



Iranian Perceptions of the U.S. Soft Power Threat

Amir Toumaj



Image: Shirin Vaezi, an Iranian woman drummer in the progressive metal group Atria, sits with a bandmate in a Tehran art cafe. REUTERS

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iranian society has become more open, modern, secular, and pluralist, a trend at odds with the religious, traditional values of the regime. In response, self-described Islamist revolutionaries depict a world in which the U.S. government is targeting Iranian culture, as expressed in social norms and behavior. Rightly or wrongly, they fear that this cultural change could lead to a “soft overthrow” of the republic from within.

Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and like-minded Islamists describe this purported battle for the hearts and minds of Iranians as a “soft war,” based on the theory elaborated by political scientist Joseph Nye in his 2004 book,

Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics.¹ The theory refers generally to the ability to attract and persuade adherents via cultural and political ideals and policies rather than coercing through hard power. In this narrative, a soft overthrow could be achieved through uprisings—including those known as “velvet” or “color” revolutions, as experienced in Czechoslovakia in the late 1980s, and Georgia and Ukraine in the 2000s. Soft overthrow could also manifest itself in the rise to power of political factions and politicians who favor détente with the United States and lose the will to uphold ideology, reminiscent of the path taken by former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

In this soft war narrative, the United States wages its informational campaign not only through networks like Voice of America, but also effectively through American civil society, including Hollywood, the television, music, and fashion industries, social media, and video games—all of which have permeated Iranian society, and Iranian youth in particular, far more than U.S. government programs. This assessment applies the world over. In the narrative, one must stress, these expressions of American culture are considered direct tools of the U.S. government employed in a plot to agitate the Iranian public toward overthrow.

U.S. policymakers should be aware that what they see as perfectly innocent people-to-people interaction—whether involving science, education, culture, or arts and entertainment—is regarded by Iranian hardliners as coordinated government-run aggression. And it is perhaps worth noting that Iranian hardliners’ suspicions extend to moments like former first lady Michelle Obama’s presenting an Academy Award to *Argo*, a 2012 movie about the CIA-led rescue of six American embassy staff during the 1979 Tehran hostage crisis.

It will be a tall order for U.S. policymakers to convince Supreme Leader Khamenei that America is not seeking the Islamic Republic’s overthrow. By way of comparison, the QAnon conspiracy in the United States demonstrates how difficult it is to change the

perceptions of individuals who subscribe to a particular theory. Even if, hypothetically, Washington shut down Voice of America and the State Department’s Virtual Embassy Iran,² and renounced efforts to help the Iranian people circumvent internet censorship, it would then have to stop the dissemination of private sector and civil society exports as well. Furthermore, clerics and hardliners—not least the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—have a vested interest in maintaining the notion of an American-conducted soft war among their followers to sustain group solidarity. This concept has come to define their worldview, as well as their theology.

Concern About Western Cultural Invasion

Iran has long had a current whose adherents worry about Western modernity, secularism, and cultural influence eroding the country’s indigenous culture. That concern has stretched across the political spectrum, encompassing clerics, some secular intellectuals, and Islamic nativists, with the Iranian milieu having been significantly influenced by Western and non-Western thinkers alike, such as Marxists and critics of modernism.³ Leading to the 1979 revolution, that threat perception took on an anti-American hue among opposition to the Pahlavi monarchy, and later transformed into a defining feature of the Islamic Republic founders and of the current Supreme Leader.

For much of the Qajar Dynasty (1798–1925), Persia faced external pressure and internal manipulation by Great Britain and Russia, but it managed to resist direct colonial rule.⁴ It also selectively adopted aspects of European material and intellectual culture.⁵ By the early twentieth century, the Qajars were handing control of national resources to European interests under various concessions, drawing the ire of merchants, clergy,

and Western-educated intelligentsia. Combined with popular dissatisfaction over the state's arbitrary rule and destitute living conditions, such developments led to the constitutional revolution of 1905,⁶ resulting in a constitutional monarchy that was ultimately snuffed out in 1911 after the dissolution of the second parliament and the Russian and British occupation of Persia.⁷ The alliance between the intelligentsia and the clergy, with the latter having strengthened its position as an independent power center by the nineteenth century,⁸ was uneasy: clerics viewed Westernization and secularization as threatening Muslims and Islam, while secular thinkers who shaped constitutional discourse viewed Islam as incompatible with the modern world.⁹ Those tensions, which remain unresolved to this day, set the tone for discourse throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

In the early Pahlavi period, monarch Reza Shah (r. 1925–41) implemented a Western-style, top-down secularization and modernization program. The effort was similar to neighboring Turkey's initiative under leader Kemal Atatürk. The rules included European-style clothing for males and removal of the veil for women, which led to increased women's participation in society, even as Reza Shah's son and successor, Muhammad Reza, lifted mandatory enforcement in 1941.¹⁰ The Pahlavis advocated a Persian-centric Iranian identity rooted in the pre-Islamic past, at the cost of suppressing identities of non-Persian minorities, who until this day constitute nearly half of Iran's population. Iran furthermore witnessed a boom in modern entertainment, such as cinemas, theaters, cafes, restaurants, and Western films, which appealed especially to youth.¹¹ These developments raised concerns among the clergy and their religious conservative followers, many of whom, for instance, avoided the radio itself, on grounds that having a medium that broadcast music was religiously unlawful.¹² Other components of the Pahlavi modernization drive included overhauls and state authority expansion in education, the economy, and the judiciary, as well as curtailing the socioeconomic influence of clerics.¹³ The Pahlavis gradually alienated clerics and the merchant class

through these measures, upsetting a historical balance of power—the state-clergy alliance dated to the pre-Islamic Sassanid Empire (AD 224–651) and was increasingly adopted elsewhere in Muslim-ruled lands after the eleventh century¹⁴—and setting the stage for its opposition.¹⁵

Some consequences and contradictions that emerged from the early Pahlavi modernization remain unresolved to this day, with one result being a growing cleavage between the modern and traditional sectors of Iranian society—although the former would not outnumber the latter for several more decades.¹⁶ In the face of changes and reduced influence beginning in the late 1920s, the Shia clergy began to see itself more as an isolated, persecuted community,¹⁷ heralding a theme that continues to this day. It also failed to present an attractive lifestyle alternative to accompany its demand for religious obedience. For their part, Pahlavi modernists and nationalists tended to view clergy as purveyors of backward superstition, and often developed an inferiority complex with regard to the West, in turn ignoring or downplaying Western militarism, imperialism, genocide, slavery, and other offenses.¹⁸ Reassessment of modernization and Westernism in the mid-twentieth century by thinkers in Iran was a reaction to that mindset.

