the people; stir patriotism in time of war.
Role of intelligence services	Guard against counterrevolutionary art.

a. Leah Silinsky, "The Committed Arts in Iran and the Soviet Union," *Janus: The Undergraduate History Journal*, University of Maryland, Fall 2018, 10–17.

Girls, Women, the Guards, and the New Iran

Another jolt to Iranian popular culture was redefining the role of women.⁵⁸ Immediately, the revolution's leaders revoked the opportunities available to women under the Pahlevi dynasty, hushing their voices unless they championed Islam, under rules that would become increasingly intolerant. The mullahs reinstituted veiling laws in 1981 and outlawed behavior that suggested a lack of proper comportment and modesty or male-female fraternization.⁵⁹ Basij yanked Barbie dolls from the shelves of homes and stores. Feminine beauty needed to be concealed from men, and the sexes were forced to segregate throughout all of Iranian society. Publicly performing female musicians and singers needed to be married and could not wear bright colors, headbands, tightfitting pants, or short-sleeve shirts. The Basij enforced public virtues with the help of police. Some referred to the roving patrols of morality militia as the "Blood of God."⁶⁰ They still do. Dress codes cover female bodies and hair at the age of nine. These codes are enforced by male and female Basij members. Iranian women protesting the compulsory headscarf by taking off their hijab in public can be imprisoned for up to ten years for inciting prostitution.⁶¹ Special Guards units police malls, art galleries, parks, and outdoor gatherings for any displays of open affection between men and women. Finally, restrictions go beyond the realm of outward appearance and interaction with the opposite sex, also affecting women's freedom of expression. In 2008, for example, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance closed the women's movement's monthly *Zanan* for "breaking the law and defaming military and revolutionary institutions, including the Basij."⁶²

Poems without Heroes

From the start of the revolution, Iran's services have killed popular intellectuals who run afoul of the regime, here too following in the footsteps of the Nazis and the USSR. While Germans, Russians, and Iranians revere their poets and philosophers, the dictatorial regimes have silenced creative voices. In Germany, the American-born Mildred Harnack, scholar, journalist, and translator, was captured by the Gestapo in February 1943. She translated Goethe into English and also encouraged resistance to the Nazis, which brought her a death sentence. Her last words were, "And I have loved Germany so much."⁶³

In the Soviet Union, Stalin commissioned the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in 1941 to endorse the Soviet war effort. Some of its members were awarded high honors and acclaimed as national literary treasures.⁶⁴ But, no longer useful after the war, the committee was disbanded and its leaders were tried before a secret military tribunal in 1952 and then shot. Another four hundred were sent to concentration camps, to suffer lingering deaths.⁶⁵

Like Soviets and Germans before them, Iranian leaders have ordered the murder their nation's poets, and members of the Guards and the MOIS have often been the triggermen. The Chain Murders of autumn 1998 refer to a killing spree in which more than eighty Iranian writers and intellectuals were abducted or killed in their own homes.⁶⁶ Hamid Hajizadeh, a poet, scholar, and high school teacher, was stabbed thirty-eight times. He and his nine-year-old son were killed in the attack. In 1998 Mohammad Mosaddegh's granddaughter was stabbed to death, in a murder likely connected to the Guards or the MOIS. She was an American resident visiting Iran and was a critic of the regime.⁶⁷

Two very high-profile murders were those of Dariush Forouhar and his wife, Parvaneh Majd Eskandar. They were stabbed to death in their home in 1998. Dariush Forouhar served as minister of labor in the government immediately after the 1979 revolution.⁶⁸ While he and his wife had long records of anti-shah activism, later, they spoke out against the mullahs. For this reason, government assassins killed them. But Iranians protested. Mourners carried portraits of the couple, shouting "death to tyranny" and "freedom of thought forever."⁶⁹ As in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, some dissidents have disappeared from public view. Sometimes, their remains are never found.

In the forty years since the 1979 revolution, Guards forces, particularly the Basij, have never declared Iran to be fully free of cultural contaminants. Iran's leaders warn against Western efforts to pollute the Iranian revolution. Khomeini's phase

one continues, though in a maintenance mode. Meanwhile, Iran is well into the second phase, of expanding the Islamic Republic's regional power.

Phase Two: Expanding Regional Influence

After Lenin seized power in Russia, Kremlin operatives probed neighboring countries for revolutionary sentiment. Similarly, the Nazis looked to fellow German-speakers in Czechoslovakia and Poland to partner in subversion and sabotage. In the Iranian case, the Guards would lead information operations loosely following the Soviet and Nazi patterns and orchestrate popular street demonstrations in regional countries with large Shia populations deemed strong candidates for Islamic revolution in the Iranian vein. Almost immediately after taking power, Khomeini tried to export the revolution to neighboring countries and used the intelligence and security services to develop parties and cadre in countries around the world. The Guards built mechanisms of control in key Middle East states, particularly Syria and Lebanon, to elbow themselves into positions of power.

Today, the Guards help maintain a contiguous line of pro-Iranian regimes between the Iraq-Iran border and the Mediterranean Sea, as will be discussed in chapter 6. They also extend Iranian influence to the Arabic-speaking side of the Persian Gulf. The Guards, the MOIS, and Iran military personnel abroad continue to train, equip, and lead military and paramilitary organizations; underwrite and arm proxies; and create zones of influence. Regularly and loudly, Iranian leaders challenge Washington's regional role.⁷⁰

The area now under Iran's reach has important geopolitical implications because Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq produce some 70 percent of the world's oil. Iran actively supports proxies in Iraq and Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Syria, and Yemen. It also supports, often through the Guards, Shia populations in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. Further, as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has stated, Iran's presence in territory contiguous to Israel threatens the life of the Jewish state, as the Iranians have for over thirty years heavily invested in the Lebanese-based Hezbollah.⁷¹

Phase Three: Guards Abroad

According to plan, the third of Khomeini's phases will consolidate Iran's global power, through the agglomeration of Islamic states into a single megastate.⁷² The Guards are intended to play a prominent role in this phase. Hitler wanted to build a European empire from the eastern France to the Urals. Berlin, to be renamed as Germania, would be the capital of this racial empire. The early Soviets tried to carry their revolution to neighboring states as well but were halted at the battle of Warsaw. Khomeini, too, saw the entire world as his target and demanded that Muslims wage relentless jihad against the United States, which he declared the center of gravity in a global struggle. In the words of former Guards commander Jafari, "The Islamic Revolution is now in its third stage—that is, (the stage) of assembling the Islamic government, and with God's help it will pass this stage."⁷³ The Guards' deputy commander explained in 2014 that Iran was supporting what it considered to be resistance forces around the world.⁷⁴

Enemies of the People

In 1979 Iran's revolutionaries turned on their enemies at home, just as the Soviets and Nazis hunted their opponents in their early rule. The Guards were charged with ferreting out and destroying these domestic enemies. The Soviets defined "counterrevolutionary activities" as any behavior that might undermine the Soviet system or might have any so-called socially dangerous character.⁷⁵ This gave the security services broad powers of arrest and summary execution, as well as the power to send citizens to lingering death in distant, frigid camps in which fourteen million people were incarcerated from 1929 to 1960.⁷⁶

The Gestapo had a similar mandate and could arrest anyone on charges of undermining the Nazi regime. Concentration camps mushroomed in the early years, with Dachau opening in 1933 by order of SS chief Himmler. The Iranian Guards reconfigured existing prisons to house many political prisoners, and they

deployed Guards and Basij to city streets.

The newly created Guards began to harass, and sometimes kill, their domestic enemies. The targets included liberals and communists. In the early postrevolutionary period, the new government defined four broad sets of enemies: former associates of the shah's regime; nonconformists in civil society; perceived social degenerates; and religions other than Shia Islam. Some of the enemy sets had overlapping characteristics. For example, mullahs condemned gays as nonconformists and degenerates. Some enemies were more hated than others. At the top of the enemies list were shah loyalists.

Former Associates of the Shah's Regime

In 1979 those connected to the shah were the primary enemies, with Pahlevi's intelligence and security services, national police, military, and judiciary singled out as particularly dangerous to Khomeini's embryonic regime. Administrators and civil servants connected to the shah's government usually fled if they could. Others tried to blend into the revolutionary tone of the day, and others were killed or disappeared into the growing constellation of prison camps.

In a role reversal, men who were political prisoners under the shah became prison guards after the revolution. They settled scores. As an example, Asadollah Lajevardi, a political prisoner under the shah, earned the moniker "the butcher of Evin Prison," of which he now became the warden.⁷⁷ Later, some of the earliest revolutionaries and Guards leaders would be executed as spies. Reformers who had opposed the shah and sidestepped SAVAK now faced arrest by the Khomeini's shock troops. Further, some key former SAVAK officers switched their loyalty to the revolutionary regime, identifying SAVAK's agents and recruits in the process.⁷⁸

As with communist and fascist regimes, Iran's new legal system became splashed with blood. Khomeini wasted no time expunging the judiciary of its moderates and replacing them with judges of Islamic law, or sharia. Decades earlier, the Pahlevi had overhauled the traditional legal system and codified it to conform to the Western legal tradition. They had also professionalized the

appointment of judges and rid the judiciary of clerics who had been trained exclusively in Islamic law.⁷⁹ These efforts were undone quickly.

Khomeini dismantled the bar association shortly after he took power. One casualty of the legal expulsion was Shirin Ebadi, a liberal who was swept into the vortex of sudden judicial change. Ebadi became a judge in 1969, while still in her twenties.⁸⁰ In the 1970s she was a loud opponent of the shah and wanted him removed. An older judge prophetically cautioned her, “Don’t you know that you’re supporting people who will take your job away if they come to power?”⁸¹ He was right. After the revolution, her tenure meant nothing, and Ebadi lost her ability to practice law. In response she became a famous and respected writer and would win the Nobel Prize for Peace for human rights activism and for calling the world’s attention to the cruelty of the Guards.⁸² As a result of her activism, her husband was hauled to Evin prison and threatened with death by stoning.⁸³

In addition to liquidating the judiciary of its non-sharia-compliant judges, the new regime tore into SAVAK, the shah’s intelligence and security service.⁸⁴ A 1974 Amnesty International report claimed that Iran under the Pahlavis had the world’s worst human rights record, citing cruel interrogation and wobbly evidence, as well as imprisonment without trial. According to contemporary accounts, often by left-leaning journalists as well as by Amnesty International investigators, torturers beat prisoners with little mercy and sometimes subjected them barbarous treatment. Techniques include using electric shocks and pulling out teeth and fingernails.⁸⁵

But other observers were less critical of SAVAK, noting that the organization was not particularly brutal by Third World standards. It was not large, having only four thousand employees in 1978. Further, SAVAK counterintelligence operations prevented some bombing attacks in public places. Finally, critics of the shah had fabricated some of the claims, for example, some demonstrators claiming to have been beaten had, in fact, splashed themselves with mercurochrome.⁸⁶ A U.S. State Department authority opined, “The thing to remember is that the shah was a Persian king; no better, no worse than other Persian kings.”⁸⁷ He had his supporters to his death, some of whom chanted “God save the shah” until the day of his death.⁸⁸ Today, there is a permanent exhibit dedicated to SAVAK’s alleged depravities in Tehran’s Ebrat Museum.⁸⁹

Early in Khomeini’s rule, the Guards’ and MOIS’s exploits eclipsed the death

count of the shah's era, as Khomeini issued an infamous fatwa calling for the execution of all "religious hypocrites." Most of those in prison, however, had been punished for minor offenses, such as distributing political pamphlets. Furthermore, most had already served their sentences. A second fatwa was issued for the execution of "apostates," referring to political prisoners belonging to other leftist groups such as the Tudeh. Special "death commissions" were quickly established throughout Iran to select unrepentant political prisoners for execution.⁹⁰

Bards as Enemies of the Guards

Another enemy of the Guards were the free spirits. Khomeini shuttered newspaper outlets that might undermine the rule of the judges. He instituted press laws, such as the permit law, that gave the state complete control over what the print media was permitted to publish. Journalists became fearful of criticizing any political or social subjects. As a result, self-censorship tightened. There was a miasma of fear and confusion.

Dr. Haleh Esfandiari saw intellectual inquiry collapse. In her native Iran, she was a journalist, scholar, and women's rights activist. But there was no room for her in the land of mullahs, so she moved to Oxford University to teach Persian. From there she moved to Washington DC.⁹¹ When she returned to Iran many years later to visit her aged mother, she was imprisoned.

Hashem Shabaani, a pacifist and the caretaker of his war-crippled father, used his pen to protest the frequent hangings. He was arrested in 2011 for "sowing corruption on earth, propaganda against the Islamic Republic and acting against national security."⁹² After torture, he confessed to a slew of nonsensical crimes and was sentenced to hang. On his death watch he pleaded, "I have tried to defend the legitimate right of every people in this world. . . . I have never used a weapon to fight these atrocious crimes except the pen." Days before he was hanged, he released an epigram titled "Seven Reasons Why I Should Die":

For seven days they shouted at me:

You are waging war on Allah!

Saturday, because you are an Arab!

Sunday, well, you are from Ahvaz

Monday, remember you are Iranian

Tuesday, you mock the sacred Revolution

Wednesday, didn't you raise your voice for others?

Thursday, you are a poet and a bard

Friday: You're a man, isn't that enough to die?⁹³

Like Shabaani, many of those accused and imprisoned for political crimes did not clearly understand why they were charged. They did not see their behavior as particularly political; nor did they understand why the Guards hounded them. Some of those condemned to death were not Iranian and never imagined that their behavior would draw attention, let alone a death sentence, from rulers in Tehran. One of them was the India-born and Cambridge-educated Salman Rushdie.

Rushdie was famous among Britain's highbrows, particularly for *Midnight's Children*, which won the prestigious Booker Prize.⁹⁴ Long a contender for the Nobel Prize, he wrote in a genre sometimes called magic realism. If his artistry was applauded among Western literati, it earned him a death sentence by Ayatollah Khomeini, who called the *Satanic Verses* blasphemous. Khomeini put out a contract on him, whereby any Muslim who killed the author would be paid \$1,000,000 and receive a place in heaven.

Rushdie was taken by surprise. Quickly, the book's publisher apologized profusely for any incautious remarks or off-color humor that caused offense. The French publisher postponed its translation. But others rallied behind Rushdie and free speech. Norman Mailer led a coffee klatch of gutsy intellectuals, including

Susan Sontag and Claire Bloom, in a marathon reading in 1989, in New York.⁹⁵ A pair of British intellectuals wrote a dramatic spoof called *Iranian Nights*. Tariq Ali, one of the authors, disclosed, “People were just genuinely scared to speak up about it at that moment. . . . We were trying to do a job—disperse the fear.”⁹⁶

Rushdie went into hiding, but he did not apologize. Some who helped produce the *Satanic Verses* were killed or wounded. In 1991 the Japanese translator of the book was stabbed to death, and Italian and Norwegian translators were killed or wounded.⁹⁷ But by 1998 the paralyzing fear of being killed on a mullah’s orders had died down. Britain restored full diplomatic ties with Iran. The Rushdie affair was over, but the Guards’ determination to muzzle critics of Islam continued.

Haram Iran: Social Degenerates

In Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union homosexuality was criminalized. There were moral and practical reasons for this. First, the practice contrasted the image of virile, muscular, and combat-eager young males. Second, it hampered population growth. Third, antihomosexual animus and prejudice were ethical holdovers from earlier, more religious, eras.⁹⁸

Postrevolutionary Iran takes homosexuality even more seriously than did the Soviets or the Nazis. Suspected gays became subject to sodomy tests, and homosexual acts became a capital crime in 1979. According to article 152 of Iran’s penal law, if two men not related by blood are found naked under one cover without good reason, both will be punished at a judge’s discretion.⁹⁹ In 2018 a prominent ayatollah cursed that homosexuals are lower than animals: “Even . . . dogs and pigs don’t engage in this disgusting act.”¹⁰⁰ Sometimes gay lovers are publicly hanged together, as happened in the city of Mashad in July 2005 when sixteen- and eighteen-year-old gays were hanged. This became world news and an American made a play out of it.¹⁰¹ In early 2019 a gay man was hanged for making love to another man.¹⁰²

Heterosexual lasciviousness is also a crime. Women suspected of loose morals are another set of social reprobates. Loose morals is a broad and subjective category in Iran. Women who do not cover their hair, as well as impoverished

women prostituting themselves to feed their family, fit into this set. Basij who patrol the streets can make on-the-spot determination on the legality of women's attire; they can beat women at the scene or imprison them. Similarly, Basij can pummel or imprison drug abusers. The definition of degeneracy is flexible and usually very subjective. People can be punished for moral transgressions committed ten years earlier. An Iranian man in his midtwenties was convicted of drinking alcohol when he was fourteen or fifteen, a crime for which he was publicly whipped eighty times while tied to a tree.¹⁰³

Non-Muslim Religions

Another set of enemies are religious minorities. Religion holds a different place in Iranian life than it held in the Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. The Soviets and the Nazis were suspicious and contemptuous of religion. When the Soviets took power in 1917, they tried to sweep Russia clean of religion, killing many of the clergy and burning churches. The Nazis had no argument with Christianity, as long as leaders and parishioners did not criticize Hitler's regime or philosophy.¹⁰⁴ But religion plays a central role in all elements of life in Iran, where the Guards, particularly Basij, police religious practice.

Until Arabs conquered Iran during the seventh century, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians practiced their faiths largely unfettered. After the Arab Muslim conquest, minority religions held inferior rights.¹⁰⁵ They had to pay a special tax because they were not Muslims.¹⁰⁶ As long as non-Muslims acknowledged their second-class citizenship, they could live in a protected, if lesser, status. But things became far worse after the revolution of 1979. Christians and Zoroastrians were punished if they proselytized, and Jews were immediately suspected of loyalty to Israel and monitored by the Guards.¹⁰⁷

Indeed, Jews were the first religious target. Treatment of Jews in Iran had been uneven for centuries.¹⁰⁸ Until the 1980s, however, Iranian Jews were part of the national culture and were major contributors to the country's economic, cultural, and political development. This changed after 1979. Anti-Semitism, long dormant, hatched out. Jews who could not emigrate became harassed often by young Guards. They quickly saw their position and safety deteriorate after the

shah's overthrow. One who wrote about the trauma years later, was then-ten-year-old Roya Hakakian. Initially shocked, Roya sank into despondency as she was forced to wear Muslim head scarfs, say praise to Allah in her all-girls school, and drink from Jewish-only water fountains. Anti-Semitic slurs that would have been disparaged as ignorant and lowbrow in the time of the shah became common in the era of the mullahs. Ancient myths, such as the blood libel, were resurrected as facts.¹⁰⁹

Zoroastrians, too, became fearful. The Zoroastrian religion is named after its founder, the prophet Zarathustra, also called Zoroaster, who preached sometime between 1800 and 1000 BCE. Iranians of all religions celebrate Zoroastrian traditions and holidays.¹¹⁰ But after the revolution, Iranian leaders disparaged Zoroastrians.¹¹¹ Revolutionary Guard commanders ordered Zoroastrians to conduct suicide missions against Iraq. In solidarity, some non-Zoroastrian free spirits dance in the Fire Festival as a social protest, at the risk of being beaten by the Guards. They dance in solidarity with persecuted religions, and they dance to celebrate their ancient Persian heritage.

As with Jews and Zoroastrians, Christians continue to suffer. While traditional ethnic churches, such as the Armenian Church, are usually tolerated, evangelical Christians and converts are brutally treated by the authorities and hounded by the Guards and the MOIS. Under Iranian law, converting from Islam to another faith is a crime that is punishable by death. Basij operators working undercover have often penetrated churches and conducted operations to reveal efforts to convert Muslims to Christianity. In August 2018 an Iranian court sentenced twelve Christians to one year in prison for holding worship meetings and evangelizing—crimes that Iran considers to be “propaganda activities.”¹¹² Basij remain on the prowl for makeshift churches secreted in homes.

Baha'i were long distrusted and sometimes despised in Iran, despite emerging within the country itself in the mid-nineteenth century, when a Shia leader declared himself the “Hidden Imam.” Branded as apostates, Baha'i were hounded and sometimes killed. Unalloyed hatred became lethal in the early postrevolutionary days when over two hundred Baha'i were killed on charges of being Zionist spies.¹¹³ Iran has criminalized ordinary Baha'i practices of worship, religious training, and fellowship. It has also denied Baha'i people government pension benefits, higher education, and business licenses in many fields.¹¹⁴ Some of those who defend arrested Baha'i are imprisoned for doing so. In June 2019, a city council representative in Shiraz was sentenced to one year in

prison for his commentary on Twitter citing the unfair treat of practicing Baha'i.¹¹⁵ Finally, Sufi Muslims, most notably the Dervishes, dance in the shadows.

To sum up, many Iranians in the early postrevolutionary period were unsure of their status in the new regime. Some left Iran because they saw no future under Khomeini's rule. Sometimes, their positions and property were given to Guards or others favored by the mullahs. Others, however, were elated by the personal prospects brought by the revolution. Most Iranians were confused and felt helpless. But those who would become the revolution's enemies—associates of the Shah's regime, nonconformists, perceived degenerates, and certain non-Muslims—knew that their world had changed by the early 1980s.

Iranian Society in the Early Postrevolutionary Period

When the shah's regime was swept away, most Iranians waited for the government to formalize its agenda. They knew that the Guards portended a new era but they could not define it. There were three large and sometimes overlapping groupings of Iranian society in the early 1980s. There were the exiles who were leaving or had left Iran for the West. There were those who became fatalistic and prepared to adapt to whatever may emerge. Finally, there were opportunity seekers who hoped to help craft a new society.

The Exiles

Some Iranians in the early postrevolutionary period left or tried to leave the country. Many elites correctly anticipated that life would be difficult under the Guards. The wealthy saw their property often expropriated, and the more liberal felt imprisoned within the ideological confines of the regime. If they could, many wealthy or free-spirited secular Iranians fled to the West. Those with close ties to the shah were often the most eager to leave. Wealthy Iranians had greater

opportunity to leave, and they resettled in luxury. One of the super-rich exiles was the shah's elder sister, who moved to Los Angeles in the 1970s. She arrived in Beverly Hills and erected a fifty-thousand-square-foot palace that included a zoo and a \$25,000 gold bedspread.¹¹⁶

Yet the super wealthy were the exception. Most Iranians did not have contacts, wealth, or adaptable skill sets. Often women were forced to flee with their children upon learning of the execution of family members. Other Iranians saw the storm coming and moved their wealth abroad to ensure a comfortable landing for the families in their new homes. Many brought their skills, trades, and intellectual abilities with them to the West and left all else behind.

This same phenomenon happened in the Soviet Union and in Nazi Germany, particularly among intellectuals, free thinkers, and religious minorities who faced the NKVD and Gestapo. Russians spoke of the 1922 "Exile of the Intellectuals," when liberal-minded intellectuals voluntarily or involuntarily fled. Years later, German intellectuals, such as Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht, set up home in California, which earned the moniker "House of Exile."¹¹⁷ Iranians, too, made Southern California their home and referred to its largest city as "Teherangeles" (see table 3 for a description of the similarities in the early postrevolutionary phases in the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Iran).

Like the Jews who departed Nazi Germany and the Russians who fled Lenin's new Soviet Union, Iranian emigrants would, generations later, relate to their grandchildren stories of success, tragedy, and survival about building lives in new lands. Some would immigrate to the United States and write about the Iran they cherished and lost and of their struggles with the Guards. Roya Hakakian was a young adolescent when the shah fell. She lived in an educated and liberal modern family. She felt thoroughly assimilated. But she, like many of Iran's other one hundred thousand Jews, was helpless to ward off the juggernaut of anti-Semitism.¹¹⁸ Some of the children with whom she played would, in a few years, become Guards or their wives.

Many Western-leaning artists left Iran if they could. As a girl and young woman in Iran, Shohreh Aghdashloo dreamed of becoming an actress in Tehran. That ended with the revolution. When mullahs ordered the Guards to shutter her theater with brick and cement, she left for the West. After living in London, she moved to the United States and became an Oscar-nominated movie actress and celebrated activist for liberalism in Iran. Regularly, she spoke out against the

Guards.

Some of Iran's dream-filled young could take chances. One of those was the plucky Marjane Satrapi, who was raised in a secular home by liberal parents. She is the personification of everything the Basij hate in women and girls. Her best-selling graphic novel *Persepolis* was hailed as literary protest against the Guards and the mullahs who control them.¹¹⁹ As a girl in Iran, she covered her hair and ducked the Basij. But alone or sharing space with trusted friends, she listened to rock and roll. Her parents sent her to live in Vienna when she was fourteen years old. A few years later, she met a Swedish man who became her husband and who encouraged her to share her story. She did, and her fluid and energetic prose made her famous in the arthouse set overnight.¹²⁰

The Captives

Unlike the exiles who managed to flee Iran and its guards, the “captives” wanted to leave but could not do so. Those who did not have the resources to leave hoped that the revolutionary fervor would temper. They needed to provide for families and hoped that fortunes improve and that their sons would not be deployed to battle. These Iranians were neither well connected nor well educated. Unlike the wealthy, who began new lives abroad, the lower-middle class and poor felt caged, and many became defeatist.¹²¹ Resigned to the rules of new regime, they were likely to stay in Iran. University-educated nonconformists were muzzled and had nowhere to go.

American-educated Dr. Azar Nafisi wrote about this sense of captivity in *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. She responded to her now-diminished status as a woman by sharing her love of literature and exploring universal themes of the Western canon with young women. Nafisi held private classes for seven female students in her apartment, where they discussed great works of world literature. Her favorites included *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Lolita*. Some of her students stood guard to make sure that police or Basij weren't infiltrating their literary opposition. This suppression of Western literature continues. In January 2018 Iran banned teaching English in primary schools, in response to fears of an alleged “cultural invasion.”¹²²

Artists were trapped. Like the literati, popular entertainers felt interned. Faeghen Atashin, known to all Iranians as Googoosh, shot to fame as a child star and became the most beloved singer in Iran. In the 1970s she defined feminine fashion. At the time of the revolution, she was living in Los Angeles but returned to Iran to entertain her countrymen in a time of crisis.¹²³ Once in Iran, she was placed under house arrest and was forbidden from singing modern songs. She could not leave Iran for twenty-one years.

Impoverished women felt completely captive and defenseless. Unlike the more cosmopolitan Dr. Nafisi and artistic Googoosh, Soraya Manutchehri was a simple woman tethered to her small village in Iran. Raised as a child of poverty, the thirty-five-year-old mother was stoned to death for adultery, almost certainly on perjured testimony.¹²⁴ This was not a case of the Basij arresting and killing a woman; the event had a carnival atmosphere led by village elders. Soraya's husband and sons were among those who pelted stones, cursing her for soiling the family's honor. This graphic death scene would be recreated in a movie, *The Stoning of Soraya M.*¹²⁵

Not all women captives in Iran were killed or sank into fatalism. Some escaped. American-born Betty Mahmoody felt trapped in Iran by her Iranian husband and fled with her daughter, stewarded by Kurdish smugglers. They trekked five hundred miles by jeep, horse, and foot over mountain passes in midwinter and made it to safety.¹²⁶ Betty wrote a book, *Not without My Daughter*, which was turned into a hugely successful made-for-television movie.¹²⁷ But stories of escape to freedom were as not common as stories of captivity.

Opportunity Seekers and Revolutionaries: Guards and Others

The third grouping of Iranians affected by the revolution in the early 1980s were the opportunity seekers and revolutionaries, some of whom became Guards. In the early Soviet Union, many clever, risk-taking, unattached young men and women could afford to tie their fortunes to the government. They could rise quickly in the Communist Party, and the fact that commissars were given tremendous power made seeking this position an attractive proposition. More established personalities could prosper, too. The poet Maxim Gorky, who was exiled in Italy,

returned to his homeland where he was celebrated as the pen of the proletariat. Years later, he wrote that Russian literature expressed the antibourgeois soul of the Soviet people.¹²⁸ Stalin served as a pallbearer at his funeral in 1936.

In the early years of Nazi Germany, purges of nonconformists, socialists, and particularly Jews from daily life gave opportunity to adherents of National Socialism. New bureaucracies mushroomed throughout Germany, expanding the career prospects of the younger generation. Leading intellectuals and artists saw their fortunes soar. Among the more famous were the professor Martin Heidegger and the young conductor Herbert von Karajan.

The new regime in Tehran in the early 1980s offered quick mobility to young men who attached themselves to the Guards. The first two groupings—the exiles and captives of Iran—feared and loathed the revolution, but the opportunity seekers and revolutionaries welcomed it. One enthusiast was a twenty-three-year-old, slightly built engineering student with a scruffy beard and cynical smirk who stormed the U.S. embassy to seize its employees. Years later, a former American embassy hostage said, “As soon as I saw his picture in the paper, I knew that was the bastard.” Other captives described the student as particularly cruel.¹²⁹ In 2005 this son of a blacksmith, the blustery one-time Guard logistician, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was elected president of Iran, and his wry smile became world famous.

Other young guns moved into power quickly. Raised in a deeply religious family, the six Larijani brothers seized opportunities in the early days of the revolution. One brother became the head of the Iranian judiciary’s human rights council, another the chairman of the judiciary, another the speaker of the assembly, or Majlis. Their father was an ayatollah, who fled into exile during the rule of the Pahlevis.¹³⁰ The Larijanis remain at the heart of Iran’s power structure as the first family of the Islamic Revolution to this day. They hammer out hardline Islamic law. In 2014 Mohammad-Javad Larijani, chief of the Iranian human rights council, clarified, “We are not ashamed of stoning or any of the Islamic decrees. No one has the right to tell a judge to avert some sentences because the United Nations gets upset.”¹³¹

The clergy entered all levels and spheres of political life. Under the shah, they had scant access to serving in positions of authority. But in the parliamentary elections of 1980 and 1984, respectively, 61 percent and 57 percent of the members of parliament elected were members of the clergy.¹³² During this

period, all significant factions of the political elite were clerical groups.¹³³

Young revolutionaries without any previous experience acquired positions in the state bureaucracy and became a new religious technocratic elite. Civil servants and managers were prejudicially hired or promoted on the basis of their ideological fervor instead of their technical expertise. Meritocracy cratered because civil servants were retired early or cashiered.

Some opportunity-seeking revolutionaries became flush with power. One, who gained particularly unfortunate notoriety, was Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammadi Gilani. Forty-one at the time of Islamic Revolution, he was well placed to lead the newly formed Revolutionary Courts. Relishing his new clout, he sentenced defendants to prison or death on vague charges such as “corruption on earth.” The trials often took less than ten minutes. But what earned him enduring infamy was the likely true rumor that he had his two sons hanged because they belonged to reform organizations. He never denied the accusation. Gilani died in 2014 but continues to be remembered as “the one who executed his own sons.”¹³⁴

Like Gilani, Iran’s Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkhali heralded an epoch of zealous executions. As president of the Revolutionary Courts, he used an assembly-line style of jurisprudence for convicting prisoners. He was a passionate activist from his youth and was steeped in ideology when he came to power in middle age. Khalkhali was sadistic and mocked those whom he sentenced to die, symbolically grasping his own throat and pretending to choke. He boasted of convicting and killing ten men in one day. Children as young as nine could be killed on the charge of treason. He bragged about his legacy of killing in his autobiography: “I feel no regret or guilt over the executions. . . . There were many more who deserved to be killed, but I could not get my hands on them.”¹³⁵ He basked in his status of one of Iran’s most ruthless revolutionaries until he died of cancer at age seventy-seven.¹³⁶

Some opportunists of the early postrevolutionary period prospered and became rich. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani stood at the revolution’s wheelhouse from its beginning. He guided the country as parliamentary speaker, war commander toward the end of the 1980–88 war with Iraq, and then president for two terms in 1989–97. From 1983 until his death in 2017, he sat on the Experts Assembly, the clerical body that selects Iran’s supreme leader.¹³⁷ He earned two monikers, “the Shark” and “the Shah of Pistachios,” and amassed a fortune of billions of

dollars.¹³⁸ In this context, it is not surprising that the prospect of enrichment particularly attracted young men to join the Guards, as this organization owned vast parastatals and international business enterprises in Iran.

This group—the opportunists and revolutionaries—was very fluid, a fluidity that bears some comparisons to the unceasing shuffle of civil servants in Stalin’s Russia. During the late 1930s the newspaper *Izvestia* stopped listing the names of its employees on the office door because so many were arrested and killed.¹³⁹ In Iran, some politicians or Guards personnel would be denounced and then killed in the early postrevolutionary period. Their vacated positions were filled quickly. In the head-spinning confusion, many of the young Guards personnel simply became worn and disappointed. These young zealots did not find what they hoped to find in the revolution. Many never advanced through the new system and struggled to provide for themselves or families. Others would be disenchanted by the commercial self-interest of the leadership. They were disillusioned by IRGC, Inc., a sarcastic term referring to the economic monopolies of the Guards, which will be discussed in chapter 7.

After the Revolution

One generation after the revolution there were established stakeholders in the new political system. Some of those who helped build the government and its intelligence and security services remained a tightly knit cohort. As one observer noted, “If you are an insider you can pick any job you want. If you are an outsider you have to wait outside the door of government offices.”¹⁴⁰ But many insiders fell out of favor of the ruling elite and some regretted their participation in creating a system that they saw as becoming very cruel.

Similarly, some men and women who were part of the brutal state machinery of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union later regretted their participation. Standing as a prisoner in the dock at Nuremberg in 1946, Minister of Armaments Albert Speer expressed regret about his role in building and maintaining the Nazi empire. This act of contrition, whether sincere or feigned, may have spared him from the gallows. Anticomunist literature is rich with the theme of guilt. Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* explored the mindset of men wracked by

guilt for being part of the KGB, and Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* introduces Commissar Krymov, who is beset with self-doubt as he withers in Lubyanka prison.¹⁴¹

Similarly, some of the clerics who helped create the revolutionary state regretted their role in a revolution turned septic. One was Ayatollah Montazeri, who helped draft the nation's new constitution, which was based on *velayat-e faqih*, or rule by Islamic jurists, a concept that "enshrined a political role for Islamic clerics."¹⁴² Later advocating for freedoms and human rights in Iran, Montazeri accused Iran's leaders of imposing a dictatorship in the name of Islam.

Montazeri appealed to the morality espoused by anti-Pahlevi clerics before the revolution. But Khamenei and his cadre mocked him for his simple ways.¹⁴³ Around the same time, Montazeri learned that under Khomeini's orders, almost four thousand prisoners serving time for earlier convictions had been put to death. "This is not what we fought for," he lamented. Montazeri began to feel painfully responsible for his part in enshrining *velayat-e faqih*.¹⁴⁴ He labored under guilt for helping create the Guards and publicly apologized for his role. This public declaration of guilt separated him from most of his contemporaries who profited from the revolution.

A New Royalty

A generation after its founding, the leadership of the Guards became intertwined through marriage of political and financial leaders. There were echoes of the past. In ancient Rome, the Julians and Claudians married into each other and used much of the empire as a family possession. Millennia later, there would be an Iranian dynastic saga of Khomeinis, Rafsanjanis, and Khatamis.¹⁴⁵ Khomeini sired seven children, most of whom married spouses who were the daughters or sons of government or clergy leaders. Khomeini's surviving children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren married into prominent Shia families, including that of Imam Mousa al-Sadr, the founder of AMAL, which was the precursor of Iranian-backed Hezbollah.

Dr. Ali Larijani is the son-in-law of a senior leader of the revolution. His brother,

Sadeq Larijani, married a woman whose brother is a prominent parliamentarian. Mohammad Ali Jafari married the sister of the deputy head of the chief of staff of Iran's armed forces. The secretary general of the Hezbollah-Iran organization, Ayatollah Mohammad Baqer Kharrazi, an elite member of the regime, is brother-in-law to the son of Ali Khamenei and brother of the former Iranian ambassador to France and current director of the Iran Diplomacy website. Other prominent families married into the Guards' political, military, and economic leadership. The Larijanis are also very rich. According to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Sadeq Larijani was worth at least \$300 million as of this writing.¹⁴⁶ Some of the Guards, young and rebellious men in the 1970s and 1980s, were senior and powerful citizens of Iran two generations later. As their beards turned gray, they passed the torch of leadership to their sons.

Summary

On November 4, 1979, a group of Iranian students seized the American embassy and held its personnel hostage for 444 days. This date is celebrated annually in Iran but some Western commentators mark the holiday as the beginning of an Islamic revolution that has metastasized into a global threat. Khomeini embodied the revolution he led, creating the Guards to enforce his value and legacy. Khomeini held a dark charisma that many Westerners found difficult to understand. Angry and shrill, he appealed to a latent nationalism, economic redistributionism, as well as religious fervor. This allure waned quickly for all but the most devoted. When Khomeini died in 1989, Middle East observer Daniel Pipes wrote, "Good news for Iran: The Lenin of Islam is gone."¹⁴⁷ But Khomeini's ideology continued to live as a bequest to the Guards.

[Table 3. Early phases in selected revolutions/seizures of power](#)

	Nazi Germany
Stated goal	Creating a racially based megastate in central Europe
Doctrinal sources of goals	Mein Kampf; Hitler's unpublished second book

Phase one: purging enemies at home	Developed concentration camps; well-coord
Phase two: expanding abroad	Developing Nazi sympathizers in racially re
Phase three: global power	Never achieved. Create a racial super-state c

a. This philosophy changed to “communism in one country” under Stalin.

b. Gerhard L. Weinberg, “Hitler’s Second Book: The Unpublished Sequel to Mein Kampf Paperback—Unabridged,” October 1, 2006, https://www.amazon.com/dp/1929631618/ref=rdr_ext_tmb.

c. Bolshevik, no. 18 (September 1952): 1–50. Reprinted in Pravda, October 3, 1952, 2–5, and October 4, 1952, 2–4. From “Seventeen Moments in Soviet History,” <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1947-2/cold-war/cold-war-texts/stalin-on-the-inevitability-of-war-with-capitalism/>.

Like the dark, penal empires of the Soviet and Nazi regimes, Iranian prisons became black holes of misery into which intellectuals, enemies, and innocents were pulled, many never to return. Mercilessly and quickly, the Guards targeted perceived enemies of the revolution or Islam. In February 2019 Iranian supreme leader Khamenei called upon the Guards to increase its search for enemy infiltrators, warning that all levels of the regime have been penetrated by foes and must be “fundamentally cleansed.”¹⁴⁸ In summer 2019 he proposed an upgrade plan for the judiciary, which would choke out political dissent “without delay.”¹⁴⁹

The Guards' Domestic Policy

The real war is a cultural war. . . . There are so many television and internet networks that are busy diverting the hearts and minds of our youth away from religion, our sacred beliefs, morality, modesty, and the like.

—Ali Khamenei, 2017

The shah was long gone, and the revolution was shaping a new government and society. The Guards were feverishly expanding into a protective force unlike anything that existed in Iran's history. Its ranks would swell to a size many times the size of SAVAK's, and the Guards would become far more murderous than were the shah's security services. In 1979 Khomeini needed to create an organizational structure and staff it with ideologically committed cadres. Soon, the Guards would be deployed at home and abroad to kill and imprison opponents. Show trials would jolt Iran, and fear would grip many political and religious circles.

The Creation of the Guards

In March 1979, the new regime abolished the hereditary monarchy and created a new position of national religious leader. This gave Ayatollah Khomeini his

position for life and made him supreme commander of the armed forces and leader of the Guards. He had the power to declare war and dismiss the president.¹ Khomeini's prestige, burnished by victory, had never been higher. In effect, he became a dictator.²

Just as Emperor Augustus, at the height of Roman power, created a Praetorian force of talented loyalists, Khomeini founded the Guards on May 5, 1979, to protect his rule.³ At the time, Khomeini announced that the Guards would be built to "guard the revolution and its achievements."⁴

Ali Khamenei, future supreme leader, helped set up the Guards.⁵ He was part of the inner circle of leaders, many of whom had bunked together in dank prisons or built comradeship while residing in Najaf to dodge the reach of SAVAK.⁶ In the late 1970s, they became the power nucleus that shaped the revolution.⁷ Many principals remembered Operation Ajax, the CIA-led coup against Mossadegh, and were convinced that Western forces would attempt to crush the revolution and return the shah to power. A robust guard force would prevent that.

Parliament issued the Statute of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in September 1982, to enshrine Khomeinist principles in law. This statute gave the Guards broad latitude to recruit, train, staff, and function. It also enabled them to partner with Iranian military services to pursue common goals.⁸ From its inception, there were bureaucratic brawls over lines of responsibility and authority between the Guards and the armed forces.⁹ Periodically, the Guards aligned with the army. At other times, the two organizations competed against each other for resources. Both had distinct responsibilities.

The Iranian constitution's article 143 stipulates that "the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran is responsible for guarding the independence and territorial integrity of the country, as well as the order of the Islamic Republic." Article 2 of the constitution's second chapter gives the Guards a primary counterintelligence function.¹⁰ Article 147 of the constitution gave the Guards access to large sectors of the economy, and today's Guards dominate many vital sectors of the economy, including energy, construction, telecommunications, and finance.

From the start of the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian army was subject to a far higher level of civilian control than the Guards. But some early Iranian leaders feared a growing concentration of power into a single organization. Prime

Minister Mehdi Bazargan, who presided over the first postrevolutionary transitional government, warned of an “imminent danger” of the Guards’ intervention in politics. He did not persuade Khomeini, and the Guards had Bazargan removed from power. The student seizure of American hostages in 1979 galvanized radicals in Iran and weakened the vestigial influence of moderates. Ali Khamenei assumed the presidency in 1981 and Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who became president in 1989, feared the Guards’ inherent volatility. For this reason, they hoped to professionalize the corps.¹¹ The Guards enjoyed a higher status than the armed forces because they protected both the nation and the revolution, as well as its leaders. The Guards built their own theological seminaries, such as the Martyr Mahallati University, for indoctrinating officers.¹²

Organizational Structure

In the 1980s the number of Guards personnel expanded from a handful to millions. Many were deployed to frontline combat during the war against Iraq. Eventually, the Guards’ manpower would boast a personnel strength as large as the entire armed forces in most states of the greater Middle East. By 2019 Iran’s total active duty military strength numbered 398,000, plus 125,000 Guards, excluding the Basij.¹³

From their inception, the Guards have been a unique intelligence and paramilitary force without exact parallel in any other country. Indeed, in many countries, foreign intelligence and domestic security services are separate organizations. In Britain, the MI-5 has domestic responsibility and the MI-6 is the foreign intelligence service. In the United States, the domestic services are led by Federal Bureau of Investigation, while the external intelligence services are led, largely, by the Central Intelligence Agency. They and other components in the U.S. intelligence community are all administratively accountable to the director of national intelligence for some elements of funding and supervision. The leadership, responsibilities, and functions of these agencies are kept mainly separate, to ensure that there is not too great a concentration of power into any single organization. In the Soviet Union many of these functions were merged into a single agency that evolved into the KGB, which splintered in the 1990s

after the collapse of the communist regime.¹⁴

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the previously discussed similarities between the Soviet and Iranian regimes, the Iranian Guards have some structural and functional similarities to the services of the Soviet Union. The KGB had both domestic and external functions. It also had paramilitary units and trained and led foreign international armies, most famously during the Spanish Civil War. Similarly, the Guards have domestic and external missions. They are organized into the intelligence headquarters unit; the Basij; and air, land, sea, and the al Qods forces, as will be discussed in detail in chapter 7.¹⁵ Additionally, the Guards control the nuclear program and large elements of the economy.¹⁶ They also maintain a Cyber Defense Command.¹⁷

Tehran has used offensive cyber-operations against the United States and Saudi Arabia, some of which have been influence operations while others have been cyber-attacks. Most of these have been conducted by the Guards and the MOIS. Some of the attacks are directed against commercial enterprises and others against governmental or educational sites. Most of the internal cyber-operations are directed against protesters and dissident groups.¹⁸

The Guards also have an elite, special operations unit, known as the Saberin, or Patient Ones. Reportedly established in 2000, these elite forces have been involved in military operations against Kurdish rebels. The training is rigorous, and all applicants must swear to volunteer for martyrdom operations.¹⁹

The Basij, the domestic arm of the Guards and the subject of chapter 4, is a combination investigative, police, and paramilitary force.²⁰ Its personnel are often among the less professional and educated of the forces in the Guards.²¹ Incorporated into the Guards in 1982, the Basij initially concentrated on riot control and internal security missions in the mid-1990s.²² Today, their role has expanded.

Qods Force personnel and its budget are controlled directly by Iran's supreme leader.²³ The Qods Force, the subject of chapter 6, is more elite, highly trained, and better supplied than is the army. Paramilitary services act as a check on the influence of the regular military, or Artesh.²⁴ The Guards' naval and air forces were established in 1985. The Guards operate a small force of marines, under the command of the navy.²⁵ Finally, there is an intelligence headquarters unit, which focuses on issues in the Muslim world.²⁶

The Directorates

As in the foundational periods of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, Iranian security and intelligence services initially primarily protected the new regime. Khomeini did not call his new force *sepah*, a Persian word for soldiers. Instead he called them the *sepah-e-pasdaran*, or “army of the guardians.”²⁷ They guarded the revolution.

The Guards were garrisoned in a facility earlier used by SAVAK on a street soon nicknamed “Pasdaran,” or Guards. Initially, the organization was modeled on the British military intelligence services, protecting Khomeini and his entourage.²⁸ Later, the Guards would fan out throughout the Middle East and other parts of the world and test the military capabilities of major Western powers.

The Guards’ Intelligence Branch was initially a two-thousand-person unit with the mission of vetting government officials and applicants to government jobs to ensure they conformed with the principles of the revolution. After large-scale riots in 2009, Ahmadinejad expanded the mission and personnel strength of the Intelligence Branch. By the early twenty-first century, the branch was endowed with increasingly sophisticated cyber capabilities.²⁹

From the early 1980s, Iran’s other main intelligence organ has been the MOIS.³⁰ Some of the MOIS’s functions are similar to those of the Guards, and some are different. Both the Guards and the MOIS collect, analyze, produce, and categorize threat information and produce internal and external intelligence. Both have counterintelligence capabilities. Both protect classified documents and train and assist other security organizations. Sometimes in conjunction with the Guards, the MOIS killed enemies abroad in the 1990s. Generally, the MOIS is charged with “protecting intelligence, news, documents, records, facilities, and personnel of the ministry; and training and assisting organizations and institutions to protect their significant records, documents, and objects.”³¹

The military services also have intelligence-gathering and analytic capabilities.³² The Ministry of the Interior has intelligence personnel who partner with the Basij to prevent hooliganism and organized crime. Shown in table 4 are the

MOIS directorates and subordinate offices.

[Table 4. MOIS directorates and subordinate offices](#)

Name of directorate	Name of subordinate office(s)
Security	Office of Security, Office of Operations, Office of
Counterintelligence	Office of Counterintelligence
Foreign operations	Office of Europe, Office of Africa, Office of the A
Security investigation	Office of Security Investigations, Office of Comp
Technology	Office of New Technology, Office of Spying Tech
Politics	Office of Politics
Evaluation and strategic affairs	Office of Evaluation
Education	Office of Education
Research	Office of Research
Archives and documents	Office of Archives and Documents
Manpower	Office of Manpower, Office of Welfare Service

Source: “Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security: A Profile” (Washington DC: Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, December 2012), 17, <https://fas.org/irp/world/iran/mois-loc.pdf>.

The Father of the Guards and Its First Leaders

The Iranian Guards, the Cheka of the Soviet Union (the precursor of the KGB), and the Schutzstaffel, or SS, of early Nazi Germany served as bodyguards for newly installed, still-fragile regimes. All three services had great latitude to harass, arrest, beat, and kill suspected opponents. In Germany, Hitler’s Night and Fog decree targeted political opponents for incarceration or summary execution. Opponents of the state would disappear during night and fog and sometimes would not be heard of again. Lenin began his war on intellectuals by ordering them shot indiscriminately. In June 1922 he signed a law giving the government the right to kill anyone deemed an enemy of the state.

In Iran, political leaders, satirists, liberal activists, and former associates of the shah’s regime lived in a state of great anxiety waiting for knocks at the door by security personnel. They still do. As in Germany and the Soviet Union, many Iranian activists keep suitcases packed should they suddenly be taken to prison.³³

When Khomeini chartered the Guards, there was no existing core of vetted veteran intelligence operatives within their orbit. Iranian leaders needed to innovate and experiment as they built the organization. From 1979 to 1981 five men commanded the Guards or served as its leader. If one person were to be crowned father of the Guards, he would likely be Mostafa Chamran. He had a short tenure—the spring, summer, and early fall of 1979—and many historians do not recognize him as being a nominal commander. However, he left his personal imprint on the Guards. Like the intelligence services of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, the Iranian Guards were built in the image of the leaders. The chiefs of all three services shared some common personal traits. They were driven by ideology and ambition. Intelligent and brutal, they took risks as young men. All service chiefs were more than empire-building

bureaucrats; they were committed ideologues.³⁴

Felix Dzerzhinsky, who created the Soviet intelligence and security service, abandoned Catholicism to become a confirmed Marxist. As a revolutionary, he was incarcerated in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, where he was beaten and tortured. Later, Lenin placed him in charge of intelligence, and he flourished.³⁵ The former prisoner became, in effect, the warden of the Lubyanka prison complex. By 1920 he would stroll the corridor of the prison and beat male or female inmates and then kill them.³⁶ “Iron Felix” was credited with being responsible for the deaths of over five hundred thousand of his countrymen. His successors would swell the death count by the millions.

Heinrich Himmler joined the Nazi Party in 1923, and six years later he was chief of the SS. By the mid-1930s he was one of the most powerful men in Europe.³⁷ Himmler molded the SS on his views of a racial hierarchy and used his organization to destroy Jewish societies.

As with those of the Soviet and Nazi services, the first leaders of the Iranian Guards left their mark.³⁸ Chamran spent much of his adult life promoting Shia revivalism and schemes to rid Iran of the shah. His intelligence shone at an early age in the 1950s and early 1960s, when he studied at American universities, obtaining a PhD in electronics and plasma physics from the University of California at Berkeley.³⁹ His real calling was revolution, however, and he traveled globally advancing Islamic guerrilla movements. In Lebanon, he helped establish AMAL, the precursor of Hezbollah, to be discussed in chapter 6. In 1974 Chamran trained hundreds of Iranians opposed to the shah’s regime and developed himself as a skilled military leader and tactician. Despite repeated efforts, SAVAK could not eliminate him, and, eventually, he would play a central role in the revolutionary government of Iran.⁴⁰

In 1979 Chamran returned to Iran to join the Islamic revolution and become minister of defense. He then spent several months as a Tehran representative of parliament, where he helped create the Guards, serving as their commander, if only for one year, after he purged Iran’s intelligence services of shah loyalists.⁴¹ When war erupted with Iraq, Chamran volunteered to command soldiers in combat. While leading an attack in June 1981, he was killed in a mortar attack. Imam Khomeini praised Chamran as a “proud commander of Islam.”⁴²

Unlike the sullied reputations of Himmler and Dzerzhinsky, that of Chamran still

glistens. Himmler was disparaged as a mass murderer after the war, and Dzerzhinsky's statue near the Kremlin was yanked and carted to an obscure field on the outskirts of Moscow after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But Mostafa Chamran was lionized and bestowed with posthumous honors. There was a salutary movie about him called Che, which was one of Chamran's many nicknames.⁴³ Books celebrating his laurel-laden life fill the shelves of bookstores and libraries. In Beirut, a street is named after him.⁴⁴ These three leaders—Dzerzhinsky, Himmler, and Chamran—are compared in table 5.

[Table 5. Leaders of the services](#)

	Felix Dzerzhinsky
Background	Abandoned hopes of priesthood to become communist. Spent
Ascent to power	Was imprisoned with future communist leaders. Developed r
Building the service	Built the Cheka as forerunner of the KGB. Promoted and par
Time in power	Led Cheka from 1917 to 1926. Orchestrated Red Terror of 19
Legacy	Became a mythical figure in the Stalin era. In 1991 a mob toj

After Chamran was killed, Mohsen Rezai, sometimes spelled Resaee, took formal command of the Guards in September 1981, at the age of twenty-seven. Khomeini made the Guards an independent agency at the time, and Rezai helped smooth the transition of national leadership from Khomeini to Khamenei's rule. He commanded the Guards for sixteen years and founded the Guards-run Imam Hussein University (IHU) in 1986. Rezai was implicated by Interpol in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Argentina. Ayatollah Khomeini prohibited Guards' commanders from involving themselves in politics outside of the Guards.⁴⁵ For this reason, Rezai left his leadership position in the Guards when he decided to enter politics, and he remains a vocal supporter of the revolution.⁴⁶ As of early 2020 Rezai was head of the Expediency Council.⁴⁷

Yahya Rahim Safavi was the Guards' third commander.⁴⁸ He became a special military advisor to Khamenei in and became commander in 1997.⁴⁹ Safavi's tenure as commander benefited from the President Ahmadinejad's enthusiasm for the IRGC. Safavi and Ahmadinejad shared national priorities, piety, and a pathological hatred for Israel. The fourth commander was Mohammad Ali Aziz Jafari, and the fifth is Hossein Salami.⁵⁰

On September 1, 2007, Iran's supreme leader Khamenei appointed Jafari as top commander of the Guards. Jafari was born in 1957, in Yazd, and was a student of architecture when riots broke out in Tehran in the late 1970s. He was arrested by the shah's forces for participating in the protests and briefly spent time in jail. After his release he participated in the student takeover of the U.S. embassy in 1979. During the war with Iraq, Jafari served on the front with the Guards and steadily rose in the ranks. He was wounded several times and gained extensive military experience, eventually becoming one of its most prominent commanders.⁵¹ He commanded the prestigious Ashura Battalion and returned to the university to earn his degree in architecture.

Jafari held several senior positions in the Guards, including head of operations at the joint headquarters and deputy commander of the ground forces. In 1992 he was appointed commander of the ground forces, a position he held for thirteen years.⁵² Jafari also shone as a staff officer and taught at the Command and Staff College. For reasons not entirely clear, Jafari was later moved from the command position to head the Hazrat Baqiatollah al-Azam Cultural and Social Headquarters.⁵³

In April 2019 Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appointed Hossein Salami as the IRGC's new chief, ending Jafari's tenure of over a decade. Deputy Commander Salami was promoted to major general and appointed commander.⁵⁴

Salami Takes Command

Salami was born in the city of Golpayegan, in Iran's central province of Isfahan, in 1960. In 1978 he began studying in the mechanical engineering department of Iran University of Science and Technology but left to fight in the front lines against Iraq. Distinguishing himself in combat, he continued his academic studies after the war and graduated with a master's degree in defense management. Salami feels comfortable in academia and served, off and on, in the faculty of Iran's National Defense University. After the war with Iraq, he served with distinction in the Guards as commander of Guards University of Command and Staff, operations deputy of IRGC Joint Staff, and commander of the Guards Air Force.⁵⁵

Salami is credited with developing Iran's robust and advanced missile capacity, bragging that this inventory was capable of "annihilating" Israel.⁵⁶ Salami also worked to implement policies that enabled Iran to camouflage its contested nuclear weapons work from international inspectors. In 2016, he boasted, "Today, more than ever, there is fertile ground—with the grace of God—for the annihilation, the wiping out and the collapse of the Zionist regime."⁵⁷ As of mid-2020 Salami remains commander of the Guards (table 6).⁵⁸

[Table 6. Leaders of the Guards](#)

	Mostafa Chamran
Years of command	Spring, summer, early fall 1980. He was the leader,
Background	PhD in physics from University of California, Berk
Connection to leadership	Was part of an inner circle of revolutionaries?
Record and achievements	Helped form political, military and intelligence age

Reason for leaving command Volunteered to return to combat and was killed in battle

a. Rohollah Faghihi, “Iran’s Rezaei Returns to His Military Roots,” *al-Monitor*, May 13, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/iran-mohsen-rezaei-irgc-return.html>.

b. Ed Blanche, “Pasdaran Power: Iran’s New Hardline Government Underlines the Growing Influence of the Revolutionary Guards Corps,” *The Middle East* 360 (2005): 3.

c. “Who Is New IRGC Commander General Salami,” *Press TV*, April 22, 2019, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2019/04/22/594033/Iran-IRGC-chief-commander-Salami>.

New Generations of Guards

The early postrevolutionary period provided openings for ambitious youth, as discussed in chapter 2. Some of those who joined the Guards in the early 1980s were opportunists, and some were committed zealots.⁵⁹ Some were both. Membership in the Guards afforded privileged access to housing and goods and services and provided a fast track to political and social mobility.⁶⁰ As in other revolutions, many career government bureaucrats with prior service were ejected and replaced by party stalwarts.⁶¹

The talented and ambitious had opportunity because the Guards needed men with skills, intelligence, and commitment. One such was Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a high-achieving university student who served as a Guards logistics commander. There is no evidence that he served in any combat role as part his tenure. Nonetheless, his brief and safe service gave him *bona fides* and fostered relationships that would catapult him to power in the 1990s.⁶² Others shared his career path.

As its leadership changed over the years, three broad generations of the Guards developed. The first generation joined during the 1980s. As a shell-shocked cohort of frontline fighters, this generation holds a bond common to combat veterans of many wars. Many had religious backgrounds and starry military resumes. Born in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, most of this cohort is retired.

The second generation of Guards were recruited after 1989 and tend to be less religious and ideological than those of the first generation, joining the organization after Ayatollah Khomeini died. Many saw service as a springboard to careers in government. Others were dead-enders and needed some employment. Most did not have the fervor of the earlier generation who fought in the trenches. Like the European youth of the 1920s, a lost generation of Iranians felt stymied and rebellious, to the point where Supreme Leader Khamenei became concerned about the waning zeal in the Guards. In 2000, he responded to this perceived problem by ordering what by all accounts was largely successful enhanced indoctrination for Guard members.⁶³

The third and successive generations of Guards are those recruited after 2000. Many come from families in which their fathers served in or were strongly connected to the Guards. This generation tends to be more religious than the second generation. Some of this dedication can be explained by enhanced ideological and political training after 2000 and screening during recruitment.⁶⁴ Since 2008 recruiters have sought religiously conservative applicants. See the generations compared in table 7.

[Table 7. Three generations of the Guards](#)

	First generation IRGC
Time period	Joined Guards during the Iran-Iraq War.
Defining characteristics	Came from religious families and were ideologically ori
Elements of world views	Deep hostility to Sunnis and Iraqis and the United State
Employment status	Mostly retired.

“Pasdar Forever”

After consolidating power, Iran’s leaders built educational machinery to indoctrinate the youth in its revolutionary ethos. Leaders reasoned that loyalty to the regime would remain fixed if it was forged at an early age. In the words of Khamenei, the more ideological cadre “would remain Pasdar (a member of the Guards) forever” and would serve as a pipeline for future leadership. Iran prizes youth as human capital for tomorrow’s political leadership, a phenomenon common in authoritarian and collectivist states.⁶⁵ Much of this ideological training was overseen by the Basij.

Iranian youth indoctrination programs quickly became eerily comparable to those of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Hitler affirmed, “He alone who owns the youth gains the future.”⁶⁶ Leaders of the Hitler Youth mobilized young Germans to serve Nazi ends. From 1939, 82 percent of German boys and girls between the ages of ten and eighteen belonged to the Hitler Youth or an affiliate. Boys were hammered by martial jingoism and paramilitary training and full-contact athletics.⁶⁷ The girls were groomed by campfire romanticism, folklore, and traditional themes of motherhood.

Similarly, in the Soviet Union, children first became Little Octobrist and then Young Pioneers, whose motto was “We promise to . . . love and cherish the Motherland passionately, to live as the great Lenin bade us, as the Communist Party teaches us.”⁶⁸ Orphans were raised in collective homes where the state molded them into “New Soviet People.”⁶⁹ The young in Russia and Germany were trained to spy on their classmates, friends, enemies, and parents.⁷⁰ Distant, though modified, echoes of these techniques would be heard in Iran by the 1980s.

Beginning in 1982 Iran’s primary and secondary education required that ideological and political values be standardized and taught nationally.⁷¹ Today, curricula focus on religious and political indoctrination.⁷² The content includes theology, with a strong focus on Shia practices and customs.⁷³ Guards-produced publications, including books, booklets, and pamphlets, are distributed in

schools.⁷⁴ One book, *Angels of Shrine*, is aimed at children as young as five. Written in the form of bedtime poetry, the book's text and illustrations eulogize fallen Iranian soldiers and cheer the heroism of Shia.⁷⁵

As a part of education, Basij-run "resistance centers" prepare children for joining Basij units when they transfer to middle school in early adolescence.⁷⁶ Then they join Pouyandegan (or Seekers) in middle school and Pishgaman (or Standard Bearers) in high school. Throughout, children are taught that Western imperialism dates back to the British tobacco monopoly of 1890–92 and the oil concession in 1901.⁷⁷

Martyrdom

Like the Nazis and the Soviets before them, Iranian leaders have made martyrs of children and young leaders (table 8). The Germans hailed twenty-two-year-old Horst Wessel, who was killed by a communist, immortalizing him in ceremony and song as a major Nazi propaganda symbol. For the Soviets, the young hero was thirteen-year-old Pavlik Morozov, who denounced his father as an enemy of the state. After his father was executed, Pavlik was killed in a family conspiracy. In turn, they were shot, and Pavlik became a national hero and the subject of statuary, folk songs, and an opera.

Iran too has its child hero. There, October 30 is celebrated as Student Basij Day and recognizes a 1980 battle of the Iran-Iraq War, in which a thirteen-year-old Basij, Mohammad Hossein Fahmideh, threw himself under an approaching Iraqi tank, killing himself and disabling the enemy tank. Khomeini hailed the boy as a hero and built a monument to honor him, which has since become pilgrimage site for schoolchildren.⁷⁸ Throughout Iran, children have been drawn into celebratory anniversary festivities, screaming loyalty to the regime. Parents teach their children to hate America so that it "flows in their very being!"⁷⁹

In successive decades, Iran would groom and field more martyrs. The ruling clergy would ordain a cult of self-sacrificial murder. Mothers of the Basij would raise sons to kill themselves and the sons of others. One mother of boy celebrated as a martyr explained to her suicide-attack-bound son, "I am not sad

at all. . . . You are going to a good place. Why should I cry?”⁸⁰ Her son was killed in Syria.

The Education Ministry promotes martyrdom in school textbooks, and has established ten thousand Koranic schools to pave the “motorway of martyrdom and humanity.”⁸¹ Guards-produced Fars Media circulates cartoons glorifying martyrdom. In one television cartoon, a young bearded Basiji is handed a Koran and sent to battle. While dreaming of his wife and his child he awakens to the sound of gunfire and artillery. As he rushes to the aid of a fallen soldier, he is killed, dying as a martyr.

Table 8. Child heroes of totalitarian states

The Soviet hero—Pavlik Morozov

Background	Leader of a Soviet Young Pioneers school group. In 1930, when he was 12, he was killed by German soldiers.
Status	Glorified as martyr for the Soviet Union. Celebrated in monuments and films.
Legacy	Nikita Khrushchev in Children’s Encyclopedia called him an “immortal hero.”

Moral Instruction

Basij-led moral instruction extends well beyond the classroom. Outside of school, children are indoctrinated to prepare for adulthood. The girls are guided toward domesticity, while the boys prepare for war. Daily life toughens children. At early, impressionable ages, children are forced to witness beatings, humiliations, and killings. Moderate civil servants have criticized the coarsening of children by a system that forces them to attend public hangings.

In Mashhad, the Guards operate an unconventional amusement park—the City of Games for Revolutionary Children.⁸² In the park, young, impressionable boys are dressed in military uniforms and shepherded around the park by a military commander who orders them to fire small-caliber weapons at a wide range of enemies. Some targets have pictures of Iraqi soldiers, while others are facsimiles of fighters for the Islamic State in Syria or images of the Saudi royal family. Children blast plastic bullets into targets with images of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. political leaders.⁸³

In 1982 the IRGC created their first high school in Tehran as a preparatory school for future Guards service. Soon after, they opened similar schools which have come to ease entry to university and then, a career in government. The Guards monitor the progress of promising students from middle school through university. The Basij and the Qods Force, in particular, strategically place recruiters near holy sites, mosques, schools, and community centers to attract volunteers.⁸⁴ The Iman Hussein University, established in 1986 and located in Tehran, is run by Guards and is home to the organization's intelligence academy.⁸⁵ The Guards use it as a training center and a recruiting ground, in addition to its many other functions, including nuclear research also under the purview of the Guards.⁸⁶ Recruits and journeymen-level intelligence professionals are taught the rudiments of the profession at IHU. Senior-level cadre attend courses, too; the university's students are schooled in many aspects of espionage, including its history, tools, and practice.⁸⁷

Courses investigate the role of espionage in international relations and national

security. Recruits train in open-source and covert intelligence collection.⁸⁸ They are taught the role espionage played in the early days of Islam. Guard cadets are schooled that intelligence in Islam began with Mohammed, was developed by Ali, and was refined by successive generations of Muslims.⁸⁹

The IHU teaches intelligence tradecraft and installs elan in the Guards. Instructors explain that the United States promotes, in the words of texts produced by the university, “global hegemony” and that Iran has been directed by divine providence to fight this enemy. In the academy, Iranian leaders highlight the importance of intelligence by citing the frequency that the terms “enemy” and “hostility” are used in the Koran.⁹⁰ They cite passages in the Koran relating to the tactics, techniques, and procedures of early Islamic leaders.

Basic courses focus on tradecraft and field exercises. The faculty of Basic Jihadi Sciences trains all the Guards officers and cadets. The first year of training is described as having 50 percent ideological content, 30 percent military training, and 20 percent moral conditioning.⁹¹ The second year is more specialized. After the completion of all the phases, individuals must take six-month introductory courses preparing them to enter the Guards.⁹² They are also trained in cyber capabilities.⁹³

There are also IHU centers with a paramilitary focus, where recruits train in live-fire combat situations and asymmetric warfare.⁹⁴ The IHU occasionally deploys its faculty and employees abroad, for example deploying trainers to Syria and Iraq to serve as advisors. Guards promote higher education in neighbouring countries.⁹⁵ The Qods Force acts as a liaison between Iranian university officials and foreign leaders.⁹⁶

One of the more colorful personalities associated with the IHU is Hassan Abbasi. Bearing the baffling moniker the “Kissinger of Islam,” Abbasi directs the Center for Doctrinal Strategic Studies, a think tank connected to the Guards. A self-styled renaissance man who lectures on economics, history, politics, and cinema, Abbasi rose through the Guards to become a leader and important lecturer.⁹⁷ As such, he often serves as the voice of the Guards, with statements such as “America means enemy, and enemy means Satan.”⁹⁸ Though the West sees suicide bombings as terrorism, Abbasi salutes them as noble expressions of Islam.⁹⁹ Abbasi fears that the West’s soft war against Iran erodes the loyalty of younger generations. He has declared that this soft war is rooted in freemasonry, democracy, and Zionism and theorized that the American cartoon figures Tom

and Jerry are part of a Zionist conspiracy.¹⁰⁰ Popular TV series like *The Simpsons*, *Lost*, and *South Park* all have resulted in “Hollywoodism,” he said: “They entertain us, but indoctrinate us at the same time. . . . The images you see pollute your sexual fantasies.”¹⁰¹

Show Trials

Just as in Nazi Germany and in the Soviet Union of the 1930s, there is a culture of ambient fear of arrest within all Iranian social strata today. It is hard to predict who will be arrested or killed or what the charges will be. In Germany, a passing comment could be classified as *Wehrkraftzersetzung*, or “subversion” or “undermining the war effort,” which was punishable by death. A generic charge brought by Soviet prosecutors was being an enemy of the people; the equivalent in Germany was an enemy of the state. From their earliest days in power, Iran’s Guards have had the ability to imprison people in a vast penal system. The charges are often vague, such as war against God or spreading propaganda.¹⁰² For example, in 2018 the Guards arrested an Iranian journalist who spoke of Mohammed’s grandson Hussein as having “passed away” rather than as “dying as a martyr.”¹⁰³

Iran’s show trials harken to the public trials of Soviet and Nazi jurisprudence, during which hollow-eyed and emotionally drained men and women, often dressed in ill-fitting apparel, sat in rows and denounced each other, their comrades, family, and former friends. The most spectacular confessions were Stalin’s “show trials” of the 1930s. On stage, some hard-core Old Bolsheviks, who had survived tsarist prisons and Siberian exile, confessed to hair-raising and ludicrous tales of conspiracy. The author Arthur Koestler, a former communist, spoke of techniques to create mental breakdowns, as interrogators would use physical torture or drugs tailored to the victim’s personality.¹⁰⁴

Patently false confessions were ensured by the Soviet “conveyer” system, in which a prisoner was interrogated, beaten, and threatened nonstop for one week without sleep. Finally, the victim would sign any confession, sometimes without even understanding what he had signed.¹⁰⁵ The Nazis used the Soviet trials as exemplars for those held by the Peoples Court of 1934–45. Before political

prisoners were brought to trial, they often confessed after ghastly, prolonged torture. Admissions of guilt were usually followed by immediate execution.