Anti-American opposition generally in Iran, and among intellectual figures in particular, has not necessarily been Islamist, and has included both secular and religious thinkers. The pro-Soviet Tudeh Party disseminated anti-imperialist and anti-American discourse in the 1940s and 1950s and, as one of the most organized parties of the period, broadly influenced opposition politics.¹⁹ Indeed, the Allied occupation of Iran during World War II and policies that led to rising inflation spurred membership in the Tudeh Party.²⁰ The Pahlavis crushed the Tudeh following the 1953 coup d'état against Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq; that episode and the significant Anglo-American role continue to be hotly debated today—yet what is clear is that the coup could not have succeeded without monarchy backing from key power centers like the

clergy and merchant class.²¹ In the post-coup years, anti-Americanism grew among other opposition elements,²² for reasons including the sense of a Pahlavi monarchy compliant with Western interests, press coverage of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and controversial monarchy policies attributed to the United States, along with increased state repression.²³ Those grievances, combined with an economic shortfall in the mid-1970s—not to mention the shah’s own missteps and indecisiveness—turned the public mood against him as well as the United States.²⁴ These negative perceptions, it bears noting, existed simultaneously with a positive view linked to U.S. government and charitable investments in Iranian education, agriculture, and cultural exchange.²⁵

Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–69), a secular leftist who later became an Islamic nationalist, stands as a seminal figure in influencing opposition to the monarchy, and in the discourse of the Islamic Republic to this day. In 1962, he popularized the term *gharbzadegi* (“Westoxication”; sometimes translated as “Occidentosis”) in a book with the same title, referring to “abandonment of traditional cultural identity and the blind imitation of all things Western”²⁶—in other words, cultural invasion. He borrowed the term from fellow Iranian thinker Ahmad Fardid (1909–94), who argued that Western civilization dating back to the Greeks lacked ethics and morality—a view oft-repeated by Iran’s founding leader Ruhollah Khomeini—and that Islamic philosophy had allowed itself to be corrupted by its Greek predecessor.²⁷ Fardid called for a return to Persian mysticism and poetry in order to transcend and ultimately abandon the West as an ontological model and way of life.²⁸ Al-e Ahmad identified what he considered “the fundamental contradictions between traditional Iranian society and the...pull of Western modernity.”²⁹ He thus argued that Pahlavi-era modernism was subservient to Western geopolitical and economic interests, and the primary driver for Iran’s dependence and Iranian alienation.³⁰ He regarded Shia Islam—which, he argued, was seared into Iranian identity—as a vehicle through which Iran could return to its authentic self and called for modernity based on those terms.³¹ At the same

time, Al-e Ahmad made dubious assertions such as blaming the West for a centuries-long plot to target Muslim unity going back to the Crusades, “inciting the Shia to bloodshed in Safavid times (1501–1736),” stoking war between Persia and the Ottoman Empire (16th–19th c.), and “encouraging Bahaism,” the faith founded in nineteenth-century Iran.³² Such conspiratorial commentary is visible in mainstream Islamist discussions to this day. That the monarchy censored Al-e Ahmad increased his attraction among dissenters.

A year after the publication of Al-e Ahmad’s book, the Pahlavi monarchy instituted in 1963 what was known as the White Revolution, a modernization program meant to bring Iran closer to the Western world through measures such as land redistribution and women’s suffrage.³³ The program was met with criticism from some secular intellectuals, large landowners, and increasingly militant clerics.³⁴ Ayatollah Khomeini began his anti-monarchy activism thereafter, specifically declaring that the monarchy was seeking to “approve and implement equality of the rights of men and women; meaning it wants to trample the necessary laws of Islam and the holy Quran; meaning it wants to take 18-year-old girls to mandatory service and to the barracks; meaning it wants to take chaste young Muslim girls to centers of prostitution with the force of the spear.”³⁵ In this context, lay religious thinker Ali Shariati, a charismatic figure who dressed in a suit and tie, delivered lectures in the late 1960s and 1970s calling for a revolutionary brand of Shia Islam to save Iran and its indigenous culture. His case was rooted in rediscovery of a sacred imagined past filled with righteous early believers and Shia imams, while criticizing the monarchy, Marxism, and conservative clerics.³⁶

Khomeini developed a theory of Shia jurisprudence for which anti-secular modernity was a pillar. A profoundly charismatic figure himself, Khomeini donned the anti-monarchy mantle, eventually outmaneuvering other opposition figures including members of the secular community to establish a theocracy in 1979 based on “guardianship of the

jurisprudent” (*velayat-e faqih*), whereby the national leader represents the Shia Mahdi (or messiah) on earth until Judgment Day.³⁷ That theory shifted the focus of Shia jurisprudence toward “cleansing the polluting politics and morals of secular modernity.”³⁸ After coming to power, Khomeini launched a (not very successful) cultural revolution to purify Iranian society of Western influence.³⁹ This cultural revolution was expressed in strict media censorship, banning video and then-prevalent VHS technology (lifted later), purging “un-Islamic” material from school curricula, ousting students and faculty, imposing the veil and other restrictions on women, and establishing and enforcing public morality laws.⁴⁰ Khomeini defined his own politics in strong anti-American and anti-Western terms, a legacy his successor, Khamenei, has vigorously upheld.⁴¹