Iran's leaders see their country filled with foreign agents and subversives. British-American author Roger Housden was arrested as he was leaving Iran in February 2009. His captors warned that they could make him "disappear" if he did not surrender information on dissidents. He confessed on television to a host of crimes and implicated people he knew to be innocent.¹⁰⁶ Another British captive said he was bullied, blindfolded, and beaten until he invented a wild story of his activities on behalf of a British service.¹⁰⁷

Like those in the Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany, Iranian intelligence and security personnel purged real, but usually imagined enemies. In utter debasement, suspects are compelled to confess on national television to crimes before their court proceedings begin. These forced confessions are then accepted as evidence in court.¹⁰⁸

In Iran, the videotaped confessions are stage-crafted to obtain the best performance.¹⁰⁹ According to one former prisoner, he spent hours each day memorizing fabricated information: "They even told me how I should move my hands and keep a happy face so that no one would suspect I was held in solitary confinement or ill-treated."¹¹⁰ As in the Soviet Union, Iranian prisoners often invent self-implicating conspiracy stories after days without sleep and unrelenting beatings. They are routinely denied access to a lawyer or their family for weeks. These confessions stand as sufficient proof of guilt.¹¹¹

One inmate explained, "You see your own disintegration." After refusing to sign a confession, the guards put a rope around this prisoner's neck as he sat at a table: "When they pulled the table, the rope wasn't attached to anything. I fell backwards. I fainted. When I came to, I was wet. They had thrown water over me. I vomited. They took my confession then, and I signed."¹¹²

In the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, family members of the accused could be used as pawns or surrogates for enemies of the state. The German chief judge of the People's Court Roland Freisler shrieked at Elfriede Scholz, the sister of Erich Maria Remarque: "Your brother is beyond our reach but you will not escape us." She was beheaded. In Iran, authorities send messages to those who have yet to be brought to prison and interrogated. According to one witness, "Two of my friends, who were recently released from the notorious Section 209 in Evin

Prison, gave me a message from their interrogators: ‘We have concocted a nice case against you, and we will get to you soon.’”¹¹³

The “Terror Club” Trial

Some show trials become iconic. In the Soviet Union, the 1936 Zinoviev-Kamenev “Trial of the Sixteen” was choreographed by Stalin. The trial of the conspirators of the July 1944 plot to kill Hitler featured the flamboyant judge of the Peoples Court screaming invectives at the accused. Like these trials, the August 2012 Iranian “Terror Club” trial granted a veneer of legal legitimacy to the procedures. Twelve individuals—seven men and five women—confessed on camera to a conspiracy to kill Iranian nuclear scientists. One defendant confessed to traveling to Israel to practice shooting at targets from speeding motorcycles:¹¹⁴ “There was a motorcycle racing complex in Tel Aviv. . . . We were given time bombs where we had to push the start button when we attached it,” he said. One defendant declared that she received training in self-defense and intelligence gathering. On a tape shown on Iranian television, she divulged, “Global Zionism will commit any kind of crime to fulfill its foul aims.”¹¹⁵

Imprisonment and Prisons

Iconic prisons are engines for gruesome lore about sadism, injustice, and audacious escape attempts. The British Tower of London, the French Bastille, and the American Alcatraz have left legacies captured in popular culture. In Russia, the Peter and Paul Fortress, founded by Peter the Great, burst with political radicals and social irritants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹¹⁶ Among the more famous were Fyodor Dostoevsky, Maxim Gorky, and Leon Trotsky. When the communists set up government in Moscow, they used the Lubyanka prison to incarcerate and kill their enemies.

If the fortress is associated with the tsar’s repression and the Lubyanka with

Stalin's Soviet justice, Auschwitz became synonymous with mechanized mass murder and sadism. Planet Auschwitz, a term coined by a survivor of that death camp, was a world of inverted values. Cruelty was hailed as virtuous, and compassion was shunned as weakness.¹¹⁷ Here, too, Iran followed in the steps of these gruesome predecessors: After the Islamic Revolution, the new regime's prison system swelled throughout the country, with the Guards playing a leading role in their perpetuation.

Mohsen Rezai founded the Guards' intelligence unit in 1981. Much of the early efforts involved counterintelligence operations directed against Kurdish separatists.¹¹⁸ Today, the unit controls some prison facilities for political prisoners in Evin prison.¹¹⁹ Evin, built in 1971, originally held enemies of the shah; today, it confines supposed enemies of the revolution.¹²⁰ Toward the end of the shah's regime in the late 1970s, conditions in Evin prison were relatively humane. An eclectic corps of regime opponents—liberals, leftists, and Islamists—bunked next to each other and sometimes played chess or volleyball games together.¹²¹ That camaraderie ended with the revolutionary regime, when the prison earned the moniker Iran's Torture Chamber.

After 1979, Iran's prisons populations swelled well beyond existing capacity. Facilities were inundated with political prisoners, and the confusion and despair of the teeming, newly incarcerated inmates became palpable. Many political prisoners were executed near the prisons, in local forests or clearings. Often prisoners were killed without trial. They were rounded up, shot, piled on trucks, and tossed into mass, unmarked graves near towns. While Iranian prisons would not reach the death counts of the German concentration camps or Soviet GULAG. Iranian prisoners face similarly grim prospects when they enter the gates.¹²² The regime claims that those whom they execute are murderers, rapists, and drug traffickers. Human rights activists counter that many of those killed are regime opponents.¹²³ Iran has the second-highest annual rate of executions in the world, after China.¹²⁴

The Pasdaran casts its net wide to imprison nonconformist political activists, out-of-favor journalists, students, religious dissidents, common criminals, political rivals, and those who are considered enemies of the state or of the revolutionary spirit. Thousands accused of trying to overthrow the regime have been jailed. Often, the charges are vague.¹²⁵ Reporters Without Borders, a watchdog organization of journalists, ranked Iran 169th out of 180 countries in its 2018 World Press Freedom Index.¹²⁶ In Iran, death row inmates are often

executed at short notice without notifying the families of the condemned. The three preferred methods of execution for women and girls are stoning, public hanging, and shooting.¹²⁷

The camps of the Soviets and Nazis were strewn with corpses and mass graves. Killings were conducted both randomly and methodologically. In Iran, there have been mass murders of political prisoners. Khomeini established special commissions to select prisoners for stock-yard-like killings; they became known as the “death commissions.”¹²⁸ In events known as the Massacre of '88, up to seven thousand were murdered in the Evin assembly hall in summer 1988. Prisoners were herded in groups of six and hanged. The bodies were transferred to mass graves in meat trucks at night. On some nights, up to four hundred were executed, their bodies were tossed into a makeshift, large grave.¹²⁹ Relatives of those killed called the point of execution as the “Flower Garden,” but others know it as the “place of the damned.”¹³⁰

“Planet Evin”: Wards 209 and 350

Evin is located near a busy highway, with a side road providing direct access to the prison.¹³¹ Life inside its gates is generally more humane than was life in the Soviet and German concentration camps. There is no evidence of industrial-scale mass murder or large-scale forced death through privation. Germans killed tens of thousands in some days of their rule. In the Soviet Union, historian Richard Pipes has calculated that more than one thousand people each day were executed over the course of 1937 and 1938.¹³² But there is ample evidence of lurid torture.

The Guards and the MOIS control their own wards within Evin. They are administrated separately from the main Evin prison management.¹³³ In Evin prison, Ward 209 is run by the MOIS, and Ward 350 is run by the Guards.¹³⁴

The MOIS-operated Ward 209 is a secret detention center for political prisoners, with solitary confinement cells.¹³⁵ In Evin as in other prisons, the MOIS and the Guards carry out extra-judicial executions.¹³⁶ Detention centers, built to hold people for several days during in-processing, have only several toilets for hundreds of detainees. Access to medical care is often denied.¹³⁷ Life is wretched

in the overcrowded cells, and many inmates are forced to sleep on the floors of hallways or in filthy cells. The Guards have a reputation for brutality. Said one prisoner of Evin's guards, "They use any tool—even toilets, showers, water, and tea."¹³⁸

Political prisoners undergo physical abuse, often in 209's torture room, which is located in the prison basement.¹³⁹ Mental and psychological torture, meant to break the spirit of the incarcerated, includes such techniques as false news and information, threats of flogging, threatening family members, or giving false news. Prisoners endure beatings, sleep deprivation, being dunked into cold water and paraded naked outside in cold weather. A particularly feared torture is called "the chicken," in which a prisoner's arms are bent back and tied to his ankles while he is suspended in midair.¹⁴⁰ Some prisoners have their head covered by an iron helmet so they will be deafened by their own cries from pain.¹⁴¹ Emad Bahavar, a supporter of the opposition Green movement serving a ten-year sentence explained, "They lined us up in the Ward 350 corridor, our faces to the wall. I could hear some crying in pain. . . . They started beating our backs very severely with batons. The screaming and crying got louder."¹⁴²

For many prisoners in the Guards-operated Ward 350 prison life is tedious, punctuated with surges of fear and periods of brutality. There is a sanitized library, but no books or newspapers are permitted inside solitary cells. Life in the solitary cells is disorienting. Prisoners lose track of time.¹⁴³ Each prison cell in Ward 350 measures approximately ninety-eight square feet and houses sixteen to twenty prisoners.¹⁴⁴ Sometimes, collective beatings can occur spontaneously, such as the April 2014 thrashing when dozens of security guards and senior prison officials attacked and severely beat political prisoners being held in Ward 350.¹⁴⁵ Famous prisoners include Esfandiyar Rahim Mashaei, one-time first vice president and chief of staff to former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.¹⁴⁶

In Evin's Women's Ward, political prisoners have difficulty communicating with their family. There are no telephones available for many prisoners, and they are granted only twenty-minute visits with their family and children. These short visits are often traumatic; indeed, some psychologists believe that cabin visits from behind a glass wall can be destructive to the psychological health of the prisoners' children. Therefore, many of the families try as much as possible not to bring the children to visit.¹⁴⁷

The conditions in Evin and other prisons have become a rallying point for civil

rights advocates. Sometimes family and friends will stand outside of Evin to protest incarceration. On occasion, the demonstrations are loud, on others they are silent.¹⁴⁸ Some women may have taken inspiration from German wives of incarcerated Jewish men who, in the winter of 1943, stood in front of a Berlin ad hoc incarceration center and shouted to the guards, “Give me back my husband!”¹⁴⁹ Soviet Refuseniks organized publicly to garner attention to their cause. In 1974, a handful of protesters stood openly and defiantly in front of embassies in Moscow clamoring for exist visas. Years later, in Tehran, a mother organized a sit-in to protest the jailing of her daughter in Evin.

Deception and Prisons

For the Soviets and the Germans, concentration camps were instruments of terror and venues for slave labor. The very existence of the camp fostered a paralyzing fear in citizens who might deviate from agenda of the state. But some macabre elements were concealed from the eyes of the outside world. This is true with Iran as well.

The Germans made efforts to disguise extermination centers, particularly after their defeat at Stalingrad. One infamous deception was masking the brutality at the Terezin concentration camp, which served as a way station for prominent European Jews, most of whom were sent to Auschwitz where they were murdered. Under international pressure to allow inspection, the Nazis beautified the camp before the Danish Red Cross visited it; as a result, the Red Cross reported that they found no indication of systemic mistreatment.¹⁵⁰

The Soviet Union concealed the poisonous conditions in their prisons from the West. U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union Joseph E. Davies penned a fawning account of Stalin and his regime. Henry A. Wallace, vice president of the United States, visited the Soviet concentration camp at Kolyma, sometimes called the “Arctic Death Camp.” He spoke of the beauty of the flowers, the sturdily built young miners, and the warm reception he received by the guards. In fact, the prisoners he saw were guards dressed as prisoners. The real prisoners were dying of starvation and freezing in forty-degree-below-zero temperatures.¹⁵¹

Iran's Evin prison, too, veils conditions in which political prisoners are held. For example, prison authorities choreographed activities for foreign dignitaries who visited the facility to observe conditions there in early 2017. Much like the charade staged years earlier by the Nazis at the Terezin, officials of Evin shepherded Western observers to certain areas of the prison. In this case, the investigators were not misled and protested loudly against the charade.¹⁵²

Mental Hospitals

Iranian leaders, like those in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, misuse the diagnosis of mental illness to incarcerate and execute political dissidents. Soviet physicians swore to serve communism.¹⁵³ Soviet psychiatrists systematically suppressed dissent by interning and sedating free spirits by misdiagnosing them as mentally ill.¹⁵⁴ Those who found faults in the Communist Party's philosophy and in the rule of the party were declared to be either enemies of the state or mentally disturbed. Some illness were diagnosed as "sluggish schizophrenia" or "delusion of reformism."¹⁵⁵

In Germany, National Socialism billed itself as "applied biology," and psychiatrists directly collaborated in the mass murder of the mentally ill. Most of the killing took place in six psychiatric institutions. Psychiatrists oversaw the killing of over two hundred thousand patients by gassing, starvation, and injection of poisons.

In Iran, high-profile critics of Khomeinism can be arrested and imprisoned in mental hospitals. A retired teacher and member of teachers' union was incarcerated at the Ibn Sina Psychiatric Hospital in Mashhad, with his parents prevented from visiting him at the facility.¹⁵⁶ The teacher was a civil rights activist who had earlier served two years in prison after the 2009 postelection protests in Iran.¹⁵⁷ He had no history of mental illness.

Incarceration and constant beatings can produce emotional collapse from which inmates never fully recover. Ali, a young prisoner, said his worst experience in prison was seeing his friend, another member of the Basij, sexually assaulted: "My friend . . . was confused. He lost control. He screamed and shouted, threw

himself against the walls. The guards warned him that if was going to continue with this behavior they would make things worse for him.”¹⁵⁸

A Young Basij Guard and His Brides

In German and Soviet prisons, inmates were abused with little mercy. German concentration camps held “brothel women.” The Nazis nicknamed these forced brothels Joy Divisions. Imprisoned women and girls included the unemployed, beggars, the homeless, prostitutes, Roma, and anyone the Nazis decided was nonconformist and physically attractive. Free thinkers were incarcerated, as well.¹⁵⁹ In Soviet GULAG camps, women were regularly subjected to rape and humiliating and degrading conditions. Some became sexual fodder for incarcerated criminal gangs.¹⁶⁰

In Iran, religious authorities have pronounced that it is unethical to execute virgins. But Shia Islam allows for temporary marriage. By marrying girls and women temporarily, guards perform sex under the covenant of marriage, which accords with Islamic law. Sometimes lotteries are taken to give guards and equal opportunities to marry and rape condemned virgins. Some guards enjoy it and see nothing wrong either the sex or the killing. Others are less enthusiastic.

The case of a young Basiji illustrates the sexual brutality endemic in Iran’s prisons. When he was sixteen years old, his mother delivered him to a Basij station and pleaded that they take him, feed him, train him, and employ him. They did so, and years later he became haunted by memories of raping virgins the night before they were executed. He confessed, “I could tell that the girls were more afraid of their ‘wedding’ night than of the execution that awaited them in the morning. And they would always fight back, so we would have to put sleeping pills in their food. By morning, the girls would have an empty expression; it seemed like they were ready or wanted to die.” Some images of the defeated looks on the faces of his sexual prey still haunt him: “I will never forget how this one girl clawed at her own face and neck with her fingernails afterwards. She had deep scratches all over her.”¹⁶¹

Other Basij live with memories of the torture and with shame of the pain they

inflicted on their countrymen. One Basiji apologized for what he judged to be cowardice for refusing to intervene against the torture and beating he witnessed: “I am thoroughly ashamed. I’m shamed before God, ashamed of my youth, ashamed in front of my friend, ashamed in front of the people.” This Basiji refused to rape women captives. After a term in jail, he fled to Britain.¹⁶²

Coping in the Camps: Evin Cabaret

As it did in the German and Soviet penal systems, there flourishes a pool of creative talent among Iranian political prisoners. German and Soviet concentration camps saw the existence of underground theaters. At Buchenwald, humorous performances began with an opening song followed by satirical sketches, folk songs, and political songs.¹⁶³ In Iran, political prisoners make sotto voce jokes about the sadistic guards and foul food and swill to help them grapple with cruelty they cannot control.

There is collective resistance in prison. Evin prison has been nicknamed Evin University because of the many student activists, journalists, and intellectuals who have passed through its gates. Iranian political prisoners continue to stage hunger strikes to protest conditions and the deaths fellow political prisoners there.¹⁶⁴ Sometimes hunger strikes turn from “wet” to “dry.” This is when strikers refuse to drink water, as well as eat food.¹⁶⁵

Many political prisoners devise their own coping plans. Canadian journalist Maziar Bahari was jailed, in his words, for “118 days, 12 hours, 54 minutes,” on charges of espionage. Worn out but not defeated in his captivity, Bahari imagined a book about his ordeal. Upon release he wrote it, and the humorist Jon Stewart made it into a movie.¹⁶⁶ Other prisoners develop a personal regime. In May 2007 Iranian American Haleh Esfandiari was thrown into Evin prison on charges of conspiracy. The director of the Middle East Program at the Wilson International Center in Washington DC, Esfandiari spent 105 days in solitary confinement. She survived by practicing a regular ten-hour exercise regimen. Like Bahari, she crafted and memorized a book; it was a biography of her grandmother.¹⁶⁷ Another intellectual drew on his mastery of Persian poetry to survive. A world-famous epidemiologist tapped into poems he had memorized as

a boy. Alone in his cell, the physician would recite his most-loved poems and write new ones.¹⁶⁸ Others shout from the prison their defiance to all those who are in earshot. They yell “Allah-o-Akbar” (God is great) and “death to the dictator” from the darkness of their cells.¹⁶⁹

But not all prisoners are emotionally well-integrated or strong, and some cannot cope. They are malnourished, abandoned, and dejected, and they begin to die physically and spiritually. When they are released, some stumble into despondency and despair and are haunted by memories of Evin prison that they cannot escape.

Luring Opponents to Return: “Clever, Multidimensional and Innovative Tricks”

Early Soviet and Nazi leaders sometimes pressured leading dissidents to return from abroad. One of the most successful early Soviet operations was the Trust, an operation designed to disrupt the anti-Bolshevik White émigré community.¹⁷⁰ Creating a false active opposition on Soviet territory, the Trust lured several prominent oppositions to the Soviet Union, where they were killed. One was Sigmund Georgievich Rosenblum, who took the name Reilly, was employed by British Intelligence, and became an international arms dealer. He was productive and clever but was outwitted by the Soviets and lured to his execution.¹⁷¹

For their part, Nazi authorities had an image problem in 1936. They feared a boycott of their Olympics and pressured one of their finest women athletes to return from the safety of Britain to compete for Germany. Gretel Bergmann, a Jewish high jump-record holder, was informed that her parents would be harmed if she did not return and showcase her ability. Fearing for her family’s safety, she returned but was not allowed to compete in the Berlin Olympics.¹⁷²

Similarly, in Iran, the Guards lured a critic of the regime back to Iran and boasted about abducting him. Major General Salami boasted that Guards captured Rouhollah Zam, a Paris-based Iranian dissident. The dissident, Rouhollah Zam, says he regretted his media activities in exile in recent years.¹⁷³ Mr. Zam, the middle-aged son of reformist cleric, ran the Amadnews website, an antigovernment forum that blamed Iran for provoking nationwide unrest.¹⁷⁴ In its

statement, the Guards claimed to have lured Zam into Iran using “clever, multidimensional and innovative tricks,” which even deceived foreign intelligence agencies.¹⁷⁵ In July 2020, a court sentenced Zam to death for corruption on earth.¹⁷⁶

“Wet Operations”: Early Killings Abroad

Since the inception of the regime, Iran has continued to send teams of assassins abroad to kill its enemies. The Iranian revolution was fragile in its early years, and its leaders feared subversion at home and attacks and intrigue from enemies abroad. The Soviets, years earlier, faced a similar challenge. After a failed assassination attempt on Lenin in August 1918, Soviet leadership launched a Red Terror. The Soviets sent “Illegals,” multilingual Soviets who assumed foreign identities, abroad to surveil and sometimes kill targets.¹⁷⁷ A legendary assassination was the bludgeoning of the well-protected Trotsky in Mexico. His death carried a message that no critic of Stalin was safe. Soviets frequently murdered defectors in the West.¹⁷⁸ The Nazis, too, killed high-profile enemies beyond their borders.

Iranian leaders, like those of the Soviets and the Nazis, have ordered enemies of the state tracked down and killed abroad.¹⁷⁹ Some attacks have been carried out by the Guards and others by MOIS operatives. Like Stalin, Khomeini sometimes personally signed the death writs, as many as five hundred, of enemy exiles.¹⁸⁰ Some slayings were well-planned and professionally executed, while others were conducted ineptly.¹⁸¹

During the 1980s and 1990s, Iranian operatives across the world engaged in assassinations targeting opposition figures in the United States, France, Sweden, Switzerland, and Germany. In Argentina, Iran-backed groups were accused in the deadly bombings of the Israeli embassy in 1992 and a Jewish community center in 1994, an attack that left 115 people dead.¹⁸²

Most of the high-profile foreign assassinations occurred in the 1990s. Germany was home to almost one hundred thousand Iranians who had fled the revolution. Iran used diplomatic facilities to gather intelligence on exile opposition forces in

Europe within this community.¹⁸³ Particularly notorious were the 1992 assassinations of three Kurdish dissidents and their translator at Berlin's Mykonos restaurant. A German court ruling named Iran's then-president Ali Akbar Rafsanjani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as ordering those killing. Yet such actions were not limited to Germany, as Khomeini targeted his enemies around the world. One Iranian dissident on Cyprus was killed by a gunman using a sound-suppressing-equipped pistol, in 1989. A former colonel in intelligence was shot in his hotel room in Dubai in June 1989.¹⁸⁴

One survivor of a March 1990 attack was on his way to an airport in Turkey when a would-be assassin opened fire, injuring him.¹⁸⁵ Other victims were mutilated to send a message. In Istanbul, in 1992, a victim was discovered in a shallow grave with her fingernails pulled out and genitals slashed. Some attacks were brazen, such as the 1993 killing of a leading dissident associated with the National Council of Resistance of Iran. He was shot in the face and killed while sitting in his car in downtown Rome. The two assassins escaped on a motorcycle.¹⁸⁶

The most notorious assassination that captured world headlines was the August 1991 killing of Shahpour Bakhtiar, the shah's last prime minister, who was stabbed to death at his home outside Paris. Immediately, Iranian exiles asserted that the slaying was the work of a hit squad from Tehran. An anticlerical political scientist and booster of democracy, Bakhtiar had served six years in jail for political activism during the time of the shah.¹⁸⁷ He had proven liberal credentials and took great risks as a young man, fighting in Spain with the loyalists against Franco and later helping the French resistance against the Nazis.¹⁸⁸ As prime minister, he allowed Ayatollah Khomeini back into the country. But Khomeini refused to work with him. Bakhtiar escaped to Paris and used his home as perch to organize against Khomeini's fundamentalist rule.¹⁸⁹ In response, Khomeini likely ordered Bakhtiar murdered. Much like Trotsky in Mexico, Bakhtiar had a well-guarded villa and was shielded around the clock by four policemen. But Bakhtiar's stronghold was insufficient to keep out assassins. As with Trotsky, Bakhtiar was killed by a family friend who had accomplices. The murderer was captured and imprisoned in France but released in 2010 in a prisoners' exchange.

Most Iranian embassies serve as centers for diplomacy, espionage, and clandestine operations. This is not unique. While the Guards and MOIS operatives mask their true identities by assuming the roles of cultural attaches or

military officers, this is standard tradecraft used by intelligence services worldwide. What separates the Iranian service personnel assigned to embassies from other intelligence personnel is the frequency with which they use the embassies to plan and carry out assassinations, particularly their embassies in Middle Eastern countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Syria.¹⁹⁰

The Guards continue to target enemies abroad. In 2018 two alleged Iranian operatives were arrested in the United States on suspicion of conducting preoperational surveillance against Jewish facilities and against sympathizers of the controversial and militant MEK. Also in 2018, Albanian authorities arrested two Iranians for planning to kill dissidents and French authorities claimed to have foiled a large-scale bombing in Paris. An Iranian diplomat in Vienna who was arrested in Germany was believed to be behind the planned attack, along with two people from Belgium who were arrested while in possession of homemade explosives and a detection device.¹⁹¹ In 2013 Iranian operatives were arrested in Nigeria for planning attacks against U.S. and Israeli tourist sites and organizations. The previous year, two Qods Force operatives were arrested in Kenya for plotting attacks against Western interests.¹⁹² In November 2018 the Danish foreign minister accused Iranian authorities of plotting to kill Iranian dissidents in Europe. The minister opined that it was “completely clear that the arrow is pointing at the Iranian intelligence service.”¹⁹³ In 2019 the European Union confirmed that it suspected Iran of planning and committing assassinations and of hiring European criminal gangs to assassinate Iranian dissidents on the continent.¹⁹⁴ In 2019 the Netherlands accused Iran of two earlier murders—in 2015 in Almere and in 2017 in The Hague.¹⁹⁵

Summary

Like the Soviets and Nazis before them, the leaders of the new Islamic Republic aspired to shape a totalitarian nation state through coercion and repression.¹⁹⁶ They built the Guards to enforce their new laws and chose piety over expertise when selecting candidates and granting promotions. The Guards have many tools, including imprisoning dissidents and guarding them in special wards with medieval conditions. They also have external roles, which they periodically play with unchained brutality. In May 2018 the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned

Evin prison under Executive Order 13553.¹⁹⁷ During that year, Iran had arrested protesters, teachers, factory workers, students, intellectuals and union activists for protesting against the regime.¹⁹⁸ As of late 2020, political prisoners continue to languish in Evin prison.

The People's Militia

The idea to create the Basij was a divine prophecy [delivered] to the Imam [Khomeini], and can be seen as a wondrous miracle.

—Guards deputy commander Hossein Salami, November 2016

On November 25, 1979, Khomeini called for the creation of, in his words, a “twenty-million-man army.” In response, the People's Militia, later to be called the Basij, was established in April 1980.¹ Initially a separate service from the Guards, the Basij battled in the war against Iraq, which lasted from 1980 to 1988. Survival in the trenches would help define a generation of Iranian leaders.²

The newly formed Basij's mettle was tested early and often during the war, as the organization provided human fodder for combat.³ Nearly an entire generation of young men and boys served and suffered in the war. By the conflict's end, Iran's economy had absorbed an estimated trillion dollars in direct and indirect losses.⁴ The war convinced Tehran that a robust and capable missile force is critical to the country's security, as long-range missiles pummeled municipalities in both countries, forcing more than a quarter of Tehran's population to flee in the so-called War of the Cities.⁵

In these trying circumstances, the Basij offered an endless stream of youthful volunteers, ready to tread across minefields and face Iraqi fire to clear paths for regular Iranian regular troops.⁶ Children served as shock troops. Many fought bravely, though they were poorly equipped and often led by adolescents who

were no more experienced in combat than were they. The Iranian regime deployed at least 550,000 youths under eighteen years old during the war. The Basij itself suffered an estimated 190,000 fatalities, a casualty rate overshadowing those of the Guards and the army.⁷

Great Wars

The Iran-Iraq war bore some similarities to World War I, from which sprang the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Like the battles of the Great War, clashes in the Iran-Iraq war occurred episodically.⁸ Lines of combat were often static, with long periods of boredom punctuated by flurries of slaughter. Most dreaded were the frontal assaults, which involved crossing minefields and dodging artillery fire to plow into the teeth of entrenched defensive positions. Iranian boys, with small metal or plastic keys dangling from their necks and promises of immediate entry to heaven if they died, formed human waves that shielded more-experienced soldiers in the onslaught. Many of the older boys saw the plastic keys as symbols of their impending sacrifice. Some of the younger ones thought they were literally their personal keys to unlock the doors of heaven. Many of these boys, aged twelve to seventeen, also wore red headbands with the words “Sar Allah,” or Warriors of God.⁹ Western observers decried the use of such young children as war crimes.¹⁰

As in World War I, the combatants in the Iran-Iraq conflict used poisoned gas extensively. Iraq used Sarin and Tabun, which killed their victims quickly, causing paralysis, convulsions, and vomiting in the minutes before death.¹¹ Many soldiers and Guards were disabled for life. One survivor described his lifelong injuries: “I can’t breathe well, I can’t walk well, I can’t walk upstairs or hills, I feel tired all the time.”¹²

Also much like the slaughter pens of World War I, the front lines of the Iran-Iraq war produced a culture of martyrdom.¹³ Song, prose, and verse made appeals to God and patriotism. In his letters about the Great War, the British commander General Douglas Haig quoted the Muslim emperor Baber who, before sending his troops into battle in 1527, said, “If we fall in the field, we die the death of martyrs; if we survive, we rise victorious the avengers of the cause of God.”¹⁴

This was the milieu and mindset of the early Guards and Basij, and successive Iranian leaders kept the images alive to teach and inspire the youth. Today, Iranian students travel on excursions to the battlegrounds on which their fathers fought and sometimes fell. The trips are called “Travelers to the Light.”¹⁵

The poppies of Flanders Fields became symbols for the slaughter of the Great War; similarly, the red tulip came to represent Iranian martyrdom generations later. Said a mother, tulips are the “color of blood.”¹⁶ Today, names of the dead adorn libraries, streets, bridges, and town halls. Murals depicting bloody battles ornament urban landscapes. To memorialize the fallen, mullahs built a Martyrs’ Cemetery, twenty miles south of Tehran, with a fountain spurting red-tinted water to symbolize the blood shed for the defense of Iran.¹⁷ Today, the fountain’s red water still flows, and mothers dip their hands into it as they weep at the memories of their sons, many of whom were Guards and Basij, who were cut down in combat. Though the war is long over, life in Iran is filled with death. Iran has some of the world’s highest levels of executions, suicide, traffic fatality, and cancer growth rate.¹⁸

Sketching the Wars: Art in “Hell”

Both World War I and the Iran-Iraq War produced antiwar art, some of it stark and some subtle. This art derided militarism, challenged authoritarianism, and snickered at nationalism. After serving in the trenches for four years, the German Otto Dix produced a series of etchings called *Hell*, in 1919. His art depicted a wasteland of barbed wire, skulls, and clumps of flesh.¹⁹ The artist George Grosz, a contemporary of Dix, was also traumatized by the war and became a communist. He left for America in 1933, from where he lashed out at Hitler and his regime.

The Soviet Union had no place for pacifism, antimilitarism, or nonconformity. In 1923 the painter and book illustrator Marc Chagall left the Soviet Union for the artistic freedom of Paris. Later, he escaped German-occupied France and, like Grosz, found refuge in America.

As in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, Iran tries to control, imprison, or

expel dissident artists. Basij and MOIS operatives hound them. Like frontline artists before him in wars around the world, one Iranian, Reza, put to canvas the war he saw and lived. His gritty and expressive paintings reflect the trauma of his young boyhood, which he spent as a conscript on the front lines. At the age of fourteen he was deployed to combat, and two years later, he commanded thirty or forty soldiers, most of them teenagers. He drew and painted the suffering he saw. A few memories haunt him still. In his dreams, he revisits the site of the rotting corpse of a female Iraqi soldier. Like the artists escaping Hitler, Lenin, and Stalin, Reza sought refuge in the West to practice his art without fear of imprisonment or death. Grosz feared the Gestapo, and Reza feared the Guards. Those artists who remained in Iran are ever mindful, like those artists of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, of harassment and imprisonment by security services, notably the Basij.

The Shifting Image and Role of the Guards

The war engendered comradery among the men and boys who fought on the front. Those who survived their tests of battle could rise rapidly through the ranks. Enlisted soldiers could become a company, battalion, or, sometimes, brigade commander. Talented soldiers were promoted quickly. Eager college students clamoring for leadership were often ordered to the front for three months to test their abilities.

The Guards, which now included uniformed and activated Basij, numbered about three hundred thousand by the end of the war. Many served in combat against Iraqis or against the Kurds in Iran and Iraq. Some were deployed to Lebanon to support Hezbollah. Most of the Guards demobilized at the end of their military service. As at the end of other massive wars, veterans sought employment or places in higher education. Some Pasdaran and Basij veterans started families or reenrolled in school or took the low-level jobs reserved for them within the government administration. While Basij could enroll in universities without passing entrance examinations, some young veterans had no clear direction for the future and grappled with their losses in the war.²⁰ Some pursued career opportunities by remaining in the Basij. Later, Basij became involved in construction; today, the organization penetrates every sector of Iran's

political economy.²¹

Within the Guards, the Basij's mission shifted from traditional territorial defense to the broadly defined "defending against threats to Iran." No longer fighting from foxholes or marching in rows toward machine-gun nests, Basij were, by the 1990s, tasked to enforce virtue, which was a challenging proposition. Many of the Basij were young, uneducated, and ill-equipped to distinguish between morality and sin. Teenagers relied on broad guidance from Basij leaders often no more educated than they were. New Basij were not trained in crowd control or police work; making matters worse, some had been coarsened and traumatized by their experiences in the war.

Gone was the persona of pious, youthful Basij volunteers praying in muddy trenches and foxholes.²² The image of brave and self-sacrificial youth had deteriorated into a picture of roving bands of hard-bitten thugs. By the 1990s most Iranians had grown to loathe them and would speak of the "gangsterization" of a once-esteemed service, which was now also dubbed as execrable "shadowy vigilantes" by Western news organizations.²³

Today, the mission of the Basij is to maintain law and order, enforce Islamic values and virtue, and combat Western culture and other foreign threats. In the words of Khomeini, Basij are instructed to patrol against Satan.²⁴ It is a morality police that enforces retrograde dress codes and nonfraternization rules. They harness technology to ensure there is no cyber corruption. For example, Basij teams canvass social media for pictures of women sporting stimulating clothing and revealing hair.²⁵ Basij pull down satellite dishes and confiscate material they consider obscene. They quote the Koran's warning of the ever-present Satan, who corrupts culture.²⁶ In 2019 it became illegal to walk dogs because mullahs declared them to be impure, and Basij make sure that they have no place on city streets.²⁷

The Basij perpetuate a culture of death and martyrdom, though the war with Iraq ended over three decades ago. Among the pious, martyrdom for Islam and the revolution is the noblest act achievable by men or women. Young Iranians are still expected to conduct suicide operations. Guards and Basij leaders continue to build a reserve corps of suicide bombers. At the Guards Center for Doctrinal Studies of Security across Frontiers, located at the IHU, young Iranians are encouraged to volunteer for those operations. The mission of the Center is to produce martyrs prepared to kill Americans. Women, as well as men, are

aggressively recruited; upon joining, they prepare themselves for a place and time when they will be expected to kill themselves and others.²⁸

Protecting the Spirit of the Revolution

The Basij derives its authority from article 151 of the Iranian constitution, which requires the government to protect the citizenry. Much of these statutory requirements, as they apply to the Guards, remain fossilized. Major General Jafari stated in October 2009 that the “main mission” of the Basij is the nonmilitary task of confronting “soft threats and soft war.” Khamenei expanded the Basij into all sectors of Iranian society and emphasized that a central role of the organization is to preserve and propagate the spirit of revolution. The Basij, more than any other branch of the Guards, have been charged with countering antigovernment protests at high schools, universities, factories, and on the street.²⁹ Other branches of the Guards could be mobilized to repress domestic riots. Jafari strengthened the connection between the land forces of the Guards and the Basij to confront hard threats.³⁰ According to a University of St. Andrews professor, the Basij periodically create a sense of emergency as a ruse to exert power and clamp down on burgeoning dissent.³¹

The Basij statute identifies three cohorts of personnel. First, there are the Regular Members, who are mobilized in wartime and engage in developmental activities in peacetime. They generally do not receive a salary unless they are mobilized. When Basij leaders claim personnel rosters of millions, they probably refer to these unsalaried and often untrained cadres. To be sure, Khomeini’s call for a Basij force of twenty million has never been reached.³² Second are Active Members, who are extensively vetted and are salaried. The third group is the Special Members, who are members of both the Basij and the Guards’ ground forces.³³ The troop strengths are listed in chapter 6, table 12.

Callow Youth with Whips

Since the end of the war with Iraq, recruits have been drawn to the Guards for several reasons. Many are devoted to the Islamic Revolution and want to defend it. Others need the food and housing the service provides. Others still, who are not competitive in other occupations can find employment, if menial, there. The less able might monitor the roads and traffic.³⁴

While most Basij do not serve in uniforms, they are not difficult to identify. The men have short hair and wear camouflage jackets and openly carry batons, clubs, and chains.³⁵ In their green minivans, they wait outside shopping malls and plazas, parks, cafes, and sporting venues. They flog and pound the young for showing affection in public.³⁶ According to a high school student, “The Basij are everywhere. . . . In the streets, in the newspapers, on television.”³⁷

As in other large organizations, the Basij has its colorful personalities and noisemakers, one of whom is Hamide Reza Ahmad Abadi. Part comic, part stoic, part iconic, Abadi patrols Tehran’s mosques on Friday-afternoon prayers. He claims to chant “Death to America” in his dreams.³⁸ His performance is animated with wild gesticulations, and he helps stage-manage weekly political rallies. He once claimed to have worked at Tehran’s notorious Evin prison, explaining, “I used to hand over and receive the accused,” but he denied any participation in beatings or killing dissidents: “These are all lies; these are all fabricated.”³⁹

Women in Service

The women employed by the German SS, Soviet NKVD, and Iranian Basij could be every bit as pitiless as their men counterparts, serving with blinkered authoritarian and sometime sadistic zeal. This was certainly the case in Germany. SS women were not marginal sociopaths but part of the social fabric of the time. They rarely demonstrated a nurturing instinct to those whom they considered enemies of the state or racial inferiors.⁴⁰ Women guards used prisoners for target practice. Some randomly tortured female prisoners, kicking and beating them to death.⁴¹

In popular culture, women in Soviet intelligence have the image of seductive, high-cheek-boned beauties who purloin secrets or entrap men. In some cases this

was accurate. But some served as guards in the vast Soviet concentration camp system performing clerical work at interrogation centers. Others were commissars and could have people executed smoothly and quickly. Full accounts of the cruelty perpetrated by NKVD or KGB women are not as available as those of their Nazi counterparts because there were no Soviet war crimes trials comparable to those that took place in Nuremberg in 1946.

Women, too, find opportunities in the Basij. Women Basij can be ruthless. They walk the streets, often in packs, and beat females whom they judge to be dressed or behaving immodestly.⁴² They break up mixed-gender parties and arrest those who secretly drink alcohol.⁴³ Girls are put in special punishment rooms where they are whipped.⁴⁴ Some of the brutality is captured on social media, such as the 2018 video footage of a woman Basiji slamming a young woman to the ground because her hijab was loose. In another incident, a woman Basiji slapped her victim in the face and wrestled with her, as the assailed woman pleas repeatedly, “Let me go, let me go.”⁴⁵

Despite their subordinate position, women Basij can be hard line, as evidenced by the leader of the Women’s Basij. Minu Aslani tenaciously fights against efforts to promote gender equality, which she sees as a Western concept that isolates women. In her words, “it is against human nature . . . the main identity of a Muslim woman is centered on her role as a mother.” For reasons that remain unclear, Aslani recommends that at least one day each month women and girls should “not grant their love and affection to their families.”⁴⁶

Mission and Structure

As mentioned above, personnel of the Basij are divided by status—Regular Members, Active Members, and Special Members. They are also placed into seven main organizations: the General Basij, the Pupil Basij, the Student Basij, the University Basij, the Public Service Basij, Tribal Basij, and the Construction Basij. There are other, smaller, units such as the Labor Basij and the Guild Basij, which specialize according to their occupation. Occasionally groups are created and then merged into other units. One was the Poor Basij Organization formed in 1979 to consolidate solidarity for revolution among the poor. The Basij

recruitment process takes place under the supervision of local clergy.⁴⁷ Towns that are particularly fertile recruiting grounds tend to be small, with a highly religious population.⁴⁸

General Basij

The General Basij is structured into brigades, battalions, and subordinate structures. In 1993 the Ashura Brigade was created as an antiriot force.⁴⁹ Ashura are paramilitary units.⁵⁰ All members of the battalions are trained to use light arms and rifles and participate in military and paramilitary exercises.⁵¹ The Imam Hussein Brigades are composed of Basij veterans who cooperate closely with other elements of the Guards, namely the Guards' ground forces. Imam Ali Brigades deal with security threats.

In addition to the paramilitary organizations, there are specialized branches of the Basij. Basij of the Guilds represents trade organizations. The Labor Basij is the Guards' arm to monitor labor organizations, unions, and syndicates. And the Student Basij stands in place of independent student organizations.

The Basij are organized regionally and are deployed to areas in cities that are designated as "resistance areas." Each resistance area is divided into resistance zones, each zone into resistance bases, and each base into several groups. The smaller towns and villages have Basij "resistance cells."⁵² Sometimes the Basij will team up with local police. For example, during the popular uprisings of July 1999 and June 2009, the Guards were deployed together with the National Police Force (NAJA), which has four local special unit brigades, and MOIS operatives.⁵³

Pupil and Student Basij: The "Liar Generation"

The Pupil Basij are twelve-to-eighteen-year-old students who participate in

religiously directed afterschool activities and specialized summer camps. The Pupil Basij organization has a role similar to that of the Young Pioneers in the Soviet Union or the Hitler Youth in Nazi Germany; it straightjackets impressionable minds and discourages free thinking. Just as they do in mosques and localities, Basij representatives in primary schools inculcate revolutionary ideas.⁵⁴ Throughout Iran, there are ten thousand Koranic schools to pave the “motorway of martyrdom.”⁵⁵

This indoctrination that followed the revolution has created generations of young Iranians who scrutinize the behavior of their friends, schoolmates, and parents for dubious conduct. The children share their suspicions with their teachers who, in turn, report to the Basij. A woman recounted that her father drank whiskey but fibbed that it was a soft drink, lest the truth be revealed to her teacher. Confessed the young woman, “We have been instructed to lie to everyone. We are a liar generation.”⁵⁶

The Student Basij, founded in 1989, is a university student organization.⁵⁷ The Islamization of Iranian universities that occurred during the early 1980s was intended to build and maintain ideological fervor. Tehran University’s Basij was established in January 1990. War veterans were given a distinct advantage in university admissions, and 40 percent of university slots were reserved for Basij and Guards. The Student Basij is headquartered in Tehran and has a regional headquarters in each province. There is a Basij organization at every university.⁵⁸

Universities in Nazi Germany, too, were under the control of state authorities. As with Soviet student groups, Nazi student organizations surveilled faculty and fellow students until the fall of the Third Reich. They ensured lectures and publications hewed to the ideological guidelines provided by Nazi leadership.⁵⁹

Many university students join their Basij chapters for reasons similar to those held by students in the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany. The Soviet Communist Youth Movement, or Komsomol, was founded in 1918 as the Russian Young Communist League.⁶⁰ University student groups existed in Nazi Germany, too. They became pathways to political leadership and career advancement and served as centers of social activity.⁶¹

In Iran today, there are immediate and sometimes substantial rewards for joining the Basij. Membership is easy.⁶² Applicants for admission are given preference if they have ties to the Basij.⁶³ Some students join the Basij because of their

Islamic beliefs and their commitment to the regime's philosophy. There are also social advantages. Students from poor or rural families find a warm home among the Basij. Student Basij also hold short-term recreational, cultural, and religious camps. Top Basij students are selected for additional intensive ideological and political courses.

The more-ambitious university Basij participate in extracurricular social campaigns. One example of many is the Justice Student Movement, which encouraged attacks on the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem in May 2018, offering a \$100,000 bounty for its destruction. Iranians scrutinize the lectures of their professors, making it easier for the Guards to purge reformist intellectuals and lecturers from universities during periods of social upheavals.⁶⁴ Students are also expected to offer their full devotion, including their lives, to the causes espoused by the Guards. Some students prepare for martyrdom operations, and Zara is one of them.

A third-year university Basiji, Zara is entirely covered with garments and only her eyes are revealed on the street. She attends Basij guidance sessions where she and others are indoctrinated in martyrdom culture and tactics. Ayatollah Khomeini is liberally quoted during the pep talks. Leaders stress the necessity of a network of martyrs to supply the Guards for suicide attacks around the world. Each volunteer is required to submit their last testament so that they can be deployed at any moment.

Zahra has prepared her last testament, in which she affirmed that her life's goal is to become a martyr; "My father fought on the front . . . and I too am eager to become a martyr and to fight on the front." She envisions her death in these terms: "It's just like in Palestine. They strap explosives . . . and then you attack in some location where the enemies gather."⁶⁵

This fanaticism alienates many Iranians who do not support the Basij. Often, the Basij feel like pariahs in their own country. Many Iranians only speak to Basij when necessary because they see them as an occupying hostile force. Basij tend to mingle among themselves. One venue is within walking distance of Tehran University and is run by the Student Basij. Café Kerase—an old Persian word for "a book"—is open to all "if they observe Islamic dignities," explained its owner. The cafe attracts conservative customers who find other coffee shops in the capital city too Western. Student Basij feel comfortable there and are not likely to receive hostile glances from liberally minded students.⁶⁶

Professors' Basij Organization

In the 1980s Iranian professors faced challenges similar to those confronting their Russian and German counterparts in the early Soviet and Nazi years. Then, intellectuals could not escape new political conditions. Some had decisions made for them. In August 1922 Lenin corralled liberal-oriented professors, placed them on two ocean liners, and deported them to Germany. The vessels became known as the "Philosophers' Ships."⁶⁷

In Germany, some intellectuals left early on, anticipating hounding by the Gestapo. Some were hardened communists of the Frankfurt School, such as Herbert Marcuse and Theodore Adorno, while others were liberals such as Thomas Mann and Hannah Arendt. Some prospered in the West, while others never adjusted fully.

But many German and Russian professors never left for the West. They saw their careers soar and felt very comfortable with the new regime. Now entrenched in positions of power and prestige, they molded the intellects of future leaders and scholars.⁶⁸ The careers of German racial theorists prospered in Nazi Germany. Martin Heidegger, the most prominent philosopher of his day, signed the Loyalty Oath of German Professors to Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist State in 1933. In the Soviet Union, Professor Trofim Lysenko, a dedicated communist, rejected scientific theories of natural selection and promoted a pseudoscience that devastated agriculture in the Soviet Union for generations.⁶⁹

Like their German and Soviet counterparts, Iranian professors were faced with the choice of whether to leave or stay. Some left; some stayed and kept quiet; others became boosters of Khomeinism. The Professors Basij Organization was officially established in 2001 to ensure that the ideas of the revolution ring on campus.⁷⁰ There are 350 professor-associated clubs in Iranian universities. Many professors have taken courses at the IHU, and some teach there. Basij connections at the university further employment and promotion prospects.⁷¹

As happened in the early Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, Iranian professors rewrite curricula to conform to ideological standards. The Professors' Basij

transformed the humanities curriculum. Genres of “resistance literature” and “holy defense” became obligatory parts of university programs.⁷² As in Nazi and Soviet eras, professors serve on cultural councils where they monitor fellow professors and students.⁷³ Periodically, particularly after periods of social unrest, universities are purged of supposed dissident elements to ensure ideological conformity.⁷⁴ The more dedicated fill the vacancies of cashiered faculty. But there may be long-term liabilities for Basij-affiliated professors if the mullahs’ rule falters. Because many Iranians despise the Basij, many students distrust and dislike professors strongly connected to that organization.⁷⁵

Clerical and Tribal Basij

Basij are assigned to scrutinize clerics in Iran. When the last shah lost the confidence of the mullahs, his power base sank, and radical clerics filled a spiritual and political vacuum. To ensure religious leaders do not move astray from the line of the supreme leader, Clerical Basij monitor both seminary students and the clergy. Some clerics are increasingly alienated from the rule of the supreme leader and the Guards who support him. They hold Ayatollah Montazeri, profiled in chapter 3, as a role model and try to liberalize many elements of Iranian society.⁷⁶ Reform-minded clergy see Islam as a way to counter drug addiction. They want to reform religious practices to boost mosque attendance, which has been falling for years.⁷⁷ In an effort to stem this liberal tendency, the Basij infiltrate reform groups.

Iran’s Swing Kids and Lipstick Jihad

Iran is a culturally divided country. Some Iranians dislike or detest its leaders, while others worship them. Former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad commands a large and active following. Speaking before teenage boys and young men in Iran’s impoverished provinces, he is often greeted like a celebrity. Said one admirer, “Ahmadinejad is the best president that we have ever had. . . .

He is an angel, the envoy of the . . . Mahdi.”⁷⁸

But many Iranians, particularly youth, detest Ahmadinejad, the Guards, and, notably, the Basij. They see them as an enemy, occupying force. In highly controlled societies, hormonal impulses find outlets in forbidden dance, music, and fashion. This was the case in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and it is the case in Iran today. In Hamburg of the late 1930s, a handful of adolescents danced the forbidden jitterbug and other swing styles. A few of the highly spirited shouted “Swing Heil” in response to the “Swing Tanzen Verboten” placards in cafes and universities.⁷⁹

In the Soviet Union there were Stilyagi, or style hunters, an often-derogatory term for Russian youth wearing stylish clothing, whose bright colors contrasted the drab, dull dress of Soviet times. Rock and roll was banned in the 1950s and 1960s, which is why it secretly thrived among Russian hipsters.⁸⁰ As in the authoritarian German and Soviet states, Iranian intelligence and security personnel discourage and apprehend social reprobates. In Iran, too, the youth are drawn to Western fashions and tastes, which concerns the hardline leaders.⁸¹ Young men and adolescent boys sometimes make rebellious fashion statements. Much like the United States of the 1960s, long hair in Iran is associated with rebellion and short hair with conservatism. Girls and young women meet with boys and young men after dark in cafes, in cars, and at parties.⁸² Undercover morality police monitor public gatherings from the streets of Tehran to the beaches of the Caspian Sea.

Basij sometimes ignore small infractions, but they respond ruthlessly to others. Sometimes they tear into demonstrations on fleets of motorcycles, wielding clubs and sometimes firearms. Sometimes they are in plain clothes, mingling among the crowd until it is time to attack. One notorious Basij tactic is plowing small knives or razor blades into the backs of protestors.

Basij Justice

Targeting Gay Men and Women

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared in a 2007 speech, at Columbia University, that there are no gays or lesbians in Iran.⁸³ Nonetheless, Basij use the internet to entrap gays and infiltrate their haunts. Undercover Basij bait homosexuals by using photographs of attractive young men and asking for responses and contact information. They will develop relationships and suggest a rendezvous. They then enter those names into a database, and surveil some suspects. At prearranged meetings, Basij will court them and lure them into bonds of affection and sexuality. Upon showing sexual interest, the target is arrested, jailed, and interrogated to obtain the names of other gay people.

In many cases, suspects are held and beaten until they admit to crimes they may or may not have committed. These confessions are then used to justify imprisonment or executions. One young gay man found himself at the mercy of the morality police, who caught him kissing a man. They released him after a flogging with a warning that he would be executed should he be caught kissing a man again. But other gay men do not fare as well. In 2004 a former Basij who was gay committed suicide by self-immolation upon hearing that he had been denied asylum in the United Kingdom.⁸⁴

Despite the increase in the number of female college graduates, the status of women in Iran collapsed after 1979, as was discussed in chapter 3. Many Iranian girls and women were then closeted and denied the opportunities that their mothers and grandmothers had previously enjoyed. The ruling mullahs, underscoring Koranic mandates, encouraged females to marry young and reproduce often. Today, many Iranian women are doing neither because they see no future for themselves or their family.⁸⁵ The optimism of earlier generations has dissipated, and some women and girls see only poverty and menial or household work ahead.

Because of widespread poverty, some women serve as sex workers in universities to meet basic needs. There may be three hundred thousand prostitutes in Tehran alone. While Shia Islam permits temporary marriages, Basij consider any woman who exchanges sexual services for money a prostitute.⁸⁶ As such, they can be beaten, interrogated, or incarcerated at the discretion of the Basij.

Today's Restive and Resistant Generation

The Basij regularly develop and refine tactics to keep Iran under the cultural sway of the mullahs. After massive popular uprisings, such as those in 2009 and 2017, the Basij will tighten control in some locations and loosen its rule in others. Other times, the Guards make people disappear. A woman recalled her dissident friends: "In June 2009, they were alive. Then they were killed one by one. . . . One day they went to the streets and never came back."⁸⁷

Passive Resistance

There are different types and levels of resistance against the Basij and the regime's leaders. Iranians fight in ways similar to those employed by disgruntled and dispirited citizens in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Iranian television and radio broadcast the voice of the state. For this reason, many Iranians listen to foreign broadcasts. Under Hitler, some Germans listened to foreign broadcasts, despite the threat of being sent to a concentration camp. The British Broadcasting Corporation developed a reputation for telling the truth. The United States promoted the Voice of America, on which Soviets citizens listened to jazz and political broadcasts. Today, Iranians listen to the BBC, which is strongly condemned by Guards-affiliated press outlets.

Though many Iranians mouth the expected pieties in front of officials, they deride them behind their backs.⁸⁸ Jokes about mullahs, bureaucrats, Basij, and the Guards crackle with sarcasm. Jokes serving as weaponized humor have been disseminated through social media and personal contact. One joke portrays Basij in a negative light, highlighting contemporary allegations of rape by Basij and security forces: "For the attention of unemployed youth: if you are suffering from loneliness, if you have sexual problems, if you have psychological problems, if you long to be a bully but are too weak, if you hate hygiene, if you have tried for university a few years and have failed; these and many other problems can be solved by using a Basij card."

Active Resistance

While sotto voce sarcasm rests at the innocuous end of the spectrum of resistance, premeditated homicide lies at the other, lethal end. Claiming to be members of the Islamic State, gunmen and suicide bombers dressed as women attacked Iranian parliament in June 2017, killing twelve and injuring forty-two others.⁸⁹ Five years earlier, antiregime suicide bombers detonated themselves among Basij in the southeastern city of Chabahar, killing two Basij. Some web users applauded the deaths of the Basij, with one writing, “God, I thank you for this . . . let them go to hell.”⁹⁰ In September 2018 Khamenei accused U.S.-backed Gulf Arab states of carrying out a shooting attack on a military parade that killed twenty-five people, almost half of them Guards personnel.⁹¹ Attacks against the Guards continue. In February 2019, a suicide bombing in southeastern Iran that killed twenty-seven IRGC members.

Somewhere between passive aggression and guerrilla attacks is a space for public protest against the regime and the Guards. Protesters span social and educational strata. Some young men burn identification cards, evoking images of American men torching draft cards during the Vietnam War.⁹² Some antiregime artists and writers publicly boycott invitations from government officials to attend events. For example, some in the creative set declined the president’s call to attend the annual Iftar celebration in 2018.⁹³

Some resistance is well organized, while other acts are spontaneous. After the results of the 2009 presidential elections were announced, many Iranians took to the street, with some carrying signs that read “Where is my vote?” and some shouting “Death to the dictator.” Other activists take risks to identify those whom they suspect of being undercover Basij operatives. In 2014 an Iranian woman living abroad created the page “My Stealthy Freedom” and urged Iranian women to post pictures and videos of themselves wearing white headscarves on Wednesdays as a protest. The hashtags #GirlsOfRevolutionStreet and #WhiteWednesdays have since gone viral.⁹⁴

Prank playing is common. As one parliamentarian was giving a speech on state radio, he was interrupted when someone played a much-loved song by

Googoosh in 2018.⁹⁵ Another example occurred at Mashad's airport. Those searching monitors for flight information read electronic messages that the government was "wasting Iranians lives and money" in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria. Other messages criticized the Guards.⁹⁶

Some protest through song and dance. In the mountains near Tehran, authorities placed a sign saying, "Do not pollute the purity of these mountains with corrupt music." Defying the Basij, Iranian youth held hands and sang and danced along the mountain's trail.⁹⁷ Others mock Shia ceremonies that are taken very seriously by devout Iranians. During the annual festival of Ashura, which mourns the death of Imam Hussein, pious men sometimes beat themselves with whips as they parade in the street. But activists put a sarcastic spin on Ashura with a carnival-like Hussein Party, at which men and women laugh and dance and beat their chests in choreographed mockery.⁹⁸

Some, less theatrical, Iranians take moral stands. This was the case with a Sufi Dervish university student who was required to pledge not to engage in activities deemed unacceptable by university officials: "They are not asking all students to make this pledge, only the Dervishes." There was no evidence she was an activist. But she refused to sign the document, which cost her place in the university.⁹⁹ But other liberal-minded Iranians can be caught and killed in the crossfire.

Neda is a woman's name and Persian word meaning "voice," "calling," or "divine message." It belonged to a twenty-seven-year-old Iranian woman who was shot through the heart and became the symbol of a generational resistance to the mullahs and the Basij. Neda Agha Soltan's assassin was almost certainly a Basiji, and her last, dying moments were captured on video. By all accounts, Neda was not a political activist. But in 2009 she stopped to stretch her legs in a traffic jam near a demonstration in Tehran. As she stood, a Basiji shot her. A physician on the scene wrote, "He aimed straight at her heart. I am a doctor, so I rushed to try to save her. She died in less than two minutes."¹⁰⁰

For many Iranians, the image of a lifeless Neda, sprawled on a Tehran street with blood streaming from her head and murdered by a Basiji, has become iconic. In 2010 then-president Ahmadinejad said Neda was killed by British operatives. Another Iranian diplomat speculated that the CIA may have killed her.¹⁰¹

After her burial, authorities warned the family not to discuss her death or to

protest. But it could not stop a tweetstorm. A Facebook group gave her the moniker “The Angel of Iran.” Others called her “Iran’s Joan of Arc.” People in Los Angeles wear shirts that say “NEDA—Nothing Except Democracy Acceptable.” Some Angelenos petitioned to name an intersection in the city to be called “Neda Square.”¹⁰²

Summary

The once-valorized Basij became loathed as club-wielding thugs by the 1990s, even as the organization extended its influence to every sector of the economy, from construction and real estate to the stock market. Today, schools, universities, and social organizations are honeycombed with Basij cells; throughout Iran, Basij threaten free spirits and their families.

The Basij have played some positive roles in society. They clean up after earthquakes and floods. But the fear of the Basij is everywhere in the country. Some Basij remain loyal to the revolution and its legacy. Others regret their service. Apologized one: “I have this terrible feeling of pain, that I spent the best years of my life unaware. . . . I was a tool. . . . I unwittingly got involved in their plans. I was unknowingly led by them.”¹⁰³

The Guards' Foreign Policy

There is no greater source of pride in this world than martyrdom.

—The late Haj Qassam Soleimani, 2014

Political and religious rulers in Tehran insist that Iran is the real Mecca, or center of the Muslim world. Iran's leaders feel morally compelled to spread Iran's revolution around the globe, as Khamenei promised. Some observers draw the Qods Force's origins to Operation Ajax in 1953, when revolutionaries determined that they could not use politics as an agent for change. Today, with his ever-growing prestige and power in the Shia world, Iran's supreme leader uses foreign policy to boost the country's status, expand its power base in the Middle East, export the Iranian revolution, and battle its enemies. Iran uses the Guards to promote influence well beyond the Middle East. Guards personnel are involved in foreign embassies, charities, and religious organizations.¹ After its revolution, Iran developed close relations with several anti-American regimes, such as the left-wing governments in Cuba, Nicaragua, and, later, Venezuela.²

Since 1979 Iran has openly vowed to export the regime's revolution. The mullahs and the Guards have held to this pledge, which is rooted in Khomeini's philosophy. They hail the Guards as custodians of many causes, from liberating Jerusalem and safeguarding Islam to serving as the international headquarters for what they call the global resistance movement.³ The Guards project Iran's influence on the Arabic-speaking side of the Persian Gulf.

The Guards brought non-Iranian recruits into their ranks soon after the 1979 revolution. The organization also extended its influence into the Arab Middle East during its war with Iraq. By 2018 Iran controlled or heavily influenced four capitals of Middle Eastern states—Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sanaa. Beyond their military actions, the Guards use psychological operations to stir unrest in Shia-populated parts of the Middle East.



[Map 2. The Middle East. Courtesy of iStock/Getty Images.](#)

Iran's regional power is entrenched, bold, and dynamic. The Guards have built a land-bridge through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, fulfilling an ancient Persian and modern Iranian strategic goal of creating a contiguous route to the Mediterranean Sea. According to Major General Jafari, the Guards' foreign mission is to aid the revolutionary movements, the resistance movements, and the oppressed worldwide.

Iranian leaders say they are confident that the American image is sullied, particularly in the greater Middle East, which provides opportunities for Iran. As quoted on the state-run Tasnim News Agency, Khamenei promised in spring 2020, "The Americans won't stay in Iraq and Syria; they'll be expelled." According to Khamenei, American leaders, namely President Trump and Secretary Pompeo, have crafted a foreign policy that is loathed for "its warmongering, helping notorious governments, training terrorists, [and] unconditional support for oppression," which makes the United States "abhorred by a major part of the world."⁴

Iranian intelligence operatives and diplomats partner closely together abroad.⁵ Qods Force personnel are well represented in embassies. As mentioned earlier, the Qods Force is an elite, externally deployed unit of the Guards. Its personnel, particularly its leadership, tend to be among the more ideologically committed and highly trained Guards members.⁶ Like other branches of the Guards, it is charged with ensuring the regime's survival. Unlike other branches, its central role is propelling Iran to become the most significant power in the region.⁷ For a number of years, the leader of the Qods Force was Haj Qassam Soleimani, who commanded multinational armies.⁸ He was killed on orders of President Trump in January 2020 and replaced by Brig. Gen. Esmail Ghani. In earlier assignments, Ghani served as Soleimani's second-in-command and worked on the IRGC staff.⁹

The U.S. government has stated that the Qods Force is a "branch of the IRGC that conducts sensitive covert operations abroad, including terrorist attacks, assassinations, and kidnappings, and is believed to have sponsored attacks

against coalition forces in Iraq.” Major General Jafari affirmed in 2016 that nearly two hundred thousand Shia youths from across the Middle East were organized and armed under the command of the Qods Force, which supports non-Iranian Shia by providing arms, funding, and paramilitary training.¹⁰

While estimates of the personnel strength of Qods Force vary, its employees are posted in Iranian embassies, charities, and religious and cultural institutions that support Shia Muslims. While providing some humanitarian support, Qods forces also engage in paramilitary and destabilizing operations. Sometimes personnel hatch assassination plots from within embassies.

Iran’s proxies, such as Hezbollah, have also previously targeted Israelis abroad, in Europe, India, and Thailand.¹¹ Qods Force operatives likely participated in the lethal attack on a Jewish center in Argentina in 1994, an event some journalists call Latin America’s 9/11. Guards probably directed the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia and many insurgent attacks in Iraq since 2003.¹²

In Syria and Iraq, children supporting the Islamic State and children supporting Iran sometimes fight each other. U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley noted that Tehran has produced many films and television shows to recruit children. The Guards-produced films encourage boys to become “the protectors of the holy places” in Syria. Similarly, the Islamic State recruits boys to become “Cubs of the Caliphate.”¹³

World Conquest or Defeat

Khomeini saw the Third World as an arena to defeat Western influence. Before the revolution, Iranian activists, namely Ali Shariati and Mustapha Chamran, rallied to promote their theories of universal social justice. Today, the Guards try to outflank American, European, and Israeli diplomatic and economic efforts in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Latin America, and elsewhere.¹⁴ Iran declares itself at war with Western states, and the Third World provides many venues and opportunities for unconventional and nonkinetic warfare.¹⁵

The Guards pursue three primary foreign policy goals. The first is to use

international initiatives to build Iranian regional dominance in the greater Middle East and western Afghanistan. The second is to export the revolution. Since the early days of the Republic, the Guards have tried to disseminate Khomeini's ideas, particularly to states with significant Shia populations.¹⁶ The third is to support states that attack enemies of Iran.

As in Hitler's Germany and Lenin and Stalin's Soviet Union, Iran's rulers are ideologically driven to pursue vast conquest. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler proposed steps by which he would forge a racial German empire to the Ural Mountains. Lenin's Red Army drove west in 1920 to master Europe, but it was halted at the battle of Warsaw. After the Soviets captured Berlin, Stalin built satellite states. Iran, too, has global goals and uses the Guards to achieve them.

Mullahs show a lachrymose nostalgia when they speak about a Greater Iran.¹⁷ The ancient Persian Empire extended throughout the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan. Since 1979 Iranian leaders have wanted to reestablish "Greater Iran," stretching from Israel to Afghanistan and based loosely on the pre-Islamic Persian Empire.¹⁸ Such an effort is expected to advance Iran's strategic position and prepare the coming of the Mahdi, discussed in chapter 2.

Jordan's King Abdullah is credited with coining the phrase Shia Crescent to describe Iran's mounting threat to the region after the fall of Saddam Hussain.¹⁹ The Qods Force can move personnel and material, including weapons and military equipment, through this corridor. It also has an air bridge to Damascus International Airport and other Syrian airfields.

Global Peace and Enemies

As mentioned, the second goal of the Guards is exporting the revolution around the world. Like the first goal of generating regional mastery, this objective promotes Iran's prestige and political power; however, it emphasizes the global mandate of spreading the Twelver Shia Islam and Khomeini's religious, spiritual, and political views. Large Shia minorities also exist in Afghanistan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Yemen.²⁰ Iranian leaders see them

as pools for recruits to their revolutionary causes. In Latin America, Iran has created a base to export revolutionary ideas, and it hopes to project its influence throughout the Western Hemisphere. Iran has vast energy, money, and materiel to develop links to Shia communities around the world.