From virtually the moment he became Supreme Leader in 1989, Ayatollah Khamenei has publicly expressed concern about a Western cultural invasion of Iran, whereby the spread of modern, decadent Western culture and political thought constitutes a threat to replace or dilute native heritage.⁴² Khamenei is right to worry about Western cultural invasion—because it has happened, and he has lost. That loss, however, was significantly attributable to the regime’s corruption, mismanagement, denial of civil liberties, and imposition of social and cultural restrictions, which met with resistance among the Iranian populace.⁴³ With technological advances making Western cultural products more accessible than ever, flouting the state’s ideals on public morality in favor of Western clothing and music became in itself an act of passive resistance.⁴⁴ Acts such as women’s defiance of hijab laws have led some high-ranking officials to question the rules’ efficacy, yet arrests continue of women with “bad” hijab practices or who dare to protest.⁴⁵

Iran is, in any case, a completely different country than it was when Khamenei acquired his post more than thirty years ago. By 2020, Iran’s urban population had increased from 56 percent to 76 percent.⁴⁶ Iranians have become far more secular, and Islamic Republic officials admit to steep drops in religious

observance, and intensified measures to discourage rising conversions to Christianity and the Bahai faith.⁴⁷ The clergy no longer enjoys its former social prestige because the people associate it with state failures, and the religious class has faced rising disrespect and public insults.⁴⁸ Again exemplifying social change away from state-propagated values, Iranians’ attitudes toward sexual mores, particularly among youth, have become more liberal.⁴⁹ At the same time, socioeconomic crises like inequality, a diminishing middle class, crime, addiction, suicide, widespread desire for migration, and climate-related problems such as drought have reached critical levels.⁵⁰

Self-described revolutionary Islamists concede that the state and Iranian society are not fully “Islamic.” Even at the outset, this term was vague in reference to matters of state such as economic planning, and just a decade following the 1979 revolution, state policymaking was based on Western models, deviating from initial revolutionary-era ideals.⁵¹ Impacts of so-called Islamization were felt in media and education, but Iran’s top echelons have sensed pervasively that these efforts were not succeeding, and that the Islamic Republic had not presented an attractive alternative to a Western lifestyle.⁵² In the face of these challenges, the leadership has introduced new measures aimed at reinvigorating ideological commitment, at least among its support base (as will be discussed later in this study).

But Less Concern About Russian Cultural Invasion

Although Western policies toward Iran over the past two centuries have obviously had an impact on Iranian and Islamist perceptions, those policies in and of themselves do not explain why the Islamic Republic does not extend its animosity to Russia, or perceive a mortal danger from it.

And that lack of animosity and apprehension is remarkable, considering Russia's history with respect to Iran and Muslims. During the Russo-Persian Wars of the early nineteenth century, Russia annexed Iranian territory in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Russia divided with Great Britain spheres of influence in Persia.⁵³ Czarist troops occupied northern Iran between 1912 and the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in a brutal campaign that targeted civilians.⁵⁴ Following World War II, the Soviet Union harbored ambitions to annex Iranian territory, sponsoring the short-lived secessionist Kurdish Republic of Mahabad and the Azerbaijan People's Government.⁵⁵ Within Soviet territory, Russia's suppression of Islam is well documented, and in the 1940s Stalin deported the entire population of Chechen and Ingush Muslims.⁵⁶ In the Islamic Republic era, during the 1980s, the Kremlin invaded Afghanistan, killing and displacing hundreds of thousands of Afghans.⁵⁷ During the Soviet-Afghan war, the IRGC provided training and support to Afghans waging jihad against the Red Army.⁵⁸ Yet Tehran's response since the 1990s to the brutal Chechen wars, marked by indiscriminate attacks against civilians, was always tempered with broader consideration for ties with Moscow.⁵⁹ Kremlin aggression against Muslims did not stop Khamenei, for example, from allying with Russia in Syria to fight a Sunni Muslim uprising.

Today, Khamenei and Islamists generally have a strong disposition toward allying with Russia against the West. Russian president Vladimir Putin, like Ali Khamenei, has expressed disdain for what both describe as projections of liberal, decadent Western culture.⁶⁰ They are echoing earlier European criticism of America, for instance among German thinkers in the early to mid-twentieth century who described the country as materially advanced but without culture or soul—as well as current criticism by American conservatives against Hollywood and the perceived liberal dominance of mainstream cultural products.⁶¹ Putin has even promoted religion, in this case Orthodox Christianity, as

a bulwark against perceived decadent Western culture and the rejection of Christian ethics, and has strengthened the state's alliance with the Moscow Patriarchate.⁶²

If Russia's anti-Muslim policies are largely ignored by the Islamic Republic, that is even more so with respect to China's anti-Muslim practices. Beijing's persecution of Uyghur Muslims, in violation of the 1948 Genocide Convention, has not stopped Iranian trade with China, or Tehran's desire for strategic alliance with Beijing.⁶³ Iranian officials, in fact, have not criticized China's persecution of its Muslim population.⁶⁴

The Fear of Soft Warfare

In January 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini, in a letter to then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, warned about the impending death of communism, and suggested that Marxism “is a material school, and materialism cannot save humanity from the crisis of lack of belief in spirituality, which is the most fundamental pain of human societies in the [E]ast and [W]est.”⁶⁵ He called on the Soviet leader to end persecution of religion and invited him to study Islam.