In terms of the third goal, combatting Iran's declared enemies, the most reviled opponents are the toxic "triangle" of the United States, Israel, and world Jewry; they also include the Saudi royal family. A leading Guards-controlled media outlet claims that "these three countries (including the Saudi royal family) finance terrorists and provide them with weapons."²¹ Iranian hatred of the United States is deep and enduring. Early in his adulthood, Ayatollah Khomeini named the United States the Great Satan, and his moniker stands.²² Historical disputes still grate. Often and loudly, Iranian leaders and Iranian media clamor that the United States has dominated weaker countries for centuries.²³ They proclaim that the United States intends to destroy Islam and the Islamic Republic. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has said Americans use soft warfare and hard power to project its unwanted influence in the Middle East.²⁴ An unforgiving Ayatollah Khamenei demands that Iran must defeat the United States.²⁵ Broadcasts, television shows, movies, songs, and video games with the theme of destroying America proliferate within Iran.²⁶

Similarly, Iranian leaders have repeatedly pledged to annihilate the "Little Satan," which is Israel. Iran's Guards' army commander has declared destroying Israel to be a central national goal.²⁷ Ayatollah Khomeini coined the saying, "The path to Jerusalem goes through Karbala," which means that the struggle for the ultimate Islamic goal (Jerusalem) goes through Iranian control of areas that have historically been part of Sunni hegemony.²⁸ The annihilation of Israel is a recurring meme among the mullahs and their devotees.²⁹ Parliament speaker Ali Larijani called Israel the "mother of terrorism" and its creation the greatest disaster of the twentieth century. In 2015 Khamenei predicted that in twenty-five years, Israel would no longer exist.³⁰ Interactive video games allow players to obliterate Tel Aviv with rocket fire.

Iranian intelligence operatives—MOIS and Guards—tried to kill senior Saudi statesman Adel al-Jubeir, a career Saudi diplomat, in 2011. With impeccable English and well-tailored suits, al-Jubeir was long a fixture on the diplomatic circuit. But for Iran, he represented both the Saudi royal family and Muslim collaboration with the United States. An Iranian-born Texas man was charged in the plot to kill al-Jubeir. In October 2018 Belgium charged an Iranian diplomat

and three other individuals with planning to bomb a meeting of an exiled Iranian opposition group in France, earlier in the year.³¹

All three of Iran's main enemies—the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia—take Tehran's threats seriously. Leaders of Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Israel disagree on many issues. However, they dread the prospect of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons and fear its burgeoning conventional capability. Saudi Arabia's King Khalid bin Salman has called on the international community to meet the Iranian threat and to take the rhetoric of its leaders seriously. He urged the world “not to approach Iran with the sort of appeasement policies that failed so miserably to halt Nazi Germany's rise to power,” such as the Munich agreement of 1938.³²

Echoing these sentiments, then—U.S. national security advisor John Bolton opined that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the international agreement that freed Western-controlled Iranian funds in exchange for promises to delay nuclear weapons development, was an act of appeasement.³³ Israeli statesman and historian Michael Oren, too, has drawn parallels to Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Western forces appeased Germany, as Nazis built a vast arsenal of advanced weaponry to conquer neighboring countries. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu stressed in 2018 that Iran is persistently and aggressively developing a nuclear weapons program.³⁴

Iran's Three-Phased Plan

Iran has a flexible, grand strategic plan to spread its influence globally. Some of these tactics are cultural and economic, some are military, and some are diplomatic. In some parts of the world, the Qods Force uses nonmilitary tactics, techniques, and procedures to build influence.

National security analyst Joseph M. Humire, testifying to the U.S. Congress about the Guards' penetration in Latin America, presented Iran's three-phased strategy to gain influence there. Humire's model has broad application for Iran's efforts to gain sway in many Third World, non-Muslim-majority states.³⁵ The phases—cultural and economic, diplomatic, and military—usually progress

sequentially. However, often these activities occur contemporaneously.

The first phase is developing cultural and economic influence. Iran uses cultural activities to infiltrate and proselytize. In this phase, Iran first cultivates prominent Shia in foreign states. From there, operatives introduce themselves to the broader Shia community. This may involve outflanking Sunni sheiks and mosques in those communities. Iran subsidizes building new mosques to be run under the direct or indirect control of Tehran. In 2015 Gen. John Kelly, then commander of Southern Command, testified that Iran has built eighty cultural centers in Latin America alone.

As the Qods Force establishes a cultural beachhead in targeted countries, it expands its economic influence through illicit as well as legal activity. In Latin America, this involves using corrupt systems to influence political outcomes. According to the nongovernmental organization Transparency International, Latin America is among the world's most corrupt regions. In Venezuela and Argentina, Iran has passed funds to politicians in hopes of receiving favors. In the Middle East, Iran's intelligence services, the Guards and the MOIS, also target host nations' intelligence and security services.

The second phase is diplomatic. Some diplomatic activity in Iranian embassies, consulates, and associated offices is authentic. But under the guise of diplomatic activity, Iran also conducts intelligence operations and influence operations. Sometimes the Guards and the MOIS partner with host-nation intelligence services. Other times they act autonomously and in violation of the host nation's laws and agreements. Iran uses diplomatic personnel to promote film festivals, book fairs, and youth festivals to spread influence. Iranian staff working in embassies target three particular communities—youth, women, and, in the case of Latin America, indigenous groups.³⁶ Iran's embassies also serve as a hub for military sales and purchases of strategic minerals.

The third phase is military penetration. In many Middle Eastern states, particularly Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, Iran's military assistance and guidance to Hezbollah is well known and often undisguised. In other countries, Iran's military and intelligence footprints are masked. Humire points to cooperation between the Basij and Venezuelan political, military, and intelligence leaders. For example, Basij and Venezuelan paramilitary personnel have exchanged lessons learned from counterprotest tactics.³⁷

Shia Liberation Army

Since its creation, the Islamic Republic has championed Shia militias abroad.³⁸ Major General Jafari explained the Qods Force's mission as aiding "revolutionary movements, the resistance movements, and the oppressed worldwide."³⁹ In January 2019 Major General Salami threatened to "eliminate" Israel if Israel goes to war with Iran.⁴⁰ Guards are positioned in Latin America, North Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia.⁴¹

Other Shia from Bahrain, India, Kuwait, and Pakistan have served under Iranian command under the Shia Liberation Army (SLA).⁴² The SLA is an organization in which non-Iranian military personnel take orders from high-level IRGC officers.⁴³ During the war with Iraq, Iran trained, funded, and equipped Shia recruits from international sources.⁴⁴ It still does, and many serve with the SLA, answering the call of Iran's mullahs to fight alongside Iranian soldiers. Nearly 4,600 foreign nationals have been killed serving in Iranian-commanded units, generally while serving in the SLA. Most were Shia Afghans and Iraqis who had taken refuge in Iran and served in the SLA. By 2018, in Syria alone, there were about seven to ten thousand foreigners and Syrians in various groups working with the Iranians, often with the SLA but also with indigenous groups.⁴⁵

The SLA is headquartered in Iran and its forces deploy across the region, particularly in Syria.⁴⁶ The SLA's three divisions are supplied with armored personnel carriers, artillery, antitank guided missiles, man-portable air-defense systems, and small arms. Some SLA recruits are sent to one of the Qods Force's military training camps inside Iran. Basic training courses last from twenty to forty-five days. Those who pass proceed to advanced training courses on logistics and support, explosives, and advanced-weapons skills. The more advanced courses cover explosives, mortars, tactics and warfare, and sniper skills. Iran also engages in charity in the region to gain the locals' support; to that end, the SLA operates soup kitchens and medical dispensaries.⁴⁷

The International Divisions of the SLA

In several significant wars of the twentieth century, armies used foreign nationals to augment their ranks. Units of foreign nationals sometimes fought as independent but affiliated units. Sometimes they were inducted directly into the host armed forces. At other times foreign nationals fought in international divisions. The subject of novels and folklore, the French Foreign Legion is the most famous and enduring model of this type. The Soviets and Nazis, too, used foreign nationals. Soviets recruited and commanded foreign battalions and brigades to fight against fascists in Spain, while Germany built foreign divisions to fight its enemies during World War II.

More specifically, the Soviet NKVD recruited communists and antifascists to fight in Spain from 1936 to 1939.⁴⁸ Each battalion's commander was a Stalin loyalist and confirmed communist. Most of the thirty-five thousand volunteers of the Soviet International Brigades had scarlet leanings, and many were dedicated communists. The defense of the Spanish Republic was romanticized among Western intellectuals, particularly Britain's Bloomsbury intellectuals and American celebrity journalists, such as Hemingway.⁴⁹ Progressive salons acclaimed the brigades in song, verse, and prose. But it was not only the hard-left ideology that drew the volunteers; many Western young men had dismal employment prospects at home during the Depression.

Germans also created international units. During World War II, SS leader Himmler built international divisions to fight for the Reich, particularly after the defeat at Stalingrad, in early 1943.⁵⁰ The Thirteenth Mountain Division of the Waffen-SS, the Handschar, recruited Balkan Muslims, and the Mufti of Jerusalem, then living in Berlin, called them to jihad. They fought for Hitler.⁵¹ Volunteers in the German SS, like those in the Spanish International Brigades, were often starry-eyed, unemployed men who hoped to craft a new world. They faced high unemployment in Europe and admired Germany's financial recovery under National Socialism.⁵²

Like the Soviets and the Germans before them, Iranian leaders have built a legion of foreign volunteers to fight for a common cause. It is composed of three divisions that are commanded by Iranians: the Afghan division, the Fatemiyoun; the Pakistani division, the Zaynabiyoun; and the Iraqi division, Hayderiyoun. These divisions wear a standard uniform and carry a single banner. These were the basic ethnic cohorts of the SLA's units (for a comparison of the Soviet,

German, and Iranian legions, see table 9).⁵³

There are three underlying reasons why Afghans, Iraqis, and Pakistanis join the SLA. They are poverty, religion, and resentment. There is teeming poverty in the Middle East. Many Middle Eastern and South Asian Shia men are unemployed, depressed, and destitute. They need to provide for themselves and their families, and they see service in the SLA as a means to do so.

At the same time, many recruits are religiously devout and find Khomeinism appealing. Just as some Westerns were drawn to the Soviet cause in the Spanish Civil War or the Nazi cause in World War II, many Shia see Iran as an advocate for their cause. In Iraq, they guard Najaf and Karbala, two places particularly revered by Shia.

Another reason is resentment of the secondary social, religious, and economic status the Shia hold in many Sunni-dominated countries. Historically, Shia needed to hide their religious status when they lived under the suzerainty of the Sunni. They continue to live at the sufferance of Sunni in many countries.

[Table 9. Selected foreign military units under the control of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Iran](#)

NKVD foreign forces in Spain	
Names of notable units	British Battalion; Lincoln Battalion; Sixth February Battalion
Nationalities	British, Irish, American, French, Germany, Italy, Poland, 1
Theater of operations	Spain.
Operational control	Commanded by NKVD operatives.
Military capabilities	Few professional soldiers; many were brave but untrained
Results	35,000 combatants; half became casualties.

a. Chris Bishop, SS: Hitler's Foreign Divisions: Foreign Volunteers in the Waffen-SS 1940–1945 (London: Amber Books, 2005).

The Afghan Division

In the 1980s Iran shipped money, supplies, and arms to Afghan groups fighting the Soviets.⁵⁴ Despite the fact that Iranian leaders never liked the Taliban, whom they saw as vulgar, they supported the Afghan group and its precursor organizations. Those Afghans who received Iranian aid were both Sunni and Shia. Today, there is a sizable Shia population in Afghanistan that serves as a pool of recruits for the SLA.

The Guards developed the Fatemiyoun in 2002.⁵⁵ Since then, more than two thousand Afghans have been killed fighting in Fatemiyoun uniforms.⁵⁶ Fatemiyoun has several brigades and anywhere between twelve to fourteen thousand fighters, of whom three to four thousand are active in Syria.⁵⁷ At the height of their involvement in the Syrian civil war, during the 2015–16 Battle of Aleppo, the Afghan division had nearly ten thousand Shia fighters deployed to Syria.⁵⁸

Recruits join for several reasons, but the dominant drive is economic. These Afghans are among the poorest of the world's poor, and they turn to Iran for help. Unemployment in Afghanistan is about 27 percent.⁵⁹ Some serving in the division will find a path to Iranian citizenship for themselves and their families.⁶⁰ These Afghans are paid from \$100 to \$500 per month to fight.⁶¹ By regulation, recruits must be age eighteen or older, but many are younger, some as young as fourteen years old.

In 2015 the Iranian Interior Ministry estimated that 2.5 million Afghans were living in Iran, many of whom were without residency documents. Many of those holding refugee status today were born in Iran, but they are not eligible for citizenship and are denied essential services.⁶² One Afghan recruit explained that the Guards' recruiter promised, "We will send you to Syria. When you come

back, we will give you an Iranian passport, a house, and money.” The recruiter added that he would be fighting a “religious war” in Syria.⁶³

Young Afghans fight for Shia Islam and for the praise they receive from revered leaders. They struggle to escape the Sunni-driven discrimination against Shia in Afghanistan. Many young, poor Shia revered Major General Soleimani as a father figure, whom they now perceive as a martyr.⁶⁴ Ali Khamenei, too, praises the living Shia and salutes the Shia dead. If Hazara Afghans are disparaged by their Afghan Sunni countrymen, they are praised by Khamenei, who said, “I have personally seen that their seminary students felt an affinity with us. I have known them since old times.”⁶⁵ The Fatemiyoun are acclaimed in the Guards-produced culture, such as in the documentary titled *The Conquerors of Tomorrow*.⁶⁶ Tombstones at their graves throughout Iran describe fallen Afghan child volunteers as “defenders of the shrines.”

The Pakistani Division

The Zeinabiyoun Division is the Pakistani Shia unit of the SLA. Its recruits are drawn mainly from the impoverished regions of Pakistan, mostly where there is a record of Sunni attacking Shia.⁶⁷ Many of those fighters come from Parachinar, the main town in the Kurram tribal region, which has a sizeable Shia population and where sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims is common. Suicide attacks and explosions of planted bombs have killed scores in the Kurram region.⁶⁸

Shia Liberation
Army



Fatemiyoun
Division
Afghan Division



Zeinabiyoun
Division
Pakistani Division



Heydarioun
Division
Iraqi Division

[Fig. 1. Chart of Shia Liberation Army.](#)

In Pakistan, it is sometimes dangerous for the Shia to participate in Ashura processions, an essential Shia ritual, without fear of harassment or attack. Major General Jafari called for efforts to provide welfare for Pakistani pilgrims entering Iran on their way to Iraq for Arbáeen pilgrimage.⁶⁹ Like Afghans and Shia Arabs, Pakistani Shia rally to Iran's causes based on religious conviction.⁷⁰

The Iraqi Division

The Iraqi Heydarioun Division was created to supplement Iranian-commanded or Iranian-sponsored units in Syria in 2015.⁷¹ Its soldiers engage in combat, but the division's central mission is logistical support. Inside Iran, it maintains logistics depots near major airports, moving personnel and cargo, including weapons and equipment, into Iraq and Syria via military and commercial aircraft. It also moves military cargo through border crossings on Iran's western border into Iraq. The Heydarioun maintain the Guards' land corridor between Iraq and Syria and Iran.

The Shia sect of Islam makes Iraq and Iran important neighbors. Millions of Iranian and Iraqi Shia cross each other's national boundaries to visit shrines of first-generation Muslim heroic figures. Crowds of Shia pilgrims converge on central Karbala each year to pray at the shrine of Mohammed's grandson.⁷² The Heydarioun, unlike the Pakistani and Afghan recruits, fight mainly on their home terrain. For many Heydarioun legionnaires, the war is personal. (See figure 1 for the chart of the Shia Liberation Army.)

A War Hero and Martyr: Qassem Soleimani

All wars have heroes. In World War II, the dashing German commando Otto Skorzeny was celebrated by Hitler and respected by Churchill, who called him “the most dangerous man in Europe.” Skorzeny directed the rescue of Mussolini from captivity. He also had a prominent role in unconventional warfare during the Ardennes Offensive.

As the ace sniper of the Soviet Union, Vasily Zaitsev boasted 225 kills during the Battle of Stalingrad, 11 of which were German snipers. He developed daring and effective tactics, which were taught in sniper schools behind the lines.⁷³ Well after the Allied victory, this Hero of the Soviet Union was saluted in books and films, such as the 2001 Hollywood movie *Enemy at the Gates*.

Iran, too, has a war hero who stood far taller than others. Like Skorzeny and Zaitsev before him, Qassem Soleimani posed with national leaders, spoke to packed audiences, and rallied youngsters to patriotism to roaring applause. He was the Guards’ most-photographed commander.⁷⁴ Like World War II heroes, Soleimani was dashing in combat and won wide praise from his peers.⁷⁵ He rose quickly in the ranks of the Guards. The gray-bearded leader was close to Khamenei and, like the supreme leader, opposed détente with the United States and the West.⁷⁶

Khamenei eulogized him as the “Liberator of Iraq”; others called him the “Silver Fox.”⁷⁷ Widely considered to be among the most important Iranian leader, he held the moniker supermani.⁷⁸ The American journalist Robin Wright compared him to General Patton, writing that he “was a flamboyant former construction worker and bodybuilder with snowy white hair, a dapper beard, and arching salt-and-pepper eyebrows, gained notice during the eight-year war with Iraq, in the nineteen eighties. . . . He was the most feared and most admired military leader in the region.”⁷⁹ In 2011, the U.S. Treasury imposed sanctions on Soleimani under Executive Order 13224, which targets terrorists.⁸⁰

Bodyguard is an Iranian-made biographical movie, if embellished, about his service.⁸¹ Crowed his brother, “Haj Soleimani has been born in our family, but he doesn’t belong to us, he belongs to the country and to the Shiites.”⁸² Soleimani yearned for martyrdom. “In light of the prestige earned by the martyrs, I pray to God for my own end to be martyrdom as well, and that He will not deny me this mighty blessing granted to outstanding individuals.”⁸³ He was

granted this blessing on January 2, 2020, when an American drone-launched missile obliterated him.

Many American leaders celebrated the assassination, comparing it to 1943 precision attack against Japanese Admiral Yamamoto, the architect of the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁸⁴ Others drew the historical analogy of the killing of Nazi SS general Reinhard Heydrich in 1942. Other Americans were more cynical of the methods and timing of the attack.

Guards Proxies in the Middle East: Popular Mobilization Units

Iran uses proxies to forge a new political and military order in the Middle East. Tehran subsidizes, equips, provisions, and directs Shia groups to weaken or defeat a common enemy. State Department envoy Brian Hook refers to Iran's "deadly trifecta"—support for proxies, illegal weapons transfers, and terrorist planning—in the Middle East. For example, Iran has extended nearly \$5 billion in cash and credit to the Assad regime and has provided more than \$100 million to Palestinian groups including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.⁸⁵ Tehran has spent at least \$16 billion in recent years supporting its Middle Eastern allies, according to Ryan Crocker, the veteran U.S. diplomat.⁸⁶

The SLA also controls but does not command Iraqi militias, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Yemeni Houthi. The Iraqi militias are called the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). These groups pursue their agendas and partner with the Qods Force.⁸⁷ PMUs give Tehran plausible deniability to attack its adversaries. The PMU was formed in 2014 when Iraq's grand ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa calling on Shia to fight the Islamic State. PMUs have battled the Islamic State, and about eight thousand PMU fighters have been killed doing so.

Iran uses PMUs and other proxies to mask its efforts to undermine American, Israeli, and Sunni groups in the Middle East.⁸⁸ Tehran trains and equips foreign fighters in Iraq to kill American soldiers, just as it equipped Taliban to kill Americans in Afghanistan.⁸⁹ The PMU have enemies in common with Iran, namely Sunni Muslims and Western states, which they decry as invaders. PMU

fighters are deployed and garrisoned at different places and sometimes are collocated with Iranian personnel. In Syria, PMU and Iranian forces are concentrated around Damascus, and especially near the international airport and around shrines.⁹⁰ In addition to the Qods Force, the Basij are deployed to augment Syrian and Iraqi Shia.⁹¹

The dominant Iranian-controlled or Iranian-sponsored units are Lebanese Hezbollah, the Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH); the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH); and the Badr Corps Brigades, also called the Badr Corps, or Badr Corps Organization, which has between ten to twenty thousand fighters.⁹² The Badr Corps, KH, and AAH are the three core PMUs. Much of their senior leadership has been trained by Iranians or in Iran. Today, the PMUs are generally deployed in Syria and Iraq.⁹³ Since January 2013, more than one thousand members of the Qods Force units have been killed fighting in Syria.⁹⁴

Iranian-Supported Iraqi Militia

Iran created the Badr Corps from Iraqi refugees and prisoners of war in the early 1980s.⁹⁵ Analysts have compared the Badr Organization in Iraq to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Badr conducted covert paramilitary operations in Iraq during the 1980s and 1990s under orders from the Qods Force. Many Badr Corps fighters have either dual Iraqi-Iranian citizenship or were born in Iran and only received their Iraqi citizenship post-2003. Badr Corps leaders are very influential in Iraq's Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior. Badr recruits are often assigned to the Iraqi army intelligence and Ministry of Interior. The Ministry of Interior commands the Federal Police, a five-division motorized infantry force, and the Emergency Response Division.⁹⁶

The AAH was initially formed with the support of the Guards, in late 2006, as an elite force. The Guards extensively trained and funded the AAH. The group is openly loyal to Iranian leaders.⁹⁷ It was founded in 2006 as an offshoot of the Mahdi Army, which fought the United States in Iraq in 2003–7. It fought alongside Hezbollah against Israel in the Lebanon war. In 2011, AAH shifted its focus to politics and social services before resuming military activities against the Islamic State.⁹⁸

The KH was founded in 2003. The KH is an Iranian-funded, anti-American Shia militia that earned a reputation for targeting U.S. and coalition forces with roadside bombs and mortars. The U.S. State Department designated it as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2009.⁹⁹ KH has also sent fighters to defend the Assad regime in Syria. In addition to its military and paramilitary roles, the KH is involved in organized crime, including kidnapping and armed robbery. In April 2018 Qatar paid at least \$275 million to the KH and the Guards to win the release members of the Qatari royal family kidnapped during a hunting trip in southern Iraq.¹⁰⁰

Some observers of Iran downplay Iranian control of events in Syria and Iraq. For example, Harvard professor Stephen Walt explicated, “Tehran’s present allies will not blindly follow its orders if doing so would jeopardize their own positions. To see these collaborations as a new Persian empire, as Henry Kissinger and Max Boot do, is risible.”¹⁰¹ Other followers of events in the Greater Middle East hold a very different view. They see the Guards as a potent force for enduring political, demographic, and military change.

Lebanon, Yemen, and Bahrain

Mustafa Chamran, the first commander of the Guards, helped build AMAL, Hezbollah’s precursor, as mentioned in chapter 3. Established by the Guards in the early 1980s, Hezbollah flourished and supplanted Amal in the environs of Beirut. In 1982 Israel drove the PLO from southern Lebanon.¹⁰² Although Iran was engaged in the Iran-Iraq War at the time, the Guards took the lead in organizing, training, and equipping Hezbollah.¹⁰³ Hezbollah also recruits, trains, and leads other groups of fighters in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Nigeria.¹⁰⁴ The Party of God espouses the same ideology as the Iranian regime and pledged its allegiance to Ayatollah Khomeini. Hezbollah’s leader describes the groups’ struggle with Israel and the Jews as a “total life-or-death war.” Soleimani claimed that Lebanese Hezbollah has developed into a “Resistance State” from its earlier status of a “Resistance Party.”

In addition to using commercial cover to move funds to Hezbollah, Iran set up training camps among the Shia population in the Beqa’a Valley, an important

farming region in eastern Lebanon. Training at the Guards' camp became a prerequisite for membership in Hezbollah.¹⁰⁵ Hezbollah remains Iran's most skilled militia, but anecdotal accounts indicate that it may no longer enjoy its privileged status with Tehran, at least regarding how its forces are treated on the battlefield.¹⁰⁶ Hezbollah provides Iran with a measure of plausible deniability in regional meddling, even as the Guards use commercial cover to move funds to the Lebanese organization.¹⁰⁷

Hezbollah committed the 1983 truck suicide bombings of the U.S. Marine and French barracks at Beirut International Airport, killing 241 U.S. and 58 French servicemen. Deputy commander of the Guards celebrated this attack. He proclaimed, "In 1983, the flames of Islamic revolution flared among Lebanese youth for the first time, and in a courageous act, a young Muslim buried 260 United States Marines under the rebels east of Mediterranean Sea."¹⁰⁸

Among other nefarious activities, Hezbollah kidnapped U.S. citizens Terry Anderson and CIA station chief William Buckley. The organization has built an extremely impressive social base in Lebanon, and its medical facilities are superior to those available in government hospitals.¹⁰⁹ After Israel's 2000 withdrawal from the country, Hezbollah became a major political party and its members were hailed as victors by Shia around the world. Hezbollah has been adept at using cyber-operations against a wide range of Middle East targets. Hezbollah operatives are deployed around the world, including Latin America.¹¹⁰

Hezbollah personnel partner with Qods Force in Arabic-speaking countries. A typical Hezbollah member wears insignia resembling Guards and believes in the supremacy of the velayat-e faghih religious doctrine. The Qods Force maintains a joint command-and-control structure with Hezbollah. Hezbollah also assists the Qods Force in its program to advise, support, and train other Shia militia groups, including the Yemeni Houthis.¹¹¹

Iran controls a proxy network in Yemen to support the Shia Ansar Allah, or Houthi Movement.¹¹² Iran also supports groups in Bahrain, whose population is 70 percent Shia. Iran has provided missiles, and small arms of Iranian origin included here, such as sniper rifles, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), AK variants, and hand grenades.¹¹³ The Houthis seized control of the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, in September 2014 and forced its president to seek refuge in Saudi Arabia. The Houthis and their allies advanced south, intending to seize the Gulf of Aden and unite the country. In March 2015, a military coalition of Arab

nations led by Saudi Arabia launched a bombing campaign aimed at ousting the Houthis and restoring the government.¹¹⁴

The Saudis fear that the success of the Houthis, who have received weapons shipments from Iran and training from Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah, will stir nationalism among the Shia in Saudi Arabia.¹¹⁵ Yemeni security forces have intercepted a shipment of weapons from the Guards to the Houthis that included RPGs, surface-to-air missiles, and high explosives. The area was the site of widespread protests in early 2011, which were crushed by an intervention of Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia. Iranian leaders have claimed that Bahrain, which has a Shia majority, is an integral part of Iran and should be restored to it.¹¹⁶ The Qods Force sponsors militant Shia groups who have attacked government targets with arms and explosives transferred to the country by the Qods Force operatives and affiliates, including Iraqi Shia militia groups.¹¹⁷

In 2017 U.S. vice admiral Kevin M. Donegan opined that Iran's involvement in Yemen is one element of its Middle East strategy to promote civil unrest and establish a power vacuum. This allows Iranian forces and its proxies to fill that void and build security that favors Iran.¹¹⁸

Population Transfers

Iran, like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union before it, uses panic and devastation in neighboring states to adjust regional ethnic and religious composition. Iran uses using coercive methods to drive Sunnis from their home and to resettle the areas with Shias.¹¹⁹

Under Hitler's leadership, Germany pursued internal colonialization. With the German invasion of the Soviet Union came designs to eliminate indigenous populations in Poland and Ukraine and to repopulate subjugated terrain with Germans and locals who conformed to specific racial characteristics. This German colony would be administered by Himmler's SS.¹²⁰ Hitler spoke of "shaping of the landscape" by enticing ten million Germans to go east and settle families there. The colonizers were to be given plots of land to be tilled by Polish slaves who would be killed when they were no longer useful.¹²¹

The Soviet Union, too, shifted populations. During his reign, Joseph Stalin oversaw the forced resettlement of six million people. Lenin relocated ethnic groups immediately after the Civil War in 1921, and the practice accelerated in 1930s and 1940s with Stalin.¹²² This was part of a larger plan to purge the new Soviet state of nationalists, religious leaders and believers, and free thinkers.¹²³

Iran, like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, has used demography as foreign policy. The wars that have overwhelmed societies in Iraq and Syria have dispersed besieged populations throughout the Middle East, with some families taking refuge in Europe or the United States. Taking advantage of these population shifts, Iran has resettled Shia in the Middle East. By late 2017 Iran began consolidating its presence throughout Syria by settling militiamen and their families there. Schools in Syria teach the Persian language, and Iran has subsidized the tuition and food costs of many students aged eight to fifteen each of whom receives a \$20 monthly stipend for attending. Shia clerics cultivate ties with the locals.¹²⁴ This demographic lift in the Syrian Shia population boosts Iran's long-term influence.¹²⁵

Summary

Iran's theocratic leadership has cast its foreign policy in the context of a holy war, and the Qods Forces is the engine by which Iran expands its global power. Iran has built a land corridor, connecting Iran through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. Iran's forces or its proxies defend shrines in Syria and Iraq, and the Guards help prepare Hezbollah to destroy Israel's cities.¹²⁶ The Qods Force's SLA is built of three divisions that are deployed in Iran's Shia Arc.¹²⁷ The Guards continue to target its enemies for assassination in the Middle East, Europe, the United States, and around the world. Iran provides Hezbollah \$700 million a year and offers Palestinian terrorist groups another \$100 million and another \$300 million to other terrorist groups.¹²⁸ Patiently and steadily, the Guards change the demographics of Iran's neighborhood. Christians and Sunnis are declining in proportion, while the Shia are growing.

The Guards' Unconventional Toolbox

The IRGC is not a person; it is a movement.

—Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, military adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 2017

The Guards have conventional and unconventional military capabilities. According to Jane's Defence Weekly, the Islamic Republic of Iran Army, the Artesh, now totals some 398,000; at the same time the Guards have an estimated personnel strength of 125,000 (see tables 10 and 11; the estimated Basij strength is listed separately in table 12).¹ The official count is twenty million, but this is hyperbolic boasting.

The Artesh and the Guards

Today, the relationship between Iran's Guards and the Artesh bears some hallmarks to the rivalries between the military forces in Nazi Germany and in the Soviet Union. In Nazi Germany, Himmler shaped the Waffen-SS to perform, among other duties, combat missions similar to those of the Wehrmacht. The Waffen-SS was an elite force, which developed capabilities superior to Wehrmacht units. Initially, its recruits had stringent racial, height, and physical

requirements.² During the early stages of the war, the Waffen-SS was capable, confident, and often victorious.

With the invasion of Poland, SS units were unbridled from customary rules of war, and they quickly established a brutal image. The Waffen-SS often teamed with the Wehrmacht to conduct mass-murder operations. After the July 1944 failed coup attempt against Hitler, the status of all branches of the SS soared because Hitler distrusted the traditional army and saw the SS as his formidable bodyguard.

[Table 10. Iran's Artesh order of battle](#)

	Total strength	Army	Air force	Navy
Active personnel	398,000	350,000	30,000	18,000
Reserves	Unknown	350,000	n/a	n/a

Table 11. The Guards' order of battle

	Total strength	Guards ground forces	Guards aerospace and i
Active personnel	125,000	100,000	5,000

Table 12. Strength of Basij

	Regular	Active	Cadre
Basij	3 million	1–2 million	200,000

Source: IISS, *The Military Balance 2006* (London: Routledge for the IISS, 2007).

Just as Hitler distrusted the loyalty of the Prussian-led army officer corps, Stalin held misgivings about personnel in the Red Army. In 1942 the Soviet Supreme High Command created an independent army of NKVD personnel, sparking an enduring rivalry between the Red Army and NKVD units. They competed against each other for resources and prestige. The NKVD operated in the rear lines, conducted special operations, and served as “blocking units” tasked with shooting Soviet soldiers suspected of retreating.

Waffen-SS and the NKVD armed forces partnered with and competed against their countries’ conventional armed forces. This relationship would be loosely replicated in Iran between the Artesh and the Guards. They have some overlapping responsibilities and also vie for scarce funds and talented recruits. This enduring competition was forged by national leaders to limit the concentration of power in the hands of the Artesh.³ The Iranian constitution charges the Artesh with “guarding the independence and territorial integrity of the country, as well as the order of the Islamic Republic.” By charter, the Guards protect the revolution, just as the SS secured the Nazi regime, and the NKVD safeguarded the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Finally, just as the SS controlled Germany’s prestigious missile program and the KGB oversaw the Soviet Union’s nuclear weapons program, the Guards control the country’s most important weapons program—its nuclear weapons development program.

The Guards enjoy significantly greater funding, higher prestige, and better salaries than do their Artesh counterparts, and Guards leaders have far greater access to national leaders than do Artesh. The Artesh, unlike the Guards, usually avoid business operations and high-level political decision making. The Guards participate in the political, economic, social, military, and foreign affairs of the country, though there are statutory prohibitions from doing so.⁴ At the same time, the Artesh and the Guards conduct joint exercises. In December 2018 they participated in a seven-day exercise carried out on the island of Qeshm in southern Iran. The exercise stressed offensive operations and tested special forces, ground, and air units.⁵

The Guards' Ground Forces

There are approximately one hundred thousand personnel in the Guards' ground forces. Jane's estimates that the order of battle contains the equivalent of two armored divisions, five mechanized divisions, and up to eighteen infantry divisions, as well as independent brigades. There are also Special Forces and airborne elements. The Guards' ground forces have several elite units, such as the highly specialized Saber Unit. According to Jane's, these units are equipped mostly with 57-mm S-60 and 23-mm ZU-23-2 towed guns. Tanks include T-54/55 tanks, as well as T-69 and T-72Z/Safir-74 tanks.⁶ There are also air defense elements that are subordinated to the Guards' aerospace and missile force.

The Guards' Navy

The Guards' navy is responsible for securing Iranian interests in the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. Its mission includes coastal defense. According to Jane's, there are approximately twenty thousand personnel, of whom five thousand are marines, in the navy.⁷ The force is trained for asymmetric warfare, and its equipment includes missile fast patrol boats. Leaders have boasted that Iran can seal the strategic Straits of Hormuz from all shipping.⁸ In early 2019 the commander of the Guards' navy claimed that he was equipping the fast boats with "new, very small missiles."⁹

Indeed, Rear Adm. Alireza Tangsiri, commander-in-chief of the Guards' navy, has bragged that his fleet could "chase the U.S. troops even to the Gulf of Mexico" if American craft ever attacked Iran's vessels.¹⁰ Other leaders have windily crowed on state-owned or state-controlled media, such as FARS, that the Guards' navy could transform U.S. aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf into "rusty iron."¹¹ While this is not likely, the Guards' navy fast boats could perform sea-based suicidal operations, similar to the attack conducted against the USS

Cole. Iranian ships have provocatively approached U.S. vessels, according to Gen. Joe Votel, commander of the U.S. Central Command, who relates that Iranian naval commanders did so to test U.S. resolve and capabilities.¹² In 2016 Guards then-deputy commander Salami boasted that when Guards boarded a U.S. ship and arrested ten sailors, they “started crying after arrest, but the kindness of our Guards made them feel calm.” He added that since World War II, “no country has been able to arrest American military personnel.”¹³

Aerospace and Missile Division

The Guards’ Aerospace and Missile Division exists parallel to the Artesh air force. After absorbing losses during the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran replenished its air inventory with Soviet aircraft, including MiG-29s and Sukhoi SU-24 long-range strike jets.¹⁴ According to Jane’s, the Guards maintain approximately fifty fixed-wing aircraft and fifty-five helicopters, mainly from Tehran, Karaj, Shiraz, and Orumiye. The Guards’ pilots have provided close air support to ground forces for combined air-land operations. The aircraft also have lift capabilities to transport equipment and personnel. The air force has SU-25s and EMB-312 Tucanos, as well as Y-12s, Dassault Falcon 20s, MFI-17s, and other aircraft such as AN-74s, which are used to provide logistical support to various bases across Iran.¹⁵

Some observers have claimed that Iran has the largest missile force in the Middle East, consisting of thousands of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, and possibly land-attack cruise missiles.¹⁶ Iran likely has more than fifteen ballistic missile systems either in its inventory or under development (table 13).¹⁷

The head of the Guards’ Aerospace and Missile Division, Brig. Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, has claimed that the Khorramshahr has a range of two thousand kilometers and can carry several warheads weighing 1,800 kilograms.¹⁸ Hajizadeh has also declared that Iran performs forty to fifty missile tests per year. In 2016 Iran unveiled two new short-range ballistic missiles, which it claims are capable of striking targets between five hundred and seven hundred kilometers away (see table 13).

The U.S. Department of State has confirmed that Iran test-fired a medium-range ballistic missile that is capable of carrying multiple warheads, which would allow it to strike parts of Europe and anywhere in the Middle East.¹⁹ In the 1990s Iran began boosting its medium-range missiles, so that it could hit Israel from any point in Iran.²⁰ Iran has supplied Hezbollah with thousands of precision rockets, missiles, and small arms.²¹ Secretary Pompeo has said satellite launches “incorporate technology that is virtually identical to that used in ballistic missiles.”²² In June 2018 Iran launched several missiles into eastern Syria. The strikes were the first time Iran has successfully launched missiles at another country in thirty years.²³ Israeli Defense Forces announced that they intercepted Iranian-fired missiles that entered Israeli airspace from Syria in January 2019.²⁴ In early 2019 Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani stressed continued efforts to increase the accuracy of Iran’s missiles.²⁵ In summer 2019 Iranian leaders boasted that its missiles could pulverize U.S. vessels should general hostilities erupt in Middle Eastern waters, with Major General Salami even claiming that Iranian missiles could sink U.S. aircraft carriers.²⁶

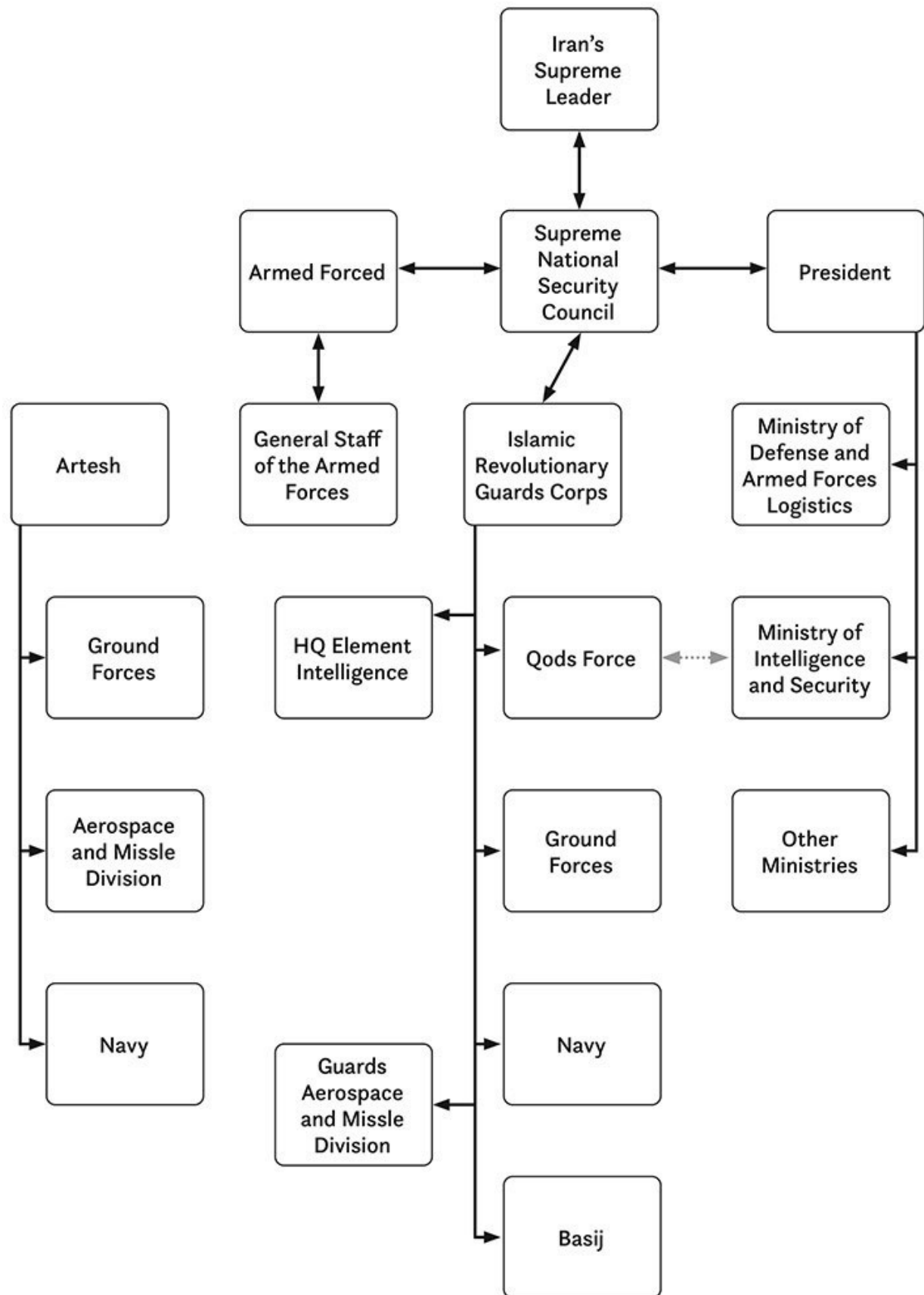
[Table 13. Iran’s missile inventory](#)

Missile	Class	Range	Status
1 Safir	SLV	350 km altitude	Operational
2 Khorramshahr	MRBM	2,000 km	In development
3 Qiam-1	SRBM	700–800 km	Operational
4 Shahab-1	SRBM	285–330 km	Operational
5 Simorgh	SLV	500 km altitude	In development
6 Koksan M1978	Artillery	40–60 km	Operational
7 Zolfaghar	SRBM	700 km	Operational
8 Emad (Shaha-3 Variant)	MRBM	1,700 km	Operational
9 Sejjil	MRBM	2,000 km	Operational
10 Shahab 2 (Scud C Variant)	SRBM	500 km	Operational
11 Shahad-3	MRBM	1,300 km	In development
12 Ghadr 1 (Shahab-3 Variant)	MRBM	1,950 km	Operational
13 Fateh-110	SRBM	200–300 km	Operational
14 Tondar 69	SRBM	150 km	Operational

15 Soumar
16 Ra'ad

Cruise missile 2,000–3,000 km Operational (presur
Cruise missile 150 km Operational

a. "Missile Threat," CSIS Missile Defense Project, Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed January 7, 2019, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/iran/>.



[Fig. 2. Guard directorates and subordinate offices. Source: “Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security: A Profile” \(Washington DC: Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, December 2012\), 17, https://fas.org/irp/world/iran/mois-loc.pdf.](https://fas.org/irp/world/iran/mois-loc.pdf)

Active Measures

Unlike classic espionage that targets agents to obtain secrets, active measures involve influence operations, forgeries, front groups, friendship associations, and propaganda. The Guards engage in those measures as a form of political warfare. Propaganda is disseminated through television, film, newspaper, posters, murals, political actions, rallies, protests, and other activities.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the new regime created the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) service. The IRIB, or Sazman-e Seda va Sima-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran, is the primary governmental agency in charge of television. Section 175 of the Iranian constitution prohibits the establishment of private broadcasting networks and clearly states that “freedom of expression and publication of ideas by the IRIB must be in line with Islamic laws and national interests.”²⁷ Most of the television shows are informational, usually propaganda, and light entertainment. In 2015 Khamenei lauded the IRIB as a critical weapon in “countering the soft war” waged by the West.²⁸ Meanwhile, the United States has levied sanctions on IRIB charging that the state-run broadcaster was blocking foreign channels that the government found objectionable.²⁹

Information operations are frequent in war. During World War II Germany used radio programming to lower enemy morale. Stations broadcast Western popular music and propaganda to reach British and American soldiers.³⁰ The Soviets, too, targeted American audiences, and many European and American writers, artists, and intellectuals were supporters of or sympathetic to the world’s first communist state. Some scripted glowing accounts of Stalin.³¹ By the mid-1930s,

Los Angeles held one of the country's strongest communist organizations, and some party members flourished in Hollywood, keeping negative depictions of Soviet life out of scripts.³²

As the Soviet and Nazi services before them, the Guards use active measures to try to deceive and influence Western leaders about the political reality and direction of the country. Iran and its Guards had an image problem after the 1979 revolution. Mass arrests; street scuffles; the forced draping of women; and the wholesale, often public, shooting of dissidents and reformers sullied the country's image. There was also the sulfurous rhetoric that poured from political halls and mosques. Recognizing the negative effects of these images, the Guards try to scrub the image of Iran and divert attention from Khomeini's global agenda.³³

The Nazi and Soviet regimes, as well as today's Iranian leaders, pledged their determination to avoid war. In the mid- and late 1930s, Germany appealed to Britain and France to maintain continental peace and to avoid senseless war. The Soviets anchored their information operations on the concept of world peace. The Iranian rhetorical themes are the victimization of Iran, the need to preserve peace, the aggression of the United States, and the illegitimacy of Israel and Saudi Arabia. Sometimes, Iranian news outlets and leaders will tap into Western themes. Khamenei leveraged the American women's "#metoo" campaign against sexual harassment, tweeting that movement exposes "the disaster of countless sexual assaults on Western women."³⁴

Other themes twist Western anxieties about climate change. For example, in 2018 the head of a civil defense organization claimed that Israeli scientists have made Iranian clouds barren of rain.³⁵ The Guards produce movies that warn Iranians of internal threats from dual nationals. In one film, the narrator says, "The Islamic Republic has been more harmed by dual nationals than anyone else."³⁶ While other Iranian broadcasts do not propagate falsehoods, they produce routinely offer negative images of the West.

Since the 1980s Iranian services have pitched their propaganda, particularly to Shia in countries around the world, subsidizing mosques and friendships associations.³⁷ Some examples are the Kuwaiti-Iranian Friendship Association that, in its own words, is called to expand economic, cultural, and social relations.³⁸ In 1998 Iran built a friendship association in China.³⁹ Sometimes, Iran taps into traditional friendship it has enjoyed with other countries,

particularly those with significant trade, such as Germany. As of late 2018, 120 German companies operated inside Iran, and 10,000 German businesses traded with Iran.⁴⁰

Agents of Influence

An agent of influence uses his or her position to shape public opinion on issues of importance to the country that controls the agent. The KGB placed great emphasis on developing agents of influence. The Soviet and Soviet Bloc intelligence agencies were proficient at spotting talent and cultivating contacts with promising actors, journalists, and intellectuals who would represent the Soviet view.⁴¹ An example was the scholarship given to the young actress Frances Farmer, whose high school essay titled “God Dies” earned her a trip to the Moscow Art Theatre.⁴² There were other famous agents of influence, such as the journalist Walter Duranty and U.S. State Department official Alger Hiss.

In prewar Nazi Germany, the German American Bund used active measures to build influence. The organization was formed in 1936 as “an organization of patriotic Americans of German stock” and grew to a membership of thousands.⁴³ Most Bund members were immigrants who arrived in America after World War I.⁴⁴ Some leading Britons promoted National Socialism, including Oswald Mosley and William Joyce. Western intellectuals such as Paul de Man, Nobel laureate Knut Hamsun, and the poet Ezra Pound were openly pro-Nazi.⁴⁵

As part of its diplomatic efforts, revolutionary Iran has long courted Western intellectuals to promote a positive image of the country. One prominent figure here was Roger Garaudy. Former communist, French resistance fighter, and convert to Islam, Garaudy loved Iran and Khomeini, whom he praised for “struggling against arrogant powers’ violence and forming a united world.”⁴⁶ He visited Iran several times in the 1990s and was received by then-president Mohammed Khatami.⁴⁷ Basiji brigadier general Mohammad Reza Naqdi eulogized Garaudy, as reported by FARS state-run media, as “a brave writer and revolutionary politician.”⁴⁸ When he died at age ninety-nine, in 2012, the Basij issued condolences to his family.⁴⁹ And Iranian leaders ensured that his legacy will not be forgotten: Hezbollah honored outstanding students in a ceremony

named after him.⁵⁰

Iran holds international conferences at which like-minded thinkers are invited to speak. Iran's Second International "New Horizons" Conference in 2014 drew a potpourri of Western Holocaust deniers, conspiracy theorists, Israel boycott promoters, and antiwar activists. Hassan Abbasi, the Guards' "Kissinger of Iran," helps plan the conferences. According to organizers, the event included "elite thinkers, philosophers, activists, and politicians worldwide" who discussed Zionist control of the film industry and the influence of the "Zionist lobby in America."⁵¹ Among attendees were U.S. antiwar activists and critics of U.S. foreign policy.⁵² French satirist Dieudonne M'bala M'bala and U.S. Muslim activists also attended.⁵³ Iran also invites U.S. professors with presumably sympathetic views to give interviews on Iranian television and at conferences; Iranian leaders regularly criticize perceived injustices in American society. For example, when a white police officer killed a handcuffed Black American in Minnesota in the summer of 2020, Foreign Minister Zarif wrote on Twitter, "Some don't think #BlackLivesMatter. . . . To those of us who do: it is long overdue for the entire world to wage war against racism. Time for a #WorldAgainstRacism."⁵⁴

Disinformation: Fake News

Active measures also include falsification of facts or fake news. This is more than polishing a country's image; it is weaponizing falsehoods for political purposes. According to veteran intelligence analyst John Barron, disinformation often involves clandestine activity.⁵⁵ World War II began with a staged attack. German SS operatives transported German concentration camp prisoners dressed as German soldiers to a German radio station near the Polish border. Then, SS personnel shot the concentration camp prisoners and presented their bodies as evidence of a Polish attack against Germany.⁵⁶ Germany then used this fake news as a pretext to invade Poland.

The KGB was adept at disinformation tactics. Among the more notorious was the AIDS hoax. The KGB circulated the lie that the United States developed AIDS as part of a biological weapons program.⁵⁷ In this case, and many others,

the Soviets took genuine documents from Western countries and changed some wording to present more authentic-appearing forgeries.

Iran, too, falsifies material as a tactic of political warfare. As an example, a propagandist altered a picture of Tom Hanks that was circulated on social media to give the actor a shirt with political slogans.⁵⁸ In January 2019, in a tribute to the Guards, graphic artists overlaid a photo of the U.S.-built Space Shuttle against a photograph of Iranian scientists, which suggested that Iran had in fact built the shuttle.⁵⁹

In fall 2018 Facebook deleted hundreds of groups and accounts it connected to Iranian information operations. The propaganda these operators disseminated promoted quarterback Colin Kaepernick's accusations against American society and disparaged President Trump and Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh.⁶⁰

Iranian falsehoods use well-worn core themes and embellish and update them with lies. A central refrain is Holocaust denial. Iran argues that it possesses the hidden knowledge that the Holocaust was a hoax created by Jews to justify the creation of Israel, acquire a collective victim status, and bilk foreign countries of billions of dollars.⁶¹ This hoax is allegedly possible because Jews control the world's media, Western entertainment, global banking, and foreign governments. Iran also builds on ancient anti-Semitic tropes such as their guilt in killing Christ and the blood libel. An example is the Iranian series *Zahra's Blue Eyes*, produced for Sahar TV by a former official of Iran's Ministry of Education, which depicts Israelis stealing the eyes of Palestinian children.⁶² Also in this vein, Iranian media excoriate the Baha'i religion as being created by the West to harm Islamic countries.⁶³

The Guards and Cyberspace

Since the 2010 Stuxnet computer attack on Iran's uranium enrichment centrifuges, the Guards have enhanced cybersecurity. Today, after channeling significant resources into cyber operations, they feel very comfortable in cyberspace. In 2013 a Guards' general publicly crowed that Iran had the "fourth biggest cyber power among the world's cyber armies."⁶⁴

Guards recruits engineers for their cyber program to monitor social media and other outlets to prevent dissent.⁶⁵ According to the U.S.-based NGO Freedom House in its 2017 report, Iran ranked as the fourth-worst country, after China, Syria, and Ethiopia, regarding internet freedom.⁶⁶ Iran has built both a defense barrier against cyberattacks on critical infrastructures and sensitive information and offensive cyber capabilities.⁶⁷

Intercepting, blocking, and breaking codes and communications has been an integral part of intelligence craft for centuries. In the twentieth century, signals intelligence analysts and operators broke the codes during times of war. In Britain, at Bletchley Park, code breakers deciphered the German military codes, and U.S. naval analysts broke the Japanese naval code.⁶⁸ This allowed Allied forces to anticipate the point and strength of enemy attacks. It also provided opportunities for offensive intelligence operations.⁶⁹ One of the most significant signals intelligence coups of the twentieth century was the United States breaking of the Soviet diplomatic code that unmasked hundreds of Soviets agents and sympathizers in the United States.

To police the web, the Guards created a “cyber army” in 2008.⁷⁰ It is staffed with approximately 2,400 personnel, some of whom are part-time independent and semi-independent hackers.⁷¹ Tehran has become increasingly adept at conducting cyber espionage and disruptive attacks against opponents at home and abroad, ranging from Iranian civil society organizations to governmental and commercial institutions in Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.⁷² The Iranian cyber army conducts external, as well as domestic, defensive operations.⁷³

External Operations

The Iranian cyber army targets Iran’s external enemies. Cyber operations allow Iranians to gather information and retaliate against perceived enemies domestically and abroad. Sometimes operators deface sites; other times, they acquire information or try to cripple sites of importance.⁷⁴ Targets include critical infrastructure and vulnerable spots in corporate supply chains.⁷⁵ Saudi Arabia, Denmark, Germany, Israel, and the United States have reported Iranian cyber-attacks against government, military, or scientific institutions. Tehran also targets

neighboring countries throughout the Middle East.⁷⁶

Sometimes cyber-operators destroy data as they exit systems or linger within them.⁷⁷ The Guards use cyber-operations to target critics at home and abroad, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations, as well as national economic, defense, and diplomatic institutions.⁷⁸ In 2012 Iranian hackers allegedly struck Saudi Arabia's national oil company, Saudi Aramco, nearly obliterating its corporate information technological infrastructure. It attacked the websites of JP Morgan and Bank of America Merrill Lynch.⁷⁹ Destructive cyberattacks from Iran penetrated systems for the Sands Hotel and Casino in 2014, targeting casino company owner Sheldon Adelson.⁸⁰ On January 5, 2020, hackers claiming to operate on behalf of Iran defaced the website of the U.S. Federal Depository Library. They posted a graphic image of a fist punching President Trump in the face. The message proclaimed, "This is a message from the Islamic Republic of Iran." If Iran was responsible for the attack, it was likely a cyber response to the assassination of Major General Soleimani two days previously.⁸¹

Summary

The Guards have ground, sea, and air forces that function parallel to and sometimes in concert with the country's conventional forces. Iran's missile inventory and its technological level impress and concern some Western powers. The Guards also control the development of nuclear weapons. The Guards has its own Cyber Defense Command, which recruits and trains cyber warriors to spy on dissidents.⁸² The Guards engage in active measures to discredit its enemies and expand Iran's influence. Iran periodically invites Western intellectuals and activists to visit Iran and participate in conferences that promote anti-European and anti-American themes and to spawn homicidal anti-Semitism.

The Guards, Inc.

Evergreen, gardened, cypressd, cinema'd, oil-tanked, boulevarded, incense-and-armpit cradle of Persian culture.

—Dylan Thomas observing Iran, circa 1951

Iran's economy is commanded by government elites, which is a practice common in the Middle East. In Egypt and Pakistan, military leaders control large, national-level economic enterprises. In Iran, the Guards are the key players.¹ The poor health of Iran's economy, which is riddled with inefficiencies, market distortions, and wealth concentrations, reflects Tehran's statist policies and national reliance on oil and gas exports.² The Guards and ruling mullahs benefit through easy access to low-interest, unpaid loans, preferential treatment in contracting for goods and services, sinecures, as well as vast corruption. Ali Ansari, an Iran expert at St. Andrews University, has observed, "The Corps is really a corporation. It is a business conglomerate with guns."³

Before the revolution, Iranians were optimistic about rising standards of living. The second half of the twentieth century offered the unfulfilled promise of sustained, broad-sector economic development with substantial boosts in Iranian living standards. Fossil-fuel revenue powered dynamic economic growth by midcentury.⁴ By the end of the 1960s, the Iranian economy was a model for the developing world. A founding member of OPEC, Iran was heavily reliant on fossil-fuel exports for revenue.⁵ But the 1970s revealed gross disparities in wealth distribution. The ostentatiousness of the super-rich contrasted the

destitution of Dickensian-like slums. This relative deprivation gave rise to widespread social unrest and laid the foundation for the 1979 revolution.

In the early 1980s, many wealthy and the upper-middle-class Iranians fled their homeland if they could. Most could not expatriate their wealth and left behind private companies, large farms, stately homes and their contents, which were confiscated as revolutionary war spoils.⁶ The exiles, however, also took with them human capital, entrepreneurial spirit, and skill sets that were difficult to replicate quickly.

Khomeini's early promise to deliver social justice resonated throughout Iran. Iranians welcomed the opportunity to enjoy the spoils of the revolution's victory. But within a generation, those who ejected the shah soon became plunderers themselves. The revolution did not improve the living standards of most Iranians. The war with Iraq drained and distorted Iran's economy, and, by the turn of the millennium, the Iranian economy had failed, by any metric. (For a breakdown of Iran's economy, see table 14.)

[Table 14. Iran: Country fact sheet from the Economist](#)

Annual data	2016	Historical averages (%)
Population	80.3	Population growth
GDP (US\$m; market exchange rate)	425,403	Real GDP growth
GDP (US\$m; purchasing power parity)	1,604,549	Real domestic demand growth
GDP per head (US\$; market exchange rate)	5,299	Inflation
GDP per head (US\$; purchasing power parity)	19,988	Current-account balance
Exchange rate (av) IR:US\$	30,915	FDI inflows (% of GDP)

Source: “Iran: Country Forecast Summary,” Economist, accessed September 22, 2018, <https://www-ciaonet-org.usawc.idm.oclc.org/record/42420?search=1>.

Extensive state intervention in many sectors of the economy and the jockeying between nationalization and privatization of key resources by Guards’ leaders and pettifogging bureaucrats has led to the decimation of Iran’s economy.⁷ Within Iran’s intelligence services, there are wide gaps in wealth. Some of the leaders live opulent lifestyles while the entry-level Guards are very poor.⁸

Iran continues to have large divisions of wealth. There is opulence for a politically connected few and teeming poverty for many. The gap is evident to those who walk the streets and haunts of the cities. Iran’s population is young, with a median age of thirty-one, and economic growth has not kept pace with social needs. Iran’s fiscal policy is driven by state-directed panels and run by ruling theocrats and bureaucrats. While elites benefit, one in four young Iranians are unemployed.⁹ The national currency, the rial, has collapsed, and Iran’s central bank has considered deleting four zeros from rial notes. Western trade sanctions have been effective, and revenue from petroleum exports declined with the sinking price of the price of oil.¹⁰

The Guards control most of Iran’s economy.¹¹ The organization gradually built up a vast business empire in various sectors of the Iranian economy through myriad holding companies, front companies, and charitable foundations. The U.S. Treasury Department has sanctioned Iranian conglomerates and corporations because of their connections to international terrorism.¹²

The Guards’ ownership and operation of trade and industrial giants and the partial ownership of smaller Iranian companies earn them up to half of the Iranian gross domestic product (GDP), by some estimates.¹³ The Guards’ economic activities include construction, oil and gas development, finance, banking, telecommunications, and criminality.¹⁴

Non-Iranian companies hoping to do business in Iran need to work directly with members of the Guards or use them as middlemen.¹⁵ Western businesses often employ large legal and public relations teams to navigate the labyrinth of offices and traders and compete on bids. Europeans will partner with companies linked

to or owned by the Guards.¹⁶

In July 2018 Secretary of State Pompeo publicly chastised particularly corrupt and well-known Iranian leaders. He identified Interior Minister Sadeq Mahsouli as partnering with Guards-run companies to exploit national wealth for personal gain. He also disparaged Grand Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, the “Sultan of Sugar,” whose side business has generated more than \$100 million. The secretary also denigrated Ali Khamenei’s “own personal, off-the-books hedge fund called the Setad, worth \$95 billion,” which serves as a “slush fund for the IRGC.” Many Iranians would agree with Secretary Pompeo’s judgment that “Iran is run by something that resembles the mafia more than a government.”¹⁷ Some of the revenue enriches individuals in the Guards and Basij, while other funds are channeled to terrorist organizations.¹⁸

The Poor, the Rich, and the Guards

Legions of beggars ramble the streets of Iran. Drug-addicted, destitute, and homeless Iranians live under bridges and in the fields. A December 2017 photo series of indigents and drug addicts subsisting in a graveyard near Tehran shocked the consciences of Iranians and highlighted the gap in national wealth. Some persons live in open graves and fight over blankets, food, and narcotics. They also live in fear of being harmed or removed. One related, “Other people bother us or throw rocks at us. . . . Aren’t we human beings?”¹⁹

If some Iranians are suffering from privation, others flaunt their wealth. Sports cars roar in the streets of Tehran, past old, crowded buses and lines of pedestrians. Preening adolescents stroll next to beggars. An Iranian journalist commented that “wealthy young Iranians act like a new aristocratic class unaware of the sources of their wealth.”²⁰ At the core of this aristocratic cadre are men and families of the Guards.

Early Distributions of Wealth

After the revolution, Iran's clerical leaders expropriated the shah's fortune and established or grew various foundations to aid the poor. Soon, Iran's new leaders began to enrich themselves. As in the Russian Revolution and the Nazis' rise to power, Iranian leaders confiscated the assets of their enemies. Lenin and Hitler justified their seizures of wealth by appealing to social justice. So did Khomeini, who nationalized many private sector companies.²¹

In the early 1920s the victorious Bolsheviks eliminated disparities in wealth by eliminating the wealthy. Many of the rich were shot as enemies of the state or driven abroad. Some in the middle class who became communists were, nonetheless, killed under suspicion of bourgeois sympathies. The more-dedicated Party loyalists could live well, by the impoverished standards of the Soviet Union.

In Nazi Germany, living conditions for most Germans first spiked and then plummeted with the failed fortunes of the war after 1942. The regime oversaw many parastatals, such as the Hermann Göring Werke and large, private corporate conglomerates like the I. G. Farben chemical combines.²² Some of the Nazi party elite lived in mansions adorned with the booty of conquered nations.

As in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, there was much plunder to be redistributed in the early years of Iran's revolution. Both the Soviet Union and Germany forcefully redistributed wealth. Lenin confiscated goods from wealthy Russians, and the Germans looted conquered nations to raise living standards in Germany and build vast public programs. Similarly, from the beginning of the Islamic Republic, the state sector absorbed most large-scale industries, major minerals, banking, insurance, power generation, dams and large-scale irrigation networks, radio and television outlets, post telegraph and telephone services, aviation, shipping, and roads.²³

At the same time, the Revolutionary Islamic Courts confiscated the assets and charitable foundations of antirevolutionaries.²⁴ Clerics could steer business in a preferred direction by issuing a religious edict, or fatwa. Explained one Western journalist, "If he (Ayatollah Khomeini) chooses to fatwa Coke and Pepsi out of Iran, what will look like a religious ruling might actually be about something quite different."²⁵

The New Grandees

The period of the most significant change in economic policy was in the second of Rafsanjani's presidencies and in the first Ahmadinejad term. Both leaders liberalized parts of the economy through privatization. (For a description of the major markets in Iran, see table 15.) Some Iranians welcomed the promise of opportunity this policy entailed. Others accused both presidents of being under the control of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. But most Iranians were ultimately disappointed by the results because privatization was based on nepotism. Just as at the end of the Soviet Union, many substantial government assets were sold to insiders, in Iran the Guards were given greater economic opportunities than ever before.²⁶

[Table 15. Iran: Markets from the Economist](#)

Major exports 2016	% of total	Major imports 2015	% of total
Oil and gas	66.4	Machinery	28.9
Chemicals and petrochemicals	10.3	Intermediate goods	13.5
Fresh and dry fruits	2.3	Chemicals	11.2

Source: “Iran: Country Forecast Summary,” Economist, accessed September 22, 2018, <https://www-ciaonet-org.usawc.idm.oclc.org/record/42420?search=1>.

The Guards first moved in the construction sector and were quickly awarded projects in the billions of dollars. By the mid-1990s, many Guards served as businessmen representing the interests of the service. The Guards justified their preferential treatment by underscoring their need to protect the Revolution. As one Western bank director explained, the Guards replaced foreign companies with their own interests in order to protect the revolutionary spirit of the country.²⁷

Leaders of the Guards became involved in foreign trade during the Iran-Iraq War. This trade expanded significantly under the leadership of Ahmadinejad, in an effort to evade sanctions.²⁸ His presidency saw the expansion of the Guards’ influence, as he appointed Guards to the most critical developmental and industrial projects and public works posts from 2005 through 2013. During this period, the Guards were awarded some \$25 billion in contracts in the oil and gas sectors.²⁹ The president enriched himself and the Guards by expanding the patronage system. He ballooned the ranks of mid-level and senior Guards who were stakeholders in companies he controlled. As an example, in October 2009 the Guards bought 51 percent of the shares in Iran Communication Corporation, which had an estimated value of \$8 billion. In February 2010 Ahmadinejad announced that the Guards would further expand their role in natural gas exploitation, refining, and distribution.

Though the Guards profited from Ahmadinejad’s intervention, the economy suffered through market distortions.³⁰ He appointed marginally educated and often incompetent Guards and Basij to key management positions, government positions, and to the upper management of public enterprises. He also pressured banks to provide preferential loans to Guards and Basij. Ahmadinejad distributed national wealth to boost his power and prestige at home. He traveled to many poorer towns, where he was greeted as a hero and lavished townsmen with developmental projects. Ahmadinejad’s generosity to his constituents produced enduring economic inefficiencies that continue.³¹

These preferential gifts also distorted the economy by making the Guards

middlemen in market transactions and by promoting no-bid contracts for the Guards. The Guards purchased large enterprises at artificially low prices. For example, the Guards-controlled Mehr-e Eghtesad Investment Corporation purchased a mine estimated at \$200 million for \$60 million, in 2009. Further, charitable enterprises controlled by the Guards did not and do not pay taxes.³²

The Guards two major economic arms are the Cooperation Foundation, which is affiliated with the Basij; the second is the Khatam al-Anbia Construction Headquarters (KAA), which has a far-reaching influence on ministries and state institutions.³³ According to the U.S. Department of Treasury, the Cooperative Foundation employs shell companies to “mask Basij ownership and control over a variety of multibillion-dollar business interests in Iran’s automotive, mining, metals, and banking industries.”³⁴

An often-cited example of Guards’ control of the economy is Gharargah Sazandegi-ye Khatam al-Anbiya, or Ghorb, which is among Iran’s largest companies and employs approximately forty thousand people. In 2007 the U.S. Treasury Department designated Ghorb a terrorist-related enterprise because of its links to Guards and its role in supporting nuclear proliferation and terrorism. Its chief executive officer is usually a high-ranking Guards officer.³⁵

Persian Mafia

The U.S. Internal Revenue Service defines an underground economy as income earned under the table and off the books. It includes laundered income trade in explicitly illegal goods, such as narcotics and weapons. Many developing countries have shadow economies of between 35 and 44 percent of their stated GDP. Some estimates put the underground economy at 36 percent of Iran’s GDP.

The Guards control port facilities and docks throughout Iran, which draws approximately \$12 billion annually.³⁶ Docks are venues for smuggling operations, tax evasion, and shakedown operations for hiring and firing dock workers. Organized crime has thrived on the docks in many countries, including the United States.³⁷ American federal authorities and state governments built waterfront commissions to control mob crews.³⁸ In Iran, however, the Guards

cannot be displaced from their plum positions and dock-operation extortion abilities because the organization is so intricately connected to the government.