Although Khomeini's letter to Gorbachev less than two years before the collapse of the Soviet Union has been hailed by the Islamic Republic as a sign of the cleric's greatness and foresight, Islamists over time have viewed the collapse as a net negative event brought about by the United States. As scholar Karim Sadjadpour noted in his biography of Ali Khamenei, “according to Khamenei's confidants, the Leader has spent a great deal of time analyzing the domestic conditions that led the Soviet and Eastern bloc governments to fall as well as the tactics employed by the U.S. government to facilitate their demise.”⁶⁶ Indeed, during an address several years later, Khamenei talked about taking daily notes in 1991

and formulating his theory about the “American plan for Soviet collapse” after receiving “much information from...important Russian and non-Russian sources.”⁶⁷ He continued that the

American or Western plan...was not a military plan. [On a] first level, it was a media plan that was mostly implemented through billboard, placard, newspaper, movie, etc...If anyone calculates, they will see that fifty or sixty percent of [the plan] was related to the effects of cultural media and tools. My dear ones! Take the issue of cultural invasion—that I raised seven, eight years ago—seriously.⁶⁸

Khamenei spoke at length about how the West “deceived” Gorbachev—who implemented political and economic reforms and openings in the 1980s and refused to fight mass uprisings in 1991, ultimately dissolving the Soviet Union—with “open arms, smiles, praise, and respect.”⁶⁹ The Supreme Leader’s remarks have informed both the theme and tone of how Islamists interpreted the Soviet collapse, and the lessons they learned with regard to their policies toward the United States, as well as toward calls for reform and opening inside Iran. For instance, in an article written in the IRGC’s *Psychological Operations Quarterly* in early 2008, Mahsa Mah-Pishinian describes a U.S. “soft war” waged against the Soviet Union in the late 1980s during glasnost to “bring the Eastern bloc to its knees through soft war and disintegration from within,” since top American military and intelligence officials had ruled out direct confrontation.⁷⁰

Following the 2009 post-election protests, when the term *soft war* became popular among the IRGC and Islamists, a constantly repeated refrain held that the United States was repeating the soft war strategy in Iran that it used to overthrow the Soviets.⁷¹ Thus, IRGC commander Masoud Jazayeri, former Armed Forces General Staff deputy and current advisor to the staff commander, told a “Soft War Workshop” held at a Tehran university in 2013 that “after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West came after

the Islamic Revolution, and has mobilized its total experiences in this field of operations,” which he noted the West had acquired over “centuries,” to “change beliefs” and spread “Western thought and culture.”⁷² Western comparisons of Presidents Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) and Hassan Rouhani (2013–21) to Gorbachev undoubtedly fed into that fear.⁷³ For instance, in 2000 Khamenei declared that “[Westerners]...first mistake is that Mr. Khatami is not Gorbachev. Their second mistake is that Islam is not communism.”⁷⁴

Following the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the 2015 Iran nuclear deal is known, Ali Saidi—then the Supreme Leader’s representative in the IRGC and now head of the Commander-in-Chief’s Ideological-Political Office—told a gathering of Basij paramilitary clerics that “America did not collapse the Soviet empire with bombs, tanks, and military attacks, but through cultural transformation and establishing McDonald’s branches.”⁷⁵ In 2017, Saidi warned that Washington was seeking a repetition of “Sovietizing,” in the form of disintegrating the Islamic Republic from within.⁷⁶

Several Iranian officials and pundits also warned about the fate of the Chinese Maoist revolution when the Chinese Communist Party decided to open up to the world. That criticism of China has been tempered following Beijing’s aggressive posturing against the United States in recent years. A number of factions in Iran, along with personalities such as former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who served as Rouhani’s mentor, admired the Chinese model of prioritizing economic development and growth to keep the ruling system in place⁷⁷—even as revolutionaries criticized the perceived sacrifice of ideology for profit. In 2016, former IRGC officer and current high-profile pundit Hassan Abbasi discussed the “Chinese model of infiltration,” in which “China was liberated from the inside without setting aside Marxism,” and accused the “West-oriented and liberal movement” in the Rouhani administration of replicating that model.⁷⁸ Likewise, former top IRGC figure Ali Saidi in 2017 warned that the West was

seeking to repeat the Soviet model of collapse, and “transform the Chinese revolution from within.”⁷⁹

In a 2016 Persian-language book titled *The Fourth Wave of Soft War*, Siamak Baqeri Chokami—a researcher at Imam Sadeq University, an incubator for Islamic Republic personnel—describes the Cold War era as constituting a “third wave” of soft warfare, marked by advances in mass communications, like television, that allowed the United States to strengthen Soviet dissidents in their organizing and garnering of support, with the goal of weakening governance in the Eastern bloc.⁸⁰ Chokami points to “cultural war and cultural transformation of other nations,” which “some modernist and post-modernist critics have called cultural imperialism.”⁸¹ He cites a passage from Jeremy Tunstall calling Western cultural products an effective means through which “indigenous, traditional and pure cultures in many parts of the world are destroyed.” Chokami also contends that the United States organizes “liberal democrat individuals and intellectuals” to “secure the capitalist system through foundations that appear charitable,” like the Rockefeller, Ford, and Carnegie foundations. He imputes to U.S.-sponsored universities in Iran during the Pahlavi monarchy the intention “to advance Iran’s modernization program according to the White Revolution.”⁸²

Chokami also extensively cites *Who Paid the Piper?*, a 1999 text that focuses on the Central Intelligence Agency’s efforts to infiltrate and coopt artistic movements in order to combat Soviet influence and expand America’s, and argues that such efforts undermined intellectual freedom.⁸³ A review of the book’s translation appeared in the 2005–6 winter edition of the IRGC’s *Psychological Operations Quarterly*, contending that the CIA successfully used journalists, artists, filmmakers, critics, university professors, and students and “even Soviet personalities and intellectuals in the project of disintegrating the former Soviet empire from within”—and that intelligence services turned their eyes toward “Muslims” following the end of the Cold War.⁸⁴ An article in the summer 2007 issue of the

journal likewise argued that the United States was replicating vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic its containment and Cold War strategy against the Soviets.⁸⁵ Analysts such as Ali Fallahi described color revolutions in the post-Soviet bloc, like those in Georgia and Ukraine, as more advanced campaigns enabled by U.S.-developed technological advances in mass communications.⁸⁶

An IRGC Publication Offers Both Rhetoric and Policy

Psychological Operations Quarterly, published by the IRGC’s Social-Cultural Directorate, offers a valuable window into the worldview espoused by the hardline Islamists who dominate Iranian military and security institutions. The analyses expressed in this journal have been echoed in statements by military and civilian officials with regard to soft war. The journal ran from 2003 to 2018; its cessation coincided with instability in the Iranian paper market, which forced many publishers to reduce their printing or stop publishing altogether.

An overview of the journal’s issues demonstrates that concerns about a coordinated Western and U.S.-led attempt to wage a war to undermine the culture and values of the Islamic Republic through new technology like the internet have been prevalent throughout the administrations of a number of U.S. presidents. The idea of a “soft war” entered the discourse in the mid to late 2000s, and the phrase crystallized the Islamic Republic’s fears following the 2009 post-election protests. A heightened threat perception continued throughout the Obama administration and increased in the aftermath of the JCPOA. Proposals in the West and among some quarters in Iran to normalize ties with the world in exchange for Western capital, strengthening

moderates in Iran, and reaching détente with the West inadvertently fed into fears about regime change that had arisen years before there was a JCPOA.

Anxieties about Western-led information warfare increased in the 1990s, coinciding with technological breakthroughs that increased information flow into Iran like never before. Technologies like satellites and the internet offered not only a wide array of entertainment, but also content depicting a starkly different and more permissive lifestyle than the religious ethos promoted by the Islamic Republic's media.⁸⁷

Meanwhile, the generation of Iranians who had little to no memory of the 1979 Islamic Revolution or the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88—considered the pristine embodiments of revolutionary and religious values—were coming of age. They increasingly consumed the aforementioned material, expressed preferences for Western clothing and tastes, and sought more pluralistic and democratic change, a glimmer of which presented itself in the 1997 presidential election as votes for reformists—the former Islamic left—who campaigned on a platform of relaxing political and social norms, and even eventually democratizing.⁸⁸ IRGC commanders and self-proclaimed revolutionaries attributed these developments to a Western-led plot, viewed them with alarm and suspicion, and redoubled their efforts to stymie change that they perceived as a threat to the revolution and religion following the crushing of the 1999 student protests.⁸⁹

Psychological Operations Quarterly launched in this context, amid apprehension among Islamists about this next generation of Iranians. In the journal, early Islamic history is reinterpreted within a context of psychological operations waged by or against the Prophet Muhammad and Shia Imams—as in an article titled “An Overview of Psychological Operations in Islam,” written by *hojatoleslam* Mehdi Taeb, whose brother Hossein is the IRGC Intelligence Organization chief and who is himself the director of Ammar Base, a pro-Khamenei think tank.⁹⁰ The

lesson learned from the history was that the key to success against current psychological warfare lay in the Quran and in Islamic religious principles. (Another article highlights concerns about a “cultural NATO”: a coalition of Western countries waging psychological operations against Iran.⁹¹)

A different series of articles called attention to supposed Western attempts to use video games and Hollywood to undermine the Islamic Republic. That Hollywood has misrepresented and stereotyped different groups is indisputable. The mainstream Islamist discussion about video game and movie entertainment in these cases, however, is comfortably steered into conspiracy theories and anti-Semitism. Mehdi Haq Vardi Taqanaki, for example, citing “hours of use,” characterized video games as a “new industry...that has become a tool of psychological operations” and of U.S. policymakers.⁹² In an article called “Cinema as a Tool of Zionist Soft Power with an Emphasis on Hollywood,” Mahsa Mah-Pishinian repeated anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jewish control of Hollywood and global media.⁹³ Movies that portrayed Persians or Iranians in an unflattering light, like *Alexander* (2004), *300* (2007), and *The Wrestler* (2008), are described as having a deeper, sinister conspiracy of actively undermining Iran to support U.S. policy.⁹⁴ To this end, the Islamic Republic widely condemned the movie *Argo*.⁹⁵ In a conference held in Tehran called *Hollywoodism*, a self-described “specialist in anti-Iranian and anti-Islamic films” told the *New York Times*, “Hollywood is not a normal industry; it’s a conspiracy by capitalism and Zionism. We need to come up with an answer to this and other films.”⁹⁶ The conference included American and other Western participants, including the editor of a conservative Christian magazine who admired the Iranian state’s ban on all public displays of sexuality, a former U.S. senator who said Hollywood negatively portrayed Iran to promote war with the country, and a Muslim activist from Chicago who called for Islamic satellite networks as the only way to counter “cultural invasion” by Western movies.⁹⁷ The Islamic Republic thus invites foreign guests to legitimize and normalize its assertions.

In another example of a conspiratorial worldview promoted by the Islamic Republic, state and state-affiliated media have published articles alleging that Hollywood has sought to undermine the arrival of Shia Mahdi. In one instance, a member of the IRGC's Imam Hossein University Messianism Scientific Association published an article with the state-run Islamic Republic News Agency claiming that the main villains in *Transformers 2*, *Man of Steel*, and *X-Men: Apocalypse* all have the superpower of communicating their messages to world listeners in their native tongue, a feature that, according to the article, is the first miracle of the Shia Mahdi.⁹⁸ Clerics, Islamic cultural officials, and pundits have made similar assertions, in a variety of formats, about Hollywood targeting the Mahdi.⁹⁹

Joseph Nye's book *Soft Power* was a major influence on the literature in *Psychological Operations Quarterly* and the discourse of Iranian officials. The new phrase "soft power" was often used interchangeably with "psychological operations." "Soft war" appeared frequently in the summer 2007 edition, in which Alireza Mahmoudi discussed human rights as "a tool of America's soft power," designed by U.S. policymakers to "make the international system align with [their] pursuit of hegemony."¹⁰⁰ Mohammad Eslam Yari Shegofti and Seyyed Ahmad Askari argued in the journal's winter 2008 (into 2009) issue that the United States would turn to waging "soft and propaganda war" against the Islamic Republic because military conflict against Iran would have "high costs" following the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁰¹

So when Green Movement leaders condemned what were widely considered fraudulent elections in 2009, the post-election protests were regarded as fulfillments of prophecies and concerns about the replication of a Western-led plot to overthrow the Islamic Republic from within, tested on the Soviet Union and in subsequent color revolutions in former Soviet-bloc countries. The discourse in the quarterly became official rhetoric and policy; for instance, top officials adopted the line of argument by Yari Shegofti and Seyyed Ahmad Askari that Washington

was turning to soft war against Tehran because of quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁰²