The Guards have a vertical monopoly on many projects in Iran. For example, they control construction of the Tehran metro. The Guards purchase construction materials from other Guards-owned companies, such as those that make cement and steel.³⁹ The Guards also have significant ownership in seven of Iran's seventeen private banks. It is difficult for even the most honest financial regulators to monitor the banks.⁴⁰ Iranian and foreign firms often hire intermediaries to penetrate the intricacies of the local business environment. The Guards reinvest some capital into the corporations. They also distribute some of its profits to Guards officers and funnel some money to politicians to secure their loyalty.⁴¹

Basij have their business networks. At least twenty businesses, known collectively as the Basij Cooperative Foundation, create shell companies to hide Basij ownership and control of multibillion-dollar entities that are "deeply entrenched" in Iran's automotive, mining, metals, and banking industries.⁴²

The Great Profiteers

Profiteering is common to both developed and underdeveloped economies, and in some countries, it is systemic. This was the case in the waning days of the Soviet Union and during the Third Reich and in Iran today. A Russian mafia came into being in the eighteenth century as a group of bandits.⁴³ In Lenin's and Stalin's Soviet Union, it was difficult for criminals to organize enduring, large-scale syndicates, but there was always a shadow economy. In the late twentieth-century Russia, some former Soviet intelligence and security personnel moved into organized crime.⁴⁴

In Nazi Germany, there was vast corruption in ruling circles. The government gave Goering, Goebbels, Hitler, and many leading generals large estates. The historian Richard Evans has called the Third Reich both a dictatorship and a kleptocracy. Leaders fought among themselves over the booty. The corruption became the target of jokes as civilian morale plummeted. There were many

popular jokes about Nazi corruption: “What is a reactionary? Someone who has a well-paid job that a Nazi wants.”⁴⁵ There are similar jokes, with a cultural spin, in Iran today.

Many Iranians today can empathize with the fears and frustrations of Russians and Germans at the shakedowns and bribes endured in earlier decades. The NGO Transparency International characterizes Iran’s economy as highly corrupt and cites the substantial involvement of the Guards in shadow transactions.⁴⁶ Long involved in the black market and smuggling various illegal goods, including weapons, the Guards also have a large stake in the illicit narcotics industry.⁴⁷

In August 2018, in response to public demand for greater accountability, Ayatollah Khamenei created special courts to try suspects for corruption. Several of those tried were directly tied to the Guards. In December 2018 Babak Zanjani was sentenced to death for embezzling money earned from black market oil exports sanctioned by the government; he was a middleman, selling Iranian oil through companies mainly affiliated with the Guards.⁴⁸

Another was Vahid Mazloomi, known as the “Sultan of Gold Coins,” who was convicted of “corruption on earth through sabotage in the economic system” and for creating an illegal trade network in foreign currency and gold coins.⁴⁹ In November 2018 he and another man convicted of corruption were executed by hanging. A third execution followed this in December 2018 in which the “Sultan of Bitumen,” a substance used in making asphalt, was executed.⁵⁰

Comparative Examples of Early Leaders

In the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and contemporary Iran national leaders have exploited vulnerabilities and opportunities to enrich themselves. Boris Berezovsky, Herman Goering, and Ali Rafsanjani were three such men.

With a talent for higher mathematics and a burning desire to succeed in life, Boris Berezovsky left academia to game the economic chaos of communism’s collapse in Russia. He began by importing used cars from Germany and, with access to capital, was well placed to profit from the privatization of the Russian

economy. Soon, he bought media outlets, a substantial share in Aeroflot and, then purchased rights to oil and gas businesses.⁵¹

He ran afoul of the new political elite under Vladimir Putin and took refuge in Britain. But Berezovsky's fortune faded, and he became in arrears in British taxes. Depressed and nervous, he hoped to return home to Russia but never did so.⁵² He was found hanged in his home at age sixty-seven, in 2013.⁵³

According to the psychologist who examined him in his Nuremberg cell, Herman Goering was a narcissistic psychopath. He was among the more intelligent of Hitler's inner circle.⁵⁴ He also had an insatiable appetite for treasure, amassing enormous wealth during the war and boasting six hunting estates, a villa, and a castle, as well as over one thousand priceless paintings. He used his position as minister for economic development to craft an industrial conglomerate, the Hermann Göring Werke, in which he held substantial shareholdings. German businessmen understood the need to bribe Goering or one of his associates to secure large contracts.⁵⁵

Speaker of parliament, a two-term president, and Khomeini's closest associate for years, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was also one of Iran's wealthiest men. Some Iranians hailed him as a pragmatist.⁵⁶ Later, he paved the way for the rise of Mohammad Khatami, hailed as a "reformist" president. In 2013 Hassan Rouhani won the presidency due in large part to Rafsanjani's vital support.⁵⁷ Rafsanjani had two monikers, the "Shark" and the "Shah of Pistachios." The first nickname acknowledged his political acumen and cunning. He almost succeeded Ayatollah Khomeini as supreme leader but was outmaneuvered by Khamenei.⁵⁸ True to his name, the Shark dispensed harsh fatwas against dissidents, communists, Kurds, and Baha'is.⁵⁹

The moniker the "Shah of Pistachios" was a spin on his vast wealth and control of leading export items. Over the years, some of his countrymen grew to envy him while others become appalled by his and his family's wealth. One of his brothers headed the country's largest copper mine and another ran the state-owned TV network. He had other family members appointed governors of provinces and managers of oil, construction firms, and automobile construction firms. But when he died in 2017, at age eighty-two of natural causes, he was mourned by the largest funeral procession since Khomeini.⁶⁰

All three personalities—Berezovsky, Goering, and Rafsanjani—were early

leaders of the authoritarian governments they helped to create. They were well positioned to avail themselves of licit and illicit economic opportunities.

Bonyads: Black Holes and Persian Empires

Large parts of the Iranian economy are dominated by bloated quasi-state enterprises, which are called bonyads. They existed for many years before the revolution and became flush with wealth when Ayatollah Khomeini seized the fortune of the royal family.⁶¹ He required that these assets be kept separate from state properties.⁶² After the revolution, the enormous assets of the shah and his cronies were given to the bonyads to care for the indigent. Bonyads took ownership and management of the Hyatt, Hilton, Sheraton, and Intercontinental hotels. One British guest described the conditions twenty-six years later. “I stayed at the old Hyatt . . . where barely a cent has been spent since the revolution. Very little works properly, from television to the internet to hot water to lifts.”⁶³

These wide-ranging foundations control billions of assets. They ostensibly provide for the needy and are derived from an Islamic tradition of charity. The mission, scope and wealth of the bonyads expanded after the revolution from religious charities into financial immense, unregulated, and secretive enterprises that enrich regime loyalists, primarily but not exclusively the Guards.⁶⁴ This control of the economy gives the Guards political power, even though they are barred by law from entering politics.⁶⁵ The 1990s were the era of the economic dominance of bonyads.⁶⁶

Some Iranians, in addition to the well-connected and the Guards, have gained from bonyad operations. Bonyads allow the impoverished and lower-middle class a pathway to higher status and living standards. Some employees are trained in skills that will help pull them out of poverty.⁶⁷ They are employed on building roads, railroads, bridges, water tunnels, canals and dams, to mining, oil and gas projects, and agriculture, and countless other projects. Today, bonyads dispense aid to the poor, in addition to acquiring and distributing wealth to the Guards. About twelve to fifteen bonyads control at least a quarter of the economy. Most bonyads are unprofitable and unproductive enterprises.⁶⁸

The operations and business models of bonyads are very opaque because of corruption and mismanagement. One financial analyst snickered, “Who knows how they function? They are like a black hole.”⁶⁹ Similar to nonprofit organizations, bonyads are tax-exempt charitable entities. Senior personnel are adept at transferring funds from one element to another to subvert U.S. sanctions and channel funds toward terrorist operations.⁷⁰ Today, bonyads make up approximately 30 percent of Iran’s GDP.

Leading Bonyads

There are hundreds of bonyads of different levels of financial holdings, employment, and range of geographic reach. Some have specialized purposes. The bonyad in which the Guards have the most equity is the Guards Cooperative Foundation.⁷¹ The Iranian charitable foundation, Bonyad-e Shahid, or the Martyr’s Foundation, supports families of soldiers killed in actions, the country’s martyrs, war-disabled, and combatants.

The largest bonyad is Bonyad-e Mostazafan va Janbazan, which helps the penniless and severely wounded from the Iran-Iraq War. For years, it was deliberately overstaffed with those who would not be competitive for employment elsewhere. Its initial purpose was not to create capital or profit. Rather, it existed largely to give a sense of purpose to the injured and to provide health care for them. However, it gradually expanded its influence and tasks to other parts of society and, according to some reports, since 1991 it has invested in energy, business, and agricultural activities in the Middle East and Africa.⁷² Bonyad e-Mostazafan funds Hezbollah and operates in Europe and Asia, with substantial new investments in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the former southern Soviet republics.⁷³

Another bonyad, Astan Quds Razavi, was founded in the sixteenth century to maintain the shrine of a religious leader. Today it controls mines, an oil company, an insurance firm, as well as cultural, scientific, educational, and social foundations in national and international environments.⁷⁴ By its own estimate, it controls 41 percent of the land in Mashhad, Iran’s second-most populated city.

Many bonyads have been sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury because of their ties to the Guards. U.S. secretary of treasury Steven Mnuchin explained that “the international community must understand that business entanglements with the Bonyad Taavon Basij network and IRGC front companies have real-world humanitarian consequences, and help fuel the Iranian regime’s violent ambitions across the Middle East.”⁷⁵

Crime

The Guards smuggle black market goods into and out of the Islamic Republic. They traffic weapons, financial resources, and personnel to spread the regime’s influence into the wider regions of the Middle East, including Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain.⁷⁶ In recent years, many international financial institutions have severed ties with Iranian banks and entities because of their illicit and deceptive practices.⁷⁷

Crime is rampant in Iran, and the Guards are heavily involved in it. Iran is a transit country for drug traffickers, particularly those who smuggle opiates and hashish. There are many entry points from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Drugs are smuggled to Europe and Russia. There are also alarming and longstanding rates of domestic drug abuse.⁷⁸ The Guards have developed a mafia-like control over many economic and public sectors. They are also involved in narcotics trafficking and in counterfeiting operations. Iran has used its global proxies to raise revenue through illicit activities.⁷⁹

Corruption

Iran has a large underground economy, ranking 130 out of the 180 countries listed in Transparency International’s 2017 Corruption Perception Index.⁸⁰ There is pervasive corruption within the ruling and religious elite, government ministries, and government-controlled business enterprises.⁸¹ Guards personnel

in Syria, particularly Guards junior officers, are engaged in corrupt activities, including shakedown operations, often in collusion with elements of militias.⁸² The Guards also allow Hezbollah elements to impose tolls at a number of main road crossings in Iraq.⁸³

Narcotics

Drug abuse is rampant in Iran. According to the Department of State, Iran is second only to China in the percentage of its population using opiates. The United Nations estimates that the Islamic Republic has some three million drug addicts.⁸⁴ In 2015 the Department of Treasury designated Guards leaders as key figures in heroin exports to the West. It named the Qods Force as being “doubly reprehensible” because it uses proceeds to fund terrorist operations.⁸⁵ The Department of Treasury listed several Guards general officers as highly involved in narcotics and alcohol trafficking.⁸⁶

At least 40 percent of opiates produced in Afghanistan are shipped to Iran for domestic use or for transit to consumption in Europe. Illicit proceeds from narcotics trafficking are used to purchase goods in the domestic Iranian market.⁸⁷ Outside of the greater Middle East, Hezbollah’s narcotics networks are particularly active in Latin America.⁸⁸ Much of the profits are repatriated to its headquarters in Lebanon.⁸⁹ Hezbollah facilitators use methods that are typical of trade-based money laundering techniques.⁹⁰ Some investigators believe that Hezbollah earns \$1 billion a year from its criminal activities, which involve close cooperation with Latin American drug cartels and criminal syndicates.⁹¹

Counterfeit Currency and Smuggling

The U.S. Department of the Treasury has designated a network of individuals and entities as criminally supporting Iran’s Guards counterfeit currency. Hezbollah’s reach extends through its networks in the Middle East, Africa,

Europe, and the Americas.⁹² Both Iran and Hezbollah have been heavily involved in counterfeiting.

This network employs deceptive measures to circumvent European export control restrictions and procured advanced equipment and materials to print counterfeit Yemeni bank notes potentially worth hundreds of millions of dollars for the Qods Force.⁹³ Front companies disguise the end users and muddy transactions when dealing with European suppliers of secure printing equipment and materials. In March 2020 Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin claimed, Iran employed a web of front companies to fund terrorist groups across the region, siphoning resources away from the Iranian people and prioritizing terrorist proxies over the basic needs of its people.⁹⁴ The U.S. government accused Iran of conducting extensive money laundering operations.⁹⁵ Secretary Mnuchin underscored that counterfeiting undermines the fidelity of international currencies, noting that “counterfeiting strikes at the heart of the international financial system.”⁹⁶

The Guards and Sanctions

In October 2017 the United States Department of Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control designated the Guards supporters of terrorism. Ten years earlier it had designated the Qods Force a terrorist-supporting organization. Treasury Secretary Mnuchin declared that the Guards support “Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s relentless campaign of brutal violence against his own people, as well as the lethal activities of Hezbollah, Hamas, and other terrorist groups.”⁹⁷ This was followed by the Department of State’s designation of the Guards as an FTO in April 2019.

In November 2018 the United States fully reimposed the sanctions on Iran that had been lifted or waived under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.⁹⁸ These target critical sectors of Iran’s economy, such as the energy, shipping and shipbuilding, and financial sectors. They are designed to choke off funds to the Guards.⁹⁹

Iran has established an international banking network with many large state-

owned banks that have foreign branches and subsidiaries in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and the Western Hemisphere. For nearly two decades the United States targeted key Iranian financial institutions and individuals to reduce the inflow of capital into Iran.¹⁰⁰ Brian Hook, a senior policy advisor in the State Department, explained, “All the major corporations have made their decisions to leave the Iranian market.”¹⁰¹ However, Iranian proxies usually have established fronts in a foreign country, enabling them to procure dual-use technologies.¹⁰²

Analysts at the Economist magazine projected 5 percent GDP growth through 2022 and 9–10 percent inflation rates from 2017 to 2018 (see table 16). However, the International Monetary Fund disputes the GDP growth rate for 2019, claiming that Iran’s economy declined by 9 percent in 2019 and expressing pessimism regarding the country’s near-term economic future.¹⁰³ Thus, significant shortages of financial inflows could affect the IRGC’s budget and its ability to supply its proxies abroad.

[Table 16. Country forecast overview: Key indicators from the Economist](#)

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Real GDP growth (%)	4.6	4.2	5.1	4.8	5.3	5.4
Consumer price inflation (av; %)	10.0	11.4	10.9	9.7	9.9	10.3
Official net budget balance (% of GDP)	-2.4	-2.9	-2.9	-3.2	-3.5	-3.9

Source: “Iran: Country Forecast Summary,” Economist, accessed September 22, 2018, <https://www-ciaonet-org.usawc.idm.oclc.org/record/42420?search=1>.

Environmental Exploitation: Water

Due to gross water mismanagement and its ruinous impact on the country, Iran faces the worst water future of any industrialized nation. After the fall of the shah in 1979, water policy became victim to poor governance and corruption. Beginning in 1987, state-owned companies began damming major rivers that changed the water flows of Iran. The Guards-operated water projects have created a system of among the world’s most inefficient uses of water resources.¹⁰⁴ In the words of one Iranian, “Maybe we’ll drink oil instead of water.”¹⁰⁵

Summary

An entrenched shadow economy based on crony capitalism, nepotism, and bribery exists throughout Iran. As international sanctions are tightening, Iranian leaders are pushing for economic development that does not rely on West-related economic cooperation and investment. Khamenei calls this the “the resistance economy.”¹⁰⁶ Most Iranians are impoverished by the standards of the developed world, but many Guards live well. Foreign Minister Zarif dismissed the reimposition U.S. sanctions in 2018, saying, “We have survived against the will of the United States for the last forty years, and I believe we will survive for the next forty years.”¹⁰⁷

In 2018 Khamenei ordered the Guards to reduce its financial activities, raising the hope that the regime has decided to loosen the IRGC’s grip on the economy.¹⁰⁸ In January 2019 Major General Jafari acknowledged that Iran was

“in an economic war with the enemy.”¹⁰⁹ One month earlier, Reza Pahlevi, son of the late Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlevi, said that “Iran should have an economy like South Korea, but it has an economy like North Korea.”¹¹⁰ By 2020 declining oil prices, continued state corruption, and inefficiencies, the cumulative efforts of sanctions, and the jolt to public health by COVID-19 had devastated the Iranian economy.¹¹¹

Empire of Terror

Iranians—boys, girls, men, women—are all IRGC.

—Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, October 2017

The world has changed many times since bands of frenzied Iranian students stormed the American embassy in Tehran in 1979 and abducted its personnel. In that year of revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini fashioned the Guards to serve as a bodyguard for his sovereignty. That bodyguard became an empire, and that empire threatens the world forty-two years later. For over four decades, Iranians have endured authoritarianism similar to that shared by citizens of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

The Soviet Union and Nazi Germany have long fallen, but the regime of the Iranian mullahs is still alive. Most Iranians subsist in a sour mix of poverty and fear, and they cannot avoid the Guards. Parents fear betrayal by their children, students fear tattling by classmates, workers are fearful confiding among themselves, and friendships are tested by a widespread fear of being reported to authorities. The Guards have created an empire of fear.

Those free spirits who remain in Iran often keep silent. The revolution has mostly been a disappointment for all but its most ardent supporters and the beneficiaries of its distorted economy. Common complaints are poor living conditions, Basij brutality, cultural isolation, forced dress codes, corruption, and parti-bazi, a term referring to the exploitation of personal connections.

Passive resistance continues. Many Iranian mosques are often empty at prayer times. In 2015 a Guards commander estimated that only about three thousand of the country's fifty-seven thousand Shia mosques were fully operational. And, of these three thousand, some functioned only during the religious months of Ramadan and Muharram. The state-run mosques are particularly barren.¹ Iranian-sponsored, anti-American demonstrations do not draw the crowds of the 1980s or 1990s.²

Loathing for the Islamic Republic is palpable in the demonstrations and attacks on property and police around the country. Fearful of being attacked, the Guards are careful when they enter city slums. Most demonstrators are young, relatively poor, and usually leaderless.³

Iran has a high misery index, which is an economic calculation used by the Cato Institute to measure living standards.⁴ While the misery index spiked under Ahmadinejad, Iran's annual rate of inflation surged in 2018 and now stands at nearly 40 percent. With sanctions, it could soar significantly higher. The rate of "absolute" poverty, characterized by extreme privation and hardship, is unusually high in the cities. Iran's overall unemployment rate of 12 percent in 2018 is rising.⁵ Iranian leaders have called for a "resistance economy."

However, the children of well-connected Iranian leaders flourish in 2020. They are called aghazadeh, an uncomplimentary term referring to privileged and spoiled offspring of the ruling Iranian elite. Khamenei's second son is worth an estimated \$3 billion. A former governor of the Central Bank of Iran estimated that approximately five thousand aghazadeh who live abroad are worth more than Iran's foreign exchange reserves.⁶

By spring 2020 Iranian authorities tried to divert social discontent toward the United States. Iran's foreign ministry protested the killing of a handcuffed Black American who was in police custody in May 2020. Some Iranian students demonstrated to show solidarity with non-white Americans, but there is no record of broad-based street marches. However, youth do often protest against Iran's leaders and the system they impose on that country. Protests are not new. They occurred in 1999, 2001, 2009, and 2017–19. But some of the 2020 protests were loud and bold and may portend a rocky future for Iran's leadership.⁷

Heroes and Antiheroes

Many of the revolution's early leaders who were discussed in earlier chapters have died, and others who were young at the government's creation are now in late middle age. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini inspired generations of Iranians to solidify and export his version of Shia Islam. When he died, Iran mourned. The ayatollah's body, sealed in a white shroud and encased in glass atop a pyramidal funeral prier, lay in state as hundreds of thousands of Iranians assembled to pay final tribute to their spiritual leader. Khomeini's death is commemorated every year by large crowds at Imam Khomeini's Mausoleum in southern Tehran. Ayatollah Khamenei traditionally speaks at the event, but it was cancelled in 2020 out of fear of the coronavirus.⁸ Khomeini's image today is mixed, as some Iranians curse him for destroying the lives of so many innocents and plunging the country into a new dark age stripped of joy.

His nemesis Shah Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlevi, King of Kings and Light of the Aryans, had died years earlier. For many Iranians, the dethroned ruler is remembered as a feckless and pathetic leader, ill-matched and outmaneuvered against a monomaniacal ayatollah. The scholar Abbas Milani drew from Shakespeare's Richard II to describe the tragedy of the throne: "For God's sake let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings."⁹ Death followed the shah, as two of his four children killed themselves.¹⁰

If the last shah is little mourned, his father, the Cossack-Persian with a commanding presence, "Machine Gun" Reza Shah, is increasingly venerated. For some Iranians, he has become a hero in the Aristotelian sense. For the ancient Greeks, heroes were not necessarily noble, or upright, or humane. Heroes were those men and women whose actions had enduring effects on society. Many of today's generation credit Reza Shah for bringing prestige and some modernity to Iran. In spring 2018, at a large stadium in Tehran, the crowd yelled, "Reza Shah! Reza Shah!" again and again.¹¹

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former Guard and hardline president, remains a controversial figure in Iran. The angry student who became mayor of Tehran and then president of Iran fell out with senior politicians in 2013 and has not fully repaired his standing. He openly enriched some of the Guards, but he likely pocketed money before his term ended.¹² Many Iranians see him as corrupt and,

increasingly, silly.

The Storm Petrels: Free Thinkers and Artists

Storm petrels are seabirds who warn of an impending storm. Ancient seamen took note when the storm petrels circled, squawked, and then flew away. According to lore, the flight of petrels portended a ferocious storm. Iranian free spirits were the first to flee revolutionary Iran, if they could. Like petrels, Iranian free thinkers fled and landed, if they could, on safer shores.

Iranian artists and intellectuals hounded by the Basij and local police and discussed in earlier chapters have gone in different directions. Googoosh, the most popular chanteuse in Iran, was trapped in Iran for twenty years. She left and had a whirlwind tour to sold-out audiences in North America. Back in Iran, she was sentenced in absentia to prison for making a joke about a mullah. It is not likely that she will leave her Beverly Hills mansion to serve a sentence. Younger generations of Iranians have rediscovered her music and adore it.¹³

Marjane Satrapi's snappy graphic novel *Persepolis* has hit the mainstream, as even libraries in Texas use the work to promote adult literacy.¹⁴ Like many liberal Iranian expatriates, Marjane will not visit today's Iran and would not be given a warm reception by the Guards if she tried. As of summer 2020 Marjane had helped create six films, the last of which was about another independent and creative woman, Marie Curie.¹⁵

Shohreh Aghdashloo, the actress who escaped revolutionary Iran to begin a flourishing career in the West, continues to advocate for liberalism in her homeland. She starred in a movie called *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, in 2008, about Soraya Manutchehri, the thirty-five-year-old woman put to death on false charges of adultery. With gritty realism, the film highlighted the carnival-like atmosphere of her stoning. Soraya's remains lie in an unmarked grave, but she still lives in memory.¹⁶

Salman Rushdie, once sentenced to death for snickering at the Koran in the *Satanic Verses*, no longer hides in the shadows in fear of a Qods Force

assassination team. Iran periodically promotes boycotts of his books.¹⁷ However, this did not deter Emory University from inviting him to the faculty.¹⁸ Rushdie remains a perennial contender for the Nobel Prize in literature. Still, today, many civil libertarians remain wary and fear the long reach of Iran's intelligence services. They see the Rushdie affair as a defeat for those who would satirize elements of Islam.

Middle East scholar Daniel Pipes opined that Khomeini established what may be considered "Rushdie rules," which continue to guide and shackle conversations about Islam. These rules hold that, in the words of Khomeini, those who oppose "Islam, the Prophet, and the Koran" may be killed.¹⁹ Today, Western intellectuals around the world tread carefully when they trespass the world of blasphemy. Iranians who fled abroad and campaign against the Iranian government sometimes live in fear. They fear being tracked down and killed by Iranian services, and some fear being deported back to Iran.²⁰

Some Iranian exiles labor under the memories of the past. Ayanaz "Anni" Cyrus was married off as a child bride in Iran and escaped to America. She explained, "I was sold as a child bride in Islamic Iran. To save my life, I ran from Hell into the Unknown. America saved me."²¹ But she found many Americans, particularly self-described feminists, uninterested in her stories of frequent, unreported, and unpunished rape in Iran. She explained, "There is no such thing as rape between a husband and his wife. Women are just property."²² Most girls have little chance to leave, and many are forced into arranged marriages.²³

Women are still hanged in Iran. Sarah M. was the 104th woman executed during the reign of Rouhani and the first executed in 2020.²⁴ But some women celebrities leave, if they can. Feisty Iranian Olympic medalist Kimia Alizadeh was the only Iranian woman to win an Olympic medal in the 2016 games. She fled Iran in 2020 explaining, "I wore whatever they told me to wear. . . . I repeated everything they told me to say." She hopes to compete in future Olympics but not under the Iranian flag.²⁵

Leaders

As of late 2020 Ayatollah Khamenei holds steady to his vision of Iran's "new civilization," regularly inveighing against American-Jewish alleged conspiracies. In September 2020, the aged ayatollah tweeted to the world that Arab states who want to make peace with Israel are doing so under the pressure of "Israelis & filthy Zionist agents of the U.S.—such as the Jewish member of Trump's family—with the utmost cruelty against the interests of the World of Islam."²⁶ In Iran, the media and Guards refer to the supreme leader as the "guardian of the Muslim world." He speaks of transforming the Guards into a large international force to implement Islamic law and to destroy Western influence.²⁷ United States leaders are concerned that Iran is doing just that.

In November 2018 U.S. envoy James Jeffrey cautioned that Iran would create a Shia version of the Islamic State to conquer Iraq if given the opportunity to do so. In death, Soleimani still commands Olympian status in the eyes of the world's Shia. In late 2019 he promised President Trump, "If you cross our red line, we will destroy you. We will not leave any move unanswered."²⁸ But it was he who was destroyed several months later and received the status of martyr that he repeatedly requested.

The Guards' Enemies List

The United States still stands atop Iran's enemy list and is likely to remain there indefinitely. Periodically, Iranian leaders assure Western audiences that they have no argument with Americans. Ayatollah Khamenei explained that exclamations of "Death to America" refers to dislike for American policies, not an actual wish for the destruction of the country. The "aim of the slogan is not death to American people. The slogan means death to U.S. policies and arrogance."²⁹ But some observers are skeptical and point to the often-repeated Guards-run press characterizations of Westerners as greedy, aggressive, unsophisticated, superficial, and intent on destroying Islam.

Prominent Americans who disparage the United States continue to receive warm receptions in Iran. During a solidarity trip to Iran, Louis Farrakhan chanted "Death to America" and declared that "America has never been a democracy."³⁰ Academic leftists toast Hezbollah fellow travelers for the pursuit of social

justice.³¹ Some speak of an American “neo-conservative” plot to take the United States to war against Iran.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has demanded that Iran abandon its nuclear weapons program, shutter its heavy-water reactor, and open all nuclear facilities to international inspection. It must also abandon its ballistic-missile program and end its support for Middle Eastern terrorist groups, including Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. It must halt support for Houthi militia, pull out of Syria, and stop arming the Taliban.³² Iran must cease harboring al Qaeda leaders.³³ As of this writing, there is no evidence that Iran will comply with the secretary’s demands. Former Guards leader Safavi has declared that the conflict between Iran and the United States is ideological and fundamental.

Some observers are convinced that Iran will continue to look for means and places to attack the United States.³⁴ The long reach of the Guards extends throughout the world, including the United States. In August 2018 two Iranian men were indicted for conducting surveillance at a Jewish facility in Chicago and gathering information on backers of the Iranian opposition group Mujahedin-e Khalq.³⁵

Iran continues to court the leaders of the Green-Red Axis who offer a sympathetic account of controversial issues. Code Pink announced it would send a “peace delegation” to Iran to help “move our two nations from a place of hostility and military threats to a place of mutual respect and peace with one another.”³⁶

The Guards and the MOIS also continue to engage in espionage abroad. In 2019 German prosecutors charged an army linguist knowledgeable about German military operations in Afghanistan with passing secrets to what they referred to as “Iranian intelligence.” In response to this and other Iranian intelligence activities, the European Union placed several Iranians on its terrorist list and froze their financial assets.³⁷

Israel and Saudi Arabia

In November 2018 Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei reiterated that Israel was a “cancerous tumor” and must be “removed and eradicated.” Khamenei previously branded Israel as the “sinister, unclean rabid dog of the region.” He blamed “Zionists” for the antigovernment demonstrations held across Iran.³⁸ Iranian leaders continue to promise to eliminate Israel from the map. Iran hopes to encircle Israel with proxies that control thousands of missiles and to saturate its cities with bombs.³⁹ In response, Israel’s defense chief has warned that his country will seek to “destroy any Iranian military presence” in Syria.⁴⁰

Iran has attacked Israeli and Jewish targets in the past, and some countries have warned Iran that they suspect the Guards have further lethal designs. Germany admonished Iran to stop surveilling persons or groups, particularly Israelis. For example, the Guards were caught gathering intelligence on the former head of the German-Israel Friendship Society.⁴¹

Iranian leaders have not warmed to Saudi Arabia, and both countries compete for influence in the Middle East, notably Yemen. Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic relations with Iran after the execution of a Shia cleric triggered outrage among Shia across the Middle East.⁴² Saudi Arabia welcomed President Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal but is less enthusiastic about his December 2018 pledge to pull U.S. troops from the Middle East.⁴³

The Mullahs’ Enemies at Home

As of this writing, Major General Salami commands the Guards and boasts that the organization can meet any domestic threat. The claim is dubious. Protests rocked the streets in 2019 and early 2020. Further, this “sedition” is deeply rooted in the grinding poverty and the fatalism of today’s generation. Some Iranians feel that they have little to lose by trying to dismantle an Islamic regime under which they have known little but gloom. The persecution of Christians is still rampant, though a handful of imprisoned believers who were sentenced for holding illegal church meetings have been released. According to a Christian advocacy group, Iran is among the top ten worst nations where Christians experience extreme abuse.⁴⁴

The 2,500-year-old Jewish community has shrunk by 90 percent of its prerevolutionary size to about twelve thousand members. Some Iranian Jews stress that “we’re not an entity outside of the Iranian nation. We are part of it.”⁴⁵ But others fear fetishized anti-Semitism and being whisked away to prison on false charges of espionage for Israel. They pray in the shadows, as do Christians and Baha’i.

Khamenei calls for a “new Islamic-Iranian civilization,” and his blueprint for achieving it is similar to that of Khomeini. Once state institutions are solidly Islamized, the duty of citizens and government agents alike is to foster the creation of an “Islamic country,” which will then serve as a template for a more extensive “Islamic civilization.”⁴⁶ In March 2017 Major General Jafari promised, “We are on the path that leads to the rule of Islam worldwide.”⁴⁷ His successor, Major General Salami, has reiterated Iran’s goal to exterminate Israel, promising to destroy both Israel and the United States if either country makes the “slightest mistake.”⁴⁸

Personal Reflections

The following comments are the views of this author and not the official or unofficial view of the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Intelligence Community, or any other agency or department of the United States government.

The twentieth century saw states with totalitarian ideologies that were built to last indefinitely. Among them were the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Only one of the three still exists. This is the Islamic Republic of Iran, which will be judged on the cold dais of history.

1. Is it likely that Iranians will overturn their government in the next five years?

This author has no reason to believe that the current regime will lose power in the next five years. As of late 2020 the Guards are firmly in control, and there are no indicators of large-scale, sustained, coordinated, externally supported, and active resistance that will overthrow the government. The fate of the Guards is inexorably tied to the mullahs' influence in Tehran; they need each other to survive. It is likely that if the mullahs are driven from power, the Guards will follow. If the Guards are substantially weakened, the rule of the mullahs will falter and possibly collapse.

Some observers are optimistic about change. Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi has opined, "It seems to me that we are witnessing the beginning of a big protest movement that can go well beyond the Green wave of 2009. It would not surprise me if it becomes something bigger."⁴⁹ Perhaps she is right, but other observers of Iran are less optimistic. Sanam Vakil and Hossein Rassam noted that for thirty years, Khamenei has been building a vast intelligence and military structure and has larded the foreign bank accounts of the Guards leadership to keep them fiercely loyal. He has developed a "deep state." They note, "When Khamenei dies, the deep state will ensure that whoever replaces him shares its hardline views."⁵⁰ As of 2020 the Iranian regime has restricted mobile internet access in several provinces. The Guards still kill protesters openly in the streets and secretly in the shadows and in the prisons. Some observers have speculated that in late 2019 the Guards and police killed over two hundred protesters.⁵¹

Many unpopular and despotic regimes have survived for decades, despite catastrophic collapses of living standards and widespread despair. As an example, the Soviet economy could not provide enough revenue to sustain government operations. However, this did not promote a national uprising. Cuba and North Korea hold their citizens in desperate conditions, but their leadership remains in power. Many Iranians would be delighted to rid themselves of the Guards, but they understand the risks of organizing to do so. Organized and effective resistance is not likely for years. However, anecdotal and passive resistance to the Basij sporadically occur.

2. If public sentiment against the regime escalates, what will be the likely direction of the Guards?

History offers a confused predictive picture. There have been instances in which palace guards switched sides to take arms against the ruling regime. This happened in earlier revolutions, such in France in 1789, Russia in 1917, and Iran in 1979. Much has been written about the defections of leading Iranian military personnel to Khomeini. In the desperate last days of the shah, some military and intelligence personnel defected to the revolution and, in a future revolution, Guards could switch sides. Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin argue that “much to the chagrin of the ruling clerics they (Iranians) root their national identity in their pre-Islamic past.”⁵²

The Guards might follow the ride of the SS or path of the KGB. Many Germans fought a “Death Ride” for Hitler. A defeat was all but certain after summer 1944, but Germany fought tenaciously for nine more months. Of Hitler’s closest lieutenants, only Albert Speer refused to enforce the “Nero Order,” to torch Germany to deny it to the Red Army. In the Battle of Berlin virtually every street was contested, and the SS put up a particularly stiff defense. The SS fighters, particularly the foreign divisions, feared retribution by the Red Army and many were driven by devotion to Hitler and what remained of his cratered Nazi empire. They were dead enders who had little to lose by fighting to the end. If Iran’s regime is pressed for survival, its Guards could follow this near-certain suicidal devotion to their national leadership.