The Islamic Republic propagated the notion that Washington sought regime overthrow, even as President Obama indicated he wanted no such thing. In his post-presidential memoir, Obama elaborates as follows:

But when I gathered my national security team, our Iran experts advised against [intervention along those lines]. According to them, any statement from me would likely backfire. Already, regime hardliners were pushing the fiction that foreign agents were behind the demonstrations, and activists inside Iran feared that any supportive statements from the U.S. government would be seized upon to discredit their movement...I felt obliged to heed these warnings, and signed off on a series of bland, bureaucratic statements—"We continue to monitor the entire situation closely"; "The universal rights to assembly and free speech must be respected."...As the violence escalated, so did my condemnation...Still, such a passive approach didn't sit well with me—and not just because I had to listen to Republicans howl that I was coddling a murderous regime."¹⁰³

Following the June 2009 post-election protests in Iran, the term *soft war* became mainstream among hardline revolutionaries. The protests lasted for several months, but they were most intense in June, when they surged en masse after Green Movement leaders like Mir Hossein Mousavi, who served as prime minister during the 1980s, directly challenged the election results.¹⁰⁴ Ali Khamenei mentioned the term dozens of times in numerous speeches, telling followers that the rebellion they witnessed was actually the result of a Western campaign to disintegrate the Islamic Republic from within.¹⁰⁵ When the United States intensified its sanctions campaign in response to Iran's nuclear program in 2012, including imposition of an oil embargo, Khamenei and the IRGC considered that as constituting another front in the broader soft war.¹⁰⁶

The IRGC's *Psychological Operations Quarterly* published dozens of articles and papers defining *soft war*, several times using it interchangeably with *psychological operations*. In the winter 2012/spring 2013 issue, authors Ruhollah Gholami, Meysam Balbasi, and Ali Ebrahimi defined soft power as employing “tools like visual and auditory media, cyberwarfare and psychological operations.”¹⁰⁷ Mohsen Matlabi Jonqani wrote that “change[s] without bloodshed and overthrow that [have] not existed in previous centuries”—owing to the rise of modern technology, along with media that have enabled “an attacker...to occupy the thoughts and will of a nation without military occupation”—are making “domination and occupation in soft war total, because they affect the target country’s beliefs, thoughts and behavior.”¹⁰⁸ Another article expresses deep concern about Western dominance of internet content that could undermine beliefs, but that view later evolved to regarding the internet as an unavoidable medium in which Tehran could manage content and produce competitive content of its own.¹⁰⁹

Abbas Kardan described the United States as tilting toward a velvet revolution—supporting “moderate elements” inside Iran and cultivating networks through programs like democracy expansion, civil society development, and public diplomacy—after failing to achieve its goals following the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions.¹¹⁰ Mahsa Mah-Pishinian, in winter 2010/2011, called attention to “American think tank approaches to combat the Islamic Republic of Iran,” framing all U.S. think tanks and many former officials as seeking “regime change” but with different tactics, some by “encouraging Iran to cooperate,” others via “change from within,” “war,” or “deterrence.”¹¹¹ All these articles were penned before the JCPOA was even conceived.

When the Obama administration, along with its European partners, expressed the hope that the 2015 nuclear accord would provide space for moderation in the Islamic Republic, that was seen by hardliners as fulfilling their prophecy. Before the accord’s signing, President Obama said, “It is

possible that if we sign this nuclear deal, we strengthen the hand of those more moderate forces inside of Iran.”¹¹² In a later interview, he observed that

there’s going to have to be a transition inside of Iran, even if gradual, in which there’s a recognition that chanting “death to America” or denying the Holocaust among its leaders or threatening Israel with destruction or...providing arms to Hezbollah, which is on the terrorist list—that those things make Iran a pariah in the eyes of a large part of the world...And that’s what I hope can happen. It will require a shift in the politics and the leadership of Iran—a different mindset in terms of how they are approaching the rest of the world and how they’re approaching countries like the United States.¹¹³

Threat Perception Evolves to “Infiltration”

At the same time, the Supreme Leader’s website published an editorial titled “Choice of Infiltration, America’s New Plan” that singled out those words by Obama. Back in the United States, a report by the Center for a New American Security advised that “the United States must use the space created by nuclear talks with Iran and activate the network of West supporters in Iran in order to create political-cultural change in Iran.”¹¹⁴ In one of his first speeches following the accord, Khamenei warned that “the Americans want to create a vehicle to infiltrate Iran through [the nuclear deal]...but we have closed this path and with all of our strength will not allow economic, political, cultural or political presence in Iran to the Americans.”¹¹⁵ In a speech before IRGC personnel in September 2015, the Supreme Leader warned about the threat of Western economic and security “infiltration” in the Islamic Republic, but called potential cultural and political

infiltration in “decisionmaking centers”—a not so subtle reference to proponents of pro-Western engagement—much more “dangerous.”¹¹⁶

Psychological Operations Quarterly published a special “infiltration” edition in spring/summer 2015 warning that the West was changing its tactics in order to more effectively undermine the Iranian state. Mohammad Pur-Khosh Saadat, in an article titled “Academic Exchange: Infiltration Strategy; A Case Study of German Public Diplomacy with Regard to Iran,” warned that “academic exchange and cultural training communication” was one of the “strategies in soft war” that would change the “identity” of exchange students, so that when students returned to their home country, they would act as “defenders of [their former host country’s] interests.”¹¹⁷ That is, whereas Western policymakers regarded these exchanges as helpful avenues to promote understanding toward reducing bilateral tensions, Saadat’s article specifically singled out the German Academic Exchange Institution as “one of the most important threats facing the Islamic Revolution in scientific and cultural arenas.”¹¹⁸