However, there is another model. The Soviet Union was never militarily defeated. Instead, it decommissioned itself and transitioned to a temporary, quasi-democratic state. Many KGB leaders positioned themselves to benefit from privatization, and some moved into criminal activities. It could be that today’s Guards will continue to engorge themselves in the business world and relinquish their security role. However, there is no current evidence that this will happen soon.

3. Are Iran’s leaders sincere when they hint at Western-style reform?

There is no reason to believe that Iranian leaders will moderate their rule. Many of the current reforms are temporary and anodyne.⁵³ There have been few enduring, liberalizing, and meaningful reforms in the forty years of the mullahs’

rule. Most changes, such as the 2019 declaration that females can attend soccer matches, have been cosmetic.⁵⁴ Only months earlier, a young woman was sentenced to prison for waving her hijab on top of a stick: “My sentence has been issued—twenty years for protesting against an unjust law.”⁵⁵ Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Middle East research and advocacy director, remarked that “2018 will go down in history as a year of shame for Iran. The staggering scale of arrests, imprisonments and flogging sentences reveal the extreme lengths the authorities have gone to in order to suppress peaceful dissent.”⁵⁶ In December 2019 a Tehran revolutionary court sentenced nine Christians to prison for practicing their faith.⁵⁷ Prisoners are still tortured on the blood-slicked floors of Evin prison.

Iranian leaders are adept at information operations and taqiyya, or deception. Khamenei approved the presidential candidacy of Mohammad Khatami, a supposed moderate, in the June 1997. Khatami’s charm offensive accentuated a “dialogue of civilizations” at a time when many intellectuals were concerned about a clash of civilizations. Temporarily, Iranian leaders toned-down the sharp anti-Western rhetoric and smiled in conversation with the Clinton administration. The president lifted some sanctions, and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright formally apologized for the 1953 coup.⁵⁸ This did not lead to enduring reforms, and Iran is still developing nuclear weapons. It did not liberalize its politics or economy.

The privatization of the economy was less driven by market forces than by the opportunism of the Guards. For years, Western observers have highlighted the rift between the traditionalists and reformers among the political and religious leadership. Iran’s bureaucracies are riven by infighting and backbiting. But the leadership has not signaled that it will liberalize Iran’s economy or culture.

All of those in power today adhere to the basic principles of Khomeinism, just as all Nazi leaders followed Hitlerism to the end. Hitler’s inner circle had different backgrounds and priorities. Some were professional soldiers and other capable planners. There was an economist, a career diplomat, another was a vulgar propagandist, and several were theoreticians and lawyers. Nonetheless, they were all committed Nazis who were ideologically bound together by the principles of National Socialism and devotion to Adolf Hitler.

In contrast, there were reforms in the Soviet Union. There were pronounced doctrinal and strategic rifts among leaders in the Soviet Politburo, which led to

economic and cultural changes after World War II. There were some “Red Woodstocks,” or controlled Western musical festivals, and by the late 1980s the economy was partially opened to small, private enterprises.⁵⁹ This led to a systemic reworking, or perestroika, of the Soviet Union. It is possible that Iran’s regime will adopt the Soviet model of gradual reform and decommission itself. But as of late 2020 there is no evidence that Khamenei intends to allow any political opposition. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared: “Presidents of Iran have come and gone. Some presidents were considered moderates, others, hard-liners. But they have all served that same unforgiving creed, that same unforgiving regime, that creed that is espoused and enforced by the real power in Iran, the dictator known as the supreme leader, first Ayatollah Khomeini, and now Ayatollah Khamenei.”⁶⁰

4. Are Iran’s leaders serious when they speak in apocalyptic terms?

Yes, they are. There is every reason to believe that the leaders are sincere about hastening the return of the Twelfth Imam and using nuclear weapons to do so. The Iranian leadership is committed to the goals and traditions of Khomeini, and for forty years they have reasserted this zeal. Iranian leaders mean what they profess. Western powers dismissed the homicidal oratory of the Soviet and German leaders in the twentieth century only to fight them in hot and cold wars.

Professor Michael Howard has observed that “people often of masterful intelligence, trained usually in law or economics or perhaps in political science, who have led their governments into disastrous decisions and miscalculations because they have no awareness whatever of the historical background, the cultural universe, of the foreign societies with which they have to deal.”⁶¹ In the twentieth century, Western leaders were naïve about the ambitions of totalitarian leaders and discounted their militant rhetoric and rantings. After Lenin took power, he instituted the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and began killing his opponents in what he this “revolutionary terror.” Stalin escalated the killing. Both Soviet dictators courted Western leaders with promises of tolerance and peace. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler outspokenly talked about annihilating entire races and creating an Aryan empire in the east. National Socialism was rooted in the conviction that it was natural and right for the Germans to rule over lesser

people. However, to Western leaders, Hitler appealed to building natural frontiers and jettisoning the harsher terms of the Versailles treaty.

If some Westerners dismiss the mullahs' fatwas as cloying rhetoric, the Guards guide their lives by them. Iranian leaders are committed to world conquest. They could use nuclear weapons over Israel or the United States to create conditions for the return of the Mahdi or out of blind hatred. According to plan, the Twelfth Imam would return as the Mahdi in a world convulsing with death and blood and fire.⁶²

5. What is likely to happen if there is a war between Iran and the United States?

Some observers fear stepped-up hostilities between Iran and the United States. Trita Parsi, a former director of the National Iranian American Council, has opined, "We're on our way towards a new cold war with Iran or, even worse, a military confrontation. Will anyone stop Trump?"⁶³ However, the United States is already at war with Iran. Iran supplies the Taliban with weapons to kill U.S. forces and subsidizes terrorist organizations globally. As of this writing, Iran likely does not have the capabilities to annihilate American cities. A deployable nuclear weapon will change this equation.

Some observers such as Trita Parsi assert that "whatever (nuclear) danger exists . . . there's really no solution that is superior to a diplomatic (one) based on inspections and verification."⁶⁴ In my view, however, there is no alternative to using military force to destroy Iran's nuclear production sites before they become fully operational. A successful attack on Iran would also send a signal to would-be nuclear nations that they could be destroyed.⁶⁵ Israel destroyed Iraq's and Syria's nuclear-weapons facilities, and the world is a safer place for it. These were raids that did not lead to generalized war. Should Iran acquire nuclear weapons, the world will change forever, and not for the better.

For years, Iranian leaders have shown contempt for what they see as American weakness and lack of resolve to attack Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini flamboyantly derided President Carter. He and the Iranian hostage takers of 1979 posed with

caricatures of American President Jimmy Carter snickering that “America cannot do a damn thing.”⁶⁶ Toward Iran, the United States continued to vacillate between policies of disinterest and conciliation after the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Appeasement reached its apotheosis with the JCPOA of the Obama administration. This brought time and resources for the Islamic Republic to develop its nuclear weapons program. It did not bring respect Iranian respect for the United States.

Military historian Victor Davis Hanson has written about the futility and self-delusion of appeasement in the twentieth century. British prime minister Neville Chamberlain was toasted as a great peacemaker after the Munich Agreement of 1938. But this was a deceptive peace that invited the bloodiest war in history.⁶⁷ Iranian leaders estimate that once they obtain nuclear weapons the United States will not be able to do a damn thing to stop its global ambitions.

6. How will history speak of the Guards?

If the Guards’ grip on power collapses, are they likely to be brought to trial? Perhaps. In the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials of 1946 former leaders of a vanquished Germany were judged by their conquerors. Prosecutors declared that entire units of SS were criminal organizations. Several of those found guilty of major war crimes were hanged, some were imprisoned, and others were spared. The trials became part of world history and a legacy of international law.

This was not the case of the NKVD/KGB. There was no singular event, comparable to the Battle of Berlin, which collapsed the Soviet Union. Instead and rare in history, the one-party state voluntarily transferred its power. There were no Nuremberg-style trials that shone the light on the Soviet concentration camp system and the Great Terror.⁶⁸ Notorious camps such as Kolyma and Magadan never became museums and memorials, in contrast to Auschwitz and Dachau. December 20 continues to be celebrated as the “Day of the Chekist.”⁶⁹

If the Guards are forcefully removed from power and brought to trial, what are the likely charges they will face? Will they be tried for crimes against peace; crimes against humanity; or war crimes? At Nuremberg war crimes included

“murder, ill-treatment and deportation to slave labor or for any other purpose of civilian population of or in occupied territory, murder or ill-treatment of prisoners of war or persons on the seas, killing of hostages, plunder of public or private property, wanton destruction of cities, towns or villages, or devastation not justified by military necessity.”⁷⁰

In Nuremberg-like trials, will the Guards be held accountable for the death and destruction they have visited on populations from Lebanon through Yemen? Will the assassinations of dissidents abroad be considered war crimes? Will the Guards be held accountable for training and funding its terrorist proxies in the Middle East, such as Hezbollah? Will leaders face a criminal court for the mass murder of U.S. Marines in Lebanon?

Will the Guards be brought to account for destroying Iran’s ancient Jewish and Christian communities and their widespread persecution of Baha’i? And what of poisoning the minds of generations of Iranian children and raising teenagers to fasten bombs to themselves to kill themselves and others? Will the tortured victims of Evin prison receive restitution, and will the families of those murdered by the Guards receive an apology? They may. But this generation of Iranian children is raised to celebrate death, not to apologize for it. Children are raised to die as martyrs.⁷¹

A Wicked Problem and an Epic Poem

Wicked problems are those broad, intractable, long-term puzzles that involve many people; have vast economic, social and security implications; and are interconnected with other problems. They are cumbersome for policymakers.⁷² Horst Rittel defines wicked problems as those that are unique and offer no definitive formula. The nuclear-weapons development program in North Korea has similar traits to the program in Iran but is different. The coronavirus of 2020 is a wicked problem that spawns myriad related problems that afflict the entire world. Poor countries have perennial wicked problems with no single solution.

There are no universal templates to solve wicked problems.⁷³ Iran is a wicked problem, and many subproblems—poverty, low educational levels, corruption,

poor infrastructure, weak medical services—bleed into each other. Should Iran acquire nuclear weapons, the wicked problem of Iran will become an existential threat to its enemies. Only the physical destruction of nuclear sites can stop this, and this must be done soon.

However, Iran is more than a problem; it is an ancient and enduring drama. The story of Iran bears the hallmark of Scheherazade and the Thousand and One Nights. In the folktale, a Persian king marries a virgin each evening and has her killed at dawn so that she cannot compromise her sexual fidelity. However, a clever Scheherazade delays her death by spinning a new story each night for the king and leaving it unfinished. The mesmerized king waits each night for the next chapter, and Scheherazade continues her tales without end. Today, Iran is a saga seemingly without end, and the only certainty in this drama is change. What will become of Iran's sword and shield—its Guards? President Trump said, "Oppressive regimes cannot endure forever, and the day will come when the Iranian people will face a choice."⁷⁴ Will Iran, like Scheherazade, begin a new chapter? Will it end as a heroic poem or continue as a wicked problem? Let history judge.

[Appendix](#)

Important Personalities

Abadi, Hamide Reza Ahmad: The “Big Mouth Basiji” who regularly appears at proregime demonstrations.

Abbasi, Hassan: Political strategist and conspiracy theorist at the Guards-run Imam Hussein University.

Aghdashloo, Shohreh: Acclaimed Iranian actress who fled Iran after the revolution.

Ahmadinejad, Mahmoud: Former student revolutionary, mayor of Tehran, minister of intelligence, and president of Iran from 2005 to 2013.

Al-Banna, Hassan: Anticolonial activist and religious organizer, he created the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 and was murdered in 1949.

Al-el-Ahmad, Jalal: Left-oriented social critic who combined themes of Frantz Fanon and Karl Marx. Popularized the term Gharbzadegi, or “Westoxification.”

Al-Jubeir, Adel: Western-raised and American-educated Saudi diplomat who served as ambassador and Saudi foreign minister.

Asadabadi, Jamaledin: Also known as al-Afghani, influential nineteenth-century advocate of Pan-Islamic unity.

Aslani, Minu: Leader of the Women’s Basij as of 2020.

Bahari, Maziar: Prisoner of Evin who wrote a book about his captivity that was made into a movie.

Bakhtiar, Shahpour: The last prime minister of Iran under the shah. He was murdered in 1991 at age seventy-seven on orders of Iranian political leaders.

Berezovsky, Boris: Russian-Jewish mathematician, magnate who died at age sixty-seven in Britain under still-undetermined circumstances.

Chamran, Mostafa: Iranian politician, physicist, military commander, and one of the founders of the Guards. Killed in combat in 1981.

Cyrus, King: Commonly known as Cyrus the Great, he founded the first Persian Empire in 549 BCE.

Darabi, Homa: American-trained Iranian physician who protested the Islamic Republic by lighting herself on fire.

Dix, Otto: German Weimar artist known for macabre battle sketches.

Ebadi, Shirin: Iranian intellectual, human rights activist, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Lives in exile.

Esfandiari, Haleh: Iranian American scholar who was a prominent journalist and civil service in the shah's Iran who was detained in Evin prison.

Fanon, Frantz: Physician and Marxist activist popular for his book *The Wretched of the Earth*. Died in 1961.

Freisler, Roland: Known as "Hitler's blood judge," he was a Nazi jurist and leader of the People's Court infamous for his theatrical verbal abuse of defendants, raving speeches, and frequent death sentences for political crimes.

Garaudy, Roger: French Resistance fighter turned-communist-turned-Muslim, he was a Holocaust denier and stronger support of Iran's Islamic Revolution.

Gentile, Giovanni: Italian political philosopher who contributed to the development of fascist ideology.

Gilani, Mohammad Mohammadi: Judge in the Revolutionary Courts of early postrevolutionary Iran, who gleefully sentenced men, women, and children to death in ten-minute trials on dubious charges of corruption of earth. May have had his two sons hanged.

Goebbels, Joseph: Propaganda minister in Nazi Germany.

Goering, Herman: Leading Nazi who was convicted as a major war criminal in Nuremberg. Died in 1946.

“Googoosh,” Faegheh Atashin: Popular Iranian singer with international following.

Grobba, Fritz: German career diplomat who promoted National Socialism among Arabs and Iranians.

Grosz, George: German anti-Hitler, procommunist cartoonist.

Hakakian, Roya: Iranian-born Jewish author who emigrated to the United States with her family.

Hanson, Victor Davis: Prominent American conservative military historian and classicist.

Harnack, Mildred: American executed in Germany for opposing Hitler.

Himmler, Heinrich: Early and important leader of Nazi Germany and founder of the Schutzstaffel, or SS.

Hook, Brian: Lawyer, diplomat, and senior advisor to U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo.

Howard, Michael: British military historian.

Humire, Joseph: Executive director of the Center for a Free Society and expert on terrorism and counterterrorism.

Imam Mahdi: For Twelver Shia, he is the last imam, and a messianic figure. Called the “Hidden Imam,” he is expected to emerge and reveal himself in end-of-days-like circumstances.

Jafari, Mohammad Ali: Succeeded Major General Safavi in 2007 to become commander of the Guards.

Khalkhali, Sadeq: A confidant of Khomeini and chief justice of the revolutionary courts who openly enjoyed sentencing people to death.

Khamenei, Ali: Early leader of Iran's revolution, president of Iran from 1981 to 1989, and supreme leader of Iran as of 2021.

Khomeini, Ruhollah: Known as Ayatollah Khomeini, he founded the Islamic Republic of Iran and remains the exemplar of piety for many Iranians.

Lajevardi, Asadollah: A former political prisoner of Evin prison who became a brutal warden and was known as "the Butcher of Evin."

Larijani family: A family of five brothers and many relatives who have, at different times, held leading positions in Iran, including speaker of the Majlis, chief of the judiciary, deputy foreign minister, and leading professors.

Livingstone, Ken: Former pro-Iranian mayor of London.

Manutchehri, Soraya: Iranian wife, mother, and subject of a movie who was stoned to death on false charges of adultery.

Maududi, Abdula: Pakistani Islamist philosopher and organizer who founded Jamaat-e-Islami. He died in 1979.

Mnuchin, Steven: U.S. Department of Treasury secretary as of 2020.

Montazeri, Ayatollah: Leader of the 1979 revolution who grew to regret the regime's cruelty, particularly against minority religions and political liberals. Died in 2009.

Mossadegh, Mohammad: Reformist prime minister who was removed from power in a coup in 1953.

Nafisi, Azar: Professor and author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, which offered her reflections on the clash between Western values and those of Revolutionary Iran.

Oren, Michael: Israeli statesman and historian.

Orwell, George: Pen name of Eric Blair. He wrote the dystopic novel 1984 and the novella Animal Farm, both as attacks on totalitarianism and communism.

Pahlevi, Mohammad Reza (sometimes spelled Pahlavi): Last shah of Iran, overthrown by Khomeini in 1979.

Pahlevi, Reza Shah: Founded the father-and-son Pahlevi dynasty by overthrowing the Qajar dynasty. Removed from power in 1941.

Parsi, Trita: Former president of the National Iranian American Council.

Pipes, Daniel: Middle East scholar and president of the Middle East Forum.

Pompeo, Mike: Soldier, lawyer, congressman, businessman, CIA director, and U.S. secretary of state.

Qutb, Sayyid: Highly influential Islamist, anticolonial activist who was hanged in 1966.

Rafsanjani, Akbar Hashemi: Influential politician, skilled in-fighter, president of Iran, head of Assembly of Experts, and billionaire. He died in 2017.

Rezai (Rezaei), Mohsen: Founder of Imam Hussein University and early commander of the Guards. He was replaced by Yahya Safavi in 1997.

Roosevelt, Kermit: Arabist, professor, businessman, and CIA officer who helped craft Operation Ajax, which removed Mossadegh as prime minister in 1953.

Rouhani, Hassan: Lawyer, scholar, has served as president of Iran since 2013.

Rushdie, Salman: Internationally acclaimed novelist and author of the 1988 Satanic Verses, which drew a fatwa from Ayatollah Khomeini.

Safavi, Navvab: Led sabotage and assassination plots of politicians and

introduced ideas of the Sunni Islamic Brotherhood to Iranians. Executed in 1955.

Salami, Hossein: The Guards' commander, as of 2019.

Satrapi, Marjane: Iranian cartoonist and social critic of Iran's leadership and the Guards and author of the graphic novel Persepolis.

Shabaani, Hashem: Iranian ethnic Arab who was hanged in 2014 on charges of belonging to a terrorist group.

Shariati, Ali: Sociologist and theologian who fused Western leftist ideas with Shia Islam. This "Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution" died in 1977.

Shirazi, Makarem: Grand ayatollah with the moniker "Sultan of Sugar" known for his wealth and corrupt practices.

Skorzeny, Otto: German Commando of World War II who held the moniker "the most dangerous man in Europe."

Soleimani, Qassam: Former popular and charismatic commander of the Guards Qods Force who was killed in January 2020.

Soltan, Neda Agha: Iranian twenty-six-year-old woman shot dead during a protest in 2009 and who became an icon for resistance to the Guards.

Stalin, Joseph: Communist revolutionary, colleague of Lenin, and dictator of the Soviet Union from 1922 to 1953.

Zaitsev, Vasily: Prolific Soviet sniper and war hero during World War II.

Zarif, Mohammad Javad: American-educated Iranian career diplomat, visiting professor, and minister of foreign affairs.

Glossary

Most of the definitions that relate to military affairs listed in this glossary are taken from U.S. military publications, which are included in the bibliography. Other definitions are the author's.

active measures: A type of political warfare that aims to influence opinions and outcomes. It includes propaganda, forgeries, front groups, and agents of influence.

agent of influence: A person uses his or her position to influence public opinion or decision-making to produce results beneficial to the country whose intelligence service operates the agent.

aghazadeh: Derogatory term referring to privileged children of Iran's ruling elite.

Artesh: Iran's conventional military forces—army, navy, air force. These are distinct from the Guards forces military forces.

Ashura Brigades: Basij paramilitary units with the mission of suppressing urban uprisings.

Assembly of Experts (Majlis-e Khobregan): A top clerical body consisting of eighty-six senior clerics who are elected every eight years by direct vote. They appoint or dismiss the supreme leader, monitor his performance and, in theory, are authorized to remove him if he is deemed incapable of fulfilling his duties.

asymmetric: In military operations, the application of dissimilar strategies, tactics, capabilities, and methods to circumvent or negate an opponent's strengths while exploiting his weaknesses.

Badr Corps Organization: A leading Iranian-supported Popular Mobilization unit in Iraq.

Basij: Basij Resistance Force, or Basij-e Mostaz'afin (Mobilization of the Oppressed), is a volunteer paramilitary organization that is part of the Guards. The Basij have several duties, particularly internal security and law enforcement. They also enforce morality codes. The singular is Basiji.

bazaaris: Independent business owners in Iran. Collectively they are an important social and economic cohort.

bonyad: Iranian charitable trusts that function as a parts of a Guards-run business empire.

Café Kerase: A popular café near Tehran University that is frequented by student Basij.

Caliphate: The political-religious Muslim state that existed between the death of Muhammad until the formal dissolution of the Caliphate in the twentieth century.

Center for Doctrinal Strategic Studies: A think tank of the Guards.

Chain Murders: Series of murders perpetrated by the Iranian services in autumn 1998 in which over eighty Iranian intellectuals and opponents of the regime were killed.

City of Games for Revolutionary Children: A Guards-controlled theme park in Mashad where children are indoctrinated and trained for future combat.

clandestine: Any activity or operation sponsored or conducted by governmental departments or agencies with the intent to assure secrecy and concealment.

Code Pink: A far-left American based activist group praised by Iranian leaders.

Cooperative Foundation: Sometimes referred to as Basij Cooperative Foundation, it is one of the IRGC's largest financial enterprises in Iran.

counterintelligence: Information gathered and activities conducted to identify, deceive, exploit, disrupt, or protect against espionage, other intelligence activities, sabotage, or assassinations conducted for or on behalf of foreign powers, organizations, or persons or their agents, or international terrorist

organizations or activities.

death commissions: Ad hoc courts formed in the initial postrevolutionary period to sentence to death political opponents to death and execute them quickly.

defenders of the shrines (Modafe'an Haram): A broad term used in the Iranian media to refer to Iran-backed fighters (including Iranians, Lebanese, Afghans, and others) who defend Shia shrines in Syria and Iraq.

Evin prison: The official name of the prison is “Evin House of Detention.” It is a multipurpose prison in Tehran that has wards incarcerating political prisoners run by the Guards and the MOIS.

Expediency Council (Majma'-e Tashkhis-e Maslahat): The council is an advisory body for the supreme leader, with ultimate adjudicating powers in disputes over legislation between the Majlis (parliament) and the Guardian Council.

fascism: Originally, an Italian philosophy that exalts a nation or race and places national power in the hands of autocratic rule. Usually harsh and unforgiving law in all elements of society.

Fatemioun Division of Shia Liberation Army: The Afghan division of the SLA.

fatwa: A religious ruling usually made by an authoritative Islamic source.

Gharargah Sazandegi-ye Khatam al-Anbiya: Also known as Ghorb, this IRGC-controlled company is one of the largest in Iran.

Green Movement (Jonbesh-e Sabz): An anticlerical, reformist political movement that emerged after the presidential elections in 2009 in reaction to the reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Green-Red Axis: The partnership of left-oriented, non-Muslim, and Muslim activist organizations in civil society and in government decision making. Common themes are multiculturalism, skepticism of democracy and capitalism, anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Zionism.

Guardian Council (Shuray-e Negahban): One of the most influential political bodies in Iran. It consists of six clerics appointed by the supreme leader and six lay jurists nominated by the judiciary chief and approved by the Majlis. The council is in charge of endorsing all bills passed by the Majlis and has the power to veto them if it considers them inconsistent with the Constitution and Islamic law.

guerrilla force: A group of irregular, predominantly indigenous personnel organized along military lines to conduct military and paramilitary operations in enemy-held, hostile, or denied territory.

Hayderiyoun Division of the Shia Liberation Army: Iraqi division of the SLA.

Hezbollah: Sometimes spelled Hizbollah or Hizballah, it is an Iranian-sponsored, Lebanon-based Shia militant group. Considered a terrorist organization by the U.S. government. There are Hezbollah fighters in Iraq as of late 2019.

Houthi Movement: Also called Shia Ansar Allah, this is a Shia group in Yemen.

Imam Hussein University: Located in Tehran, it is home to the IRGC's training academy and career development center.

information operations: The integrated employment of the core capabilities of electronic warfare, computer network operations, psychological operations, military deception and operations security, in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities, to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting one's own.

intelligence: The product resulting from the collection, processing, integration, evaluation, analysis, and interpretation of available information concerning foreign nations, hostile or potentially hostile forces or elements, or areas of actual or potential operations.

intelligence and security services of Iran, Soviet Union, and Nazi Germany:

a. The dominant Iranian services are the Guards and Ministry of Military of Intelligence and Security.

b. The primary Soviet services were the “All-Russian Emergency Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage,” or CHEKA; “Joint State Political Directorate under the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR,” OGPU; “People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs,” NKVD; and the Committee for State Security, KGB.

c. The primary services of Nazi Germany were the Geheime Staatspolizei, Gestapo, and the Schutzstaffel, SS. Constituent groups were the Allgemeine SS, or General SS; Waffen-SS, Armed SS; and the Totenkopfverbände, SS-TV; and Sicherheitsdienst, SD.

intelligence officer: A member of a military intelligence service, police, or a nonmilitary intelligence service who is involved in intelligence activity.

irregular warfare: A violent struggle among state and nonstate actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population.

Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB): Primary governmental agency in charge of television broadcasting.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC): Sepāh e Pāsdārān e Enqelāb e Eslāmi. Sometimes called Pasdaran or Sepah. In this manuscript the IRGC is usually referred to as Guards.

Islamic world: Muslims consider this the land in which there is a majority of Muslims and lands in which sharia is practiced. The term sometimes refers to areas of Western states in which there are majority Muslim populations. Some Muslims argue that any territory that had been under Muslim rule will, forever, be part of the Muslim world. These countries include Israel, Spain, vast parts of India and the Balkans, and other parts of the world.

Islamism: Islamism refers to political Islam and is rooted in Islamic law. The conflict with Western norms and laws include the requirement that non-Muslims must acknowledge a subordinate religious, political, and social status when they are ruled by Muslims; the inferior status of women; the prohibition on homosexuality; the death penalty for apostasy; and many other laws. The term “Islamism” was popularized by Daniel Pipes, a Middle East scholar.

Islamofascism: A term popularized, but not coined, by the late Christopher

Hitchens. It refers to the fusion of Western fascistic principles with Islamism. The two political philosophies share a totalitarian view of society; intolerance of dissent; anti-Semitism and anti-Western sentiment; a homicidal hatred of their perceived enemies; and utopic aspirations.

jihad: There are two jihads. The Greater Jihad is a determination to become a better, generally more pious, Muslim. The Lesser Jihad is armed conflict to protect Muslims or expand the land of the Muslims. The word jihad, as used by leaders in Muslim communities around the world, generally means the Lesser Jihad. The call to jihad is generally, though not always, a call to armed force.

jihadist or jihadi: A militant Muslim who uses violence, among other tools, to defend Muslims or to expand the frontiers of Islam.

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA): Agreement under which Iran dismantled part of its nuclear program and international inspectors gained extensive access to monitor its compliance. In return, Iran received money.

Karbala: A city approximately one hundred kilometers southwest of Baghdad in which a battle of extreme historical importance to Shia was fought in 680.

komitehs: Iranian neighborhood committees.

Land-Bridge Corridor (LBC): The LBC fulfilled the historic Persian goal of a direct land route to the Mediterranean Sea through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

liberalism: A Western political philosophy that emphasizes autonomy, political and economic freedom, limited governance, and a belief in progress.

Majlis (Majles-e Shuray-e Eslami): The Islamic Consultative Assembly; Iran's 290-member parliament.

Martyrs and Self-Sacrificers Affairs Foundation (Bonyad-e Shahid va Omur-e Isargaran): An organization in charge of supporting the families of those killed safeguarding the ruling establishment—particularly during the Iran-Iraq War—as well as war veterans.

Massacre of '88: The execution of seven thousand prisoners in Evin prison

in summer 1988.

Mehr-e Eghtesad Investment Corporation: One of the IRGC's largest financial enterprises.

military deception: Actions executed to deliberately mislead adversary military, paramilitary, or violent extremist organization decision makers, thereby causing the adversary to take specific actions (or inactions) that will contribute to the accomplishment of the friendly mission.

Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS): The Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS, also known as Vezarat-e Ettela'at va Amniat-e Keshvar or VEVAK). A key Iranian intelligence service whose officers often partner with and sometimes compete against the Guards.

Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK): The People's Mujahedeen of Iran, more commonly known as the Mujahedin-e Khalq or MEK, is an anti-Iranian regime group. It was once listed by the United States as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) but was delisted in 2012.

Mykonos Assassination: Iranian-ordered assassinations of regime opponents in Berlin in 1992.

National Police Force: Iranian national police force that has special counter-riot units that work with the IRGC and the MOIS.

"Neither Gaza nor Lebanon": A controversial slogan chanted by protestors opposing the government, the Guards, and foreign policy that, in their judgment, prioritizes Iranian involvement in foreign wars over the material needs of Iranians at home.

New Horizons Conferences: Two international conferences held in Tehran to promote Holocaust denial, anti-Israel sentiment, and anti-Semitism.

Operation Ajax: The 1953 overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh.

Popular Mobilization Units (PMU): Iraqi militias that sometimes team with the Qods Force.

principlists (osulgarayan): Religiously and politically conservative Iranians who are devoted to the supreme leader and the principles of the Islamic Revolution.

proxy: A nonstate paramilitary group receiving direct assistance from an external power.

Qods Force: Sometimes spelled the Quds Force or the Qoods Force, it is the expeditionary arm of the Guards. It was established to project Iranian military power abroad and to export Iran's revolutionary ideas abroad.

Red Terror: A campaign of NKVD-directed killing and imprisonment in response to a failed attempt to assassinate Lenin.

resistance movement: An organized effort by some portion of the civil population of a country to resist the legally established government or an occupying power and to disrupt civil order and stability.

Saberin Unit: Elite commando unit in Iran's conventional ground forces.

salafism: A fundamentalist approach to Sunni Islam that seeks to return all elements of society to the time of the early Muslims.

SAVAK: Sazeman-e Ettelaat va Amniyat-e Keshvar was built under the last shah to monitor, infiltrate, and eliminate threats from opposition groups, particularly communists and revolutionary Islamists.

Schutzstaffel SS: Nazi protection squad and paramilitary organization built on two main branches—the Allgemeine SS (or General SS) and Waffen-SS (or Armed SS).

“Shaytan-e Bozorg” (“Great Satan”): Farsi phrase coined by Khomeini, used to describe the United States.

Shia Crescent: A term coined by Jordan's King Abdullah to describe Iran's mounting influence in countries of the greater Middle East in which there are countries with large Shia populations.

Shia Liberation Army (SLA): Qods Force-commanded divisions of largely Pakistani, Iraqi, and Afghan volunteers. SLA personnel are usually

deployed outside of Iran.

Shia revivalism: A revivalist Shia Islam made popular in the 1940s and 1950s in Iran. It blended activism with elements of socialism and Iranian nationalism.

siqeh: Temporary marriage in Shia that can last for as little as minutes.

soft threat: Power that is based on cultural values that can transform cultural identity and behavior.

soft war (Jang-e Narm): The Islamic Republic defines it as using culture and active measures to conduct war. Iran claims that the United States uses cultural infiltration as the dominant tactic in its cultural war against Iran.

spy: As defined by the Guards, “A spy is an agent who is recruited to illegally obtain secret and confidential information for specific objectives.”

taqiyya: Lying to advance or to protect Islam. The term is generally and historically applied to the practice of Shia disguising their religious affiliation when they lived in Sunni-majority countries. Today, the term has broader applications.

Terror Club: Iranian show trial of 2012 of twelve persons who were accused of being spies for Israel trained to conduct terrorism.

terrorism: The unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political.

traitor: A person who has wittingly given state secrets or who has switched allegiance to a foreign policy without proper authorization.

Travelers to the Light: Iranian youth who traveled on excursions to battlefields of the Iran-Iraq War.

Tudeh Party: Literally the Party of the Masses, this was a communist party formed in early 1940s. Tudeh was subject to crackdowns both under the former regime of Pahlavi and after the 1979 revolution. The party was officially banned in the 1980s.

Velayat-e faqih (Guardianship of Juris consult): Enshrined in Iran's constitution, this key concept is regarded a key pillar of Iran's current system. It is the requirement that a pious man, expert in Islamic law who has political acumen, should lead Islamic society. The leader, called Vali-ye Faqih (Guardian juris consult) is elected by a group of senior clerics, the Assembly of Experts.

Ward 209 in Evin prison: Overcrowded MOIS-run ward in Evin prison, in which political prisoners are incarcerated, tortured, and killed.

Ward 350 in Evin prison: IRGC-controlled ward infamous for sadistic guards and deplorable living conditions.

The West: Historically, the term meant all land west of Persia. By the nineteenth century it meant the more industrialized countries in Europe and the United States and Canada and other states with high levels of science, education, medical practices, and military capabilities. In the twentieth century, Japan and several other states, such as Australia and New Zealand, were considered part of the West.

wet operations: State-ordered assassinations generally of political opponents.

Zahra's Blue Eyes: Television series that depicts Israelis stealing the eyes of Palestinian children.

Zaynabiyoun Division of the Shia Liberation Army: Pakistani division of the SLA.

Notes

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