In a journal article on “Infiltration Through Public Diplomacy,” Fatemeh Mersali wrote that “cultural-education ties” were “components of a strategy of infiltration in public diplomacy with the goal of cultivating intellectuals and finally creating and establishing a dependent network in the target country.” Moreover, the author argued, “cultural and scientific intellectuals, after education in the West and [after] some years...become loudspeakers for the West.”¹¹⁹ Abdullah Moradi warned that after the JCPOA, the United States was focused on “[first] containing the Islamic Republic...and, at higher and more successful stages, changing the system’s behavior.”¹²⁰ The paper cited as evidence statements by U.S. officials who wanted to build upon the JCPOA to generate dialogue on other issues, citing, for example, Obama’s suggestion that the JCPOA could lead to further dialogue.¹²¹ Another study concluded that the United States was merely changing tactics toward its goal of overthrow: that it aimed to leverage the infiltration of “opportunists” and

“Western-oriented” individuals in Iran’s decision-making institutions to help reduce bilateral tensions, strengthen U.S.-Iran ties, and remove ideology from the Islamic Republic so as to change the country from within. This was a not so veiled reference to individuals in the Islamic Republic who sought the relatively modest goal of détente with the United States: pragmatists like former president Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

Anxiety in the quarterly extended to English textbooks—and to McDonald’s restaurants. Qodrat Haji-Rostamli warned that the teaching of textbooks on English is designed to “spread anti-cultural teaching...disrupt religion, introduce various unconventional woman and man relations, spread Western lifestyle, etc.,” calling for “the necessary production and design of [Iranian] teaching material in the country.”¹²² Dariush Jafarzadeh Dashbalaq and Said Ebrahimi warned at length about the spread of McDonald’s franchises in Iran—doing so around the time of the JCPOA—and noted that the Soviet collapse happened following the chain’s first appearance in Moscow.¹²³ They added that “many believe” the corporation is linked to Freemasons and acts as “one of the primary supporters of the Zionist regime”; that its stores “display a prominent aspect of American culture across the world” and spread consumerism and materialism; and that it acts as a “highly advanced center to evaluate social developments across the world,” which in the “best case” meant it could be used, unbeknownst to Iranians, to gather data on segments of the population. The authors called McDonald’s a tool to change people’s values, spread the American lifestyle worldwide, and create the groundwork for “social political, security and revolutionary [change].”¹²⁴ They recommended, apropos, that Iranian intelligence and security services verify the identity of any companies seeking to do business in Iran.

Siamak Baqeri Chokami’s *The Fourth Wave of Soft War* represents a distillation of various discourses set forth in *Psychological Operations Quarterly*. In his analysis, the fourth wave of soft war is enabled by

advances in information technology, effectively expanding the war's reach for hearts and minds to all political, military, cultural, and social spheres.¹²⁵ Citing a speech delivered by Ali Khamenei in 2004, Chokami describes a complex network led at the top by “power-seeking plutocrats” who “control the world and manage the governments of America, England, et cetera.”¹²⁶ In that speech, Khamenei had stated that “globalization, which today is raised in trade, money, culture, and cultural networks—like [the] internet and such—all knowingly or unknowingly serve this class.”¹²⁷ The idea of a superclass and global elite, of course, is not unique to Iran, and has been the subject of mainstream studies as well, like David Rothkopf's 2008 *Superclass: The Global Power Elite and the World They Are Making*—although Rothkopf made clear that his book was not a “volume for conspiracy theorists,” and that he also wanted to explore inequality in power and wealth.¹²⁸

For his part, Chokami subsequently describes layers of a network of “actors” in soft warfare embracing Western intelligence agencies, U.S. think tanks hewing toward both sides of the aisle, Iranian-American institutions (including those that have favored better ties with the Islamic Republic, like the National Iranian America Council), international institutions such as the World Bank, human rights groups, “Zionist-controlled media,” social media influencers, “heavy metal bands,” members of the Bahai faith, secular thinkers and pro-Westerners in Iran, “Satan worshippers,” and NGOs.¹²⁹ Chokami furthermore singles out “English Shia and American Sunni” movements alongside so-called deviant Islamic movements and clerics (including those who advocate secularism) as being controlled by Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in order to undermine “pure Muhammadian Islam” of Khomeini and Khamenei.¹³⁰

The threat perception with regard to a U.S soft war against Iran persisted during the Trump administration, including after Washington exited the JCPOA and reimposed sanctions. Nor did it ease after the outbreak of the Tanker War 2.0 in 2019, when

Washington reimposed an oil embargo and Tehran stepped up its own campaign to press the United States to reduce the financial pressure.¹³¹ Officials and media framed the December 2017–January 2018 mass protests, which took place before Washington reimposed sanctions, within the familiar framework that the “enemy,” including the United States and foreign media, was behind the protests.¹³² The demonstrations in that round caught officials by surprise, and were most intense in working class cities and towns outside Tehran that were considered the system's traditional base of support.¹³³

In November 2018, moreover, months after Washington had exited the JCPOA and reimposed sanctions, Khamenei emphasized that “we are engaged in a cultural” and “soft war,” and that “there are those who deny it, and this is part of soft war.”¹³⁴ He called out “artists and experts” as acting as the armed forces in “this war.”¹³⁵ He repeatedly ruled out the possibility of talks with the U.S. administration, and officials vowed “maximum resistance” to Trump's “maximum pressure” policy.¹³⁶ Following the November 2019 nationwide protests triggered by sudden cuts in fuel subsidies, Khamenei, in a meeting with senior Basij officials, described those protests, as well as previous ones stretching back to the 1999 student uprising, as resulting from “the spread of the...Arrogance [the West] in the fields of thought, culture, politics and ideology in order to turn from hard [military] invasion to soft invasion.”¹³⁷

Since the U.S. targeted killing of former Qods Force chief Qasem Soleimani, Iranian officials and commanders have framed that event, too, within the context of a soft war. Ali Khamenei declared that Soleimani's “funeral and later commemorations astounded the generals of the Arrogance[’s] [West’s] soft war.”¹³⁸ IRGC Propaganda and Cultural Directorate deputy Ali Rajabi declared that Soleimani's “martyrdom was a firm slap to the generals of the enemy's soft war [because] it was a great cultural event that made the world sympathetic to us, and caused victories against the enemies.”¹³⁹ Following the outbreak of Covid-19, officials and

state media warned about a “soft war” waged to tarnish the Islamic Republic’s response to the pandemic as marred by cover-ups and generally poor leadership.¹⁴⁰

The Role of the IRGC

The IRGC has made combating “soft war” a top priority. One of the earliest proponents of this effort was Muhammad Ali Jafari, IRGC commander between 2007 and 2019. Previously, he had directed the IRGC Strategic Research Center for three years,¹⁴¹ during which time the center oversaw research into “velvet revolutions” and U.S. “soft regime-change policies.”¹⁴² After his appointment as IRGC chief, Jafari instituted what was termed “mosaic doctrine” to increase IRGC readiness in the face of a potential U.S. ground invasion, an approach that required waging asymmetric war until reaching a political resolution on Tehran’s terms. Jafari furthermore believed that the IRGC should focus on future internal threats and mass protests, and he thus established the al-Zahra and Ashura brigades in the Basij paramilitary as anti-riot forces.¹⁴³ Following the 2009 post-election protests, Jafari stressed to commanders that combating “soft threats” was the “most important mission of provincial units,” and directed the Basij paramilitary force to focus on “cultural and social threats.”¹⁴⁴ Top IRGC commanders stressed those threats as well.¹⁴⁵

The IRGC and the armed forces have set up a series of units to combat soft war. In 2013, a senior Armed Forces General Staff deputy commander announced the formation of a Defense Propagation Headquarters to make policies in the “field of soft war,” and to manage “reporting in defensive matters and news related to the armed forces.”¹⁴⁶ In 2018, IRGC spokesman Ramazan Sharif claimed that the IRGC had formed its own Soft War Base “from long before,” considering the “situation of psychological invasion

and mixed media war of the enemy against the holy system of the Islamic Republic and the Guard Corps.”¹⁴⁷

Paramilitary groups like the Basij and the Basij University Club have defined soft war as the most important battle ahead, launching initiatives like the “righteous circles,” announced in 2014 in Basij bases across the country, in which youth meet to receive education on combating media invasion, “ethical corruption, distribution of narcotics, and spreading of alcohol-drinking culture” by “enemies.”¹⁴⁸ Representatives of the Supreme Leader in the IRGC, the officials of which operate as political commissars, have integrated “soft war” within their political-ideological programs.¹⁴⁹

The IRGC has also set up an entity called the Baqiatollah al-Azam Social and Cultural Base, to which Jafari retired after his apparent demotion in 2019, the reasons for which are not entirely clear.¹⁵⁰ Jafari met with directors of the Islamic Propagation Organization, a religious and cultural organization in charge of promoting the state’s ideology, to enable the “revolutionary and cultural organizations” to better explicate the “second step” of the revolution, as per the name given by the Supreme Leader in his edict issued on the fortieth anniversary of the revolution, which emphasized that revolutionary ideals must be sustained. Loyalists consistently refer to that edict. In 2020, Jafari met with his successor and former deputy Hossein Salami and called for “presenting attractive and pure revolutionary art work” to facilitate success in the soft war.¹⁵¹

The Islamic Republic does not publish transparent figures about its expenditures on soft war–related operations, but there have been allegations of waste and corruption. An unofficial figure for expenditures in the armed forces and religious seminaries is 16.5 trillion rials (equivalent, at this writing, to \$143 million at the official rate and \$66 million at the free exchange rate), which equals 0.7 percent of the latest formal military spending in the 2020/21 fiscal year.¹⁵² (Here, one must note a caveat that the actual military budget is unclear and could be larger.) This spending includes cyber operations units, which

are primarily in the armed forces but have been identified elsewhere, as in the Cyber Department of the Islamic Propagation Organization.¹⁵³ Corruption charges targeting the soft war budget and research allocations have included the claim that employees act as online trolls, and are only concerned with receiving a paycheck rather than carrying out the regime's mission.¹⁵⁴

Other organizations are affiliated with the IRGC, including news agencies like Tasnim News, Fars News, and the Owj Arts and Media Organization.¹⁵⁵ There are also institutes that subcontract production of content, churning out propaganda material, movies, television series, and music videos.¹⁵⁶ Ammar Base, as noted above, is a think tank dedicated to combating soft war formed by Mehdi Taeb, who is also deputy chairman at the Shahid Avini Institute, which produced the prominent television series *Gando* (discussed below).¹⁵⁷

Broadcasting, Cultural Diplomacy, and Educational Outreach

The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB-TV) also wages information campaigns, as do cultural institutes and charitable foundations. Seth Jones and Danika Newlee of the Center for Strategic and International Studies reviewed these in a helpful 2019 study.¹⁵⁸ Over the years, IRIB has received government funding valued in the billions of dollars to operate television and radio channels for Iranian audiences. It also runs channels for audiences abroad, like Press TV for English speakers, and al-Alam and al-Kawthar in Arabic.¹⁵⁹ In 2021, the United States seized the American-owned domains of Press TV and more than thirty other websites held by the Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU).¹⁶⁰ A year earlier, the U.S. Treasury Department had designated IRTVU for being owned

or controlled by the IRGC Qods Force; specifically, Treasury charged the Qods Force with using IRTVU to amplify false narratives in English about the 2020 U.S. presidential election in order to sow discord.¹⁶¹

The Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, which reports to the Office of the Supreme Leader, administers Iranian cultural and religious outreach. Other organizations under its umbrella that conduct cultural diplomacy include the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly, the Islamic Development Organization, and the Qom Seminary Office of Islamic Propaganda, which sends missionaries and clerics abroad. Universities and seminaries such as al-Mustafa International University recruit seminary students from around the world, teaching the Islamic Republic's Islamist ideology.¹⁶² The United States designated al-Mustafa University in 2020 as a "recruiting ground for the Qods Force."¹⁶³

Successes and Failures in the Soft War

The Islamic Republic has taken a series of coercive measures to disrupt the perceived U.S.-led soft war, including enforcing morality laws in public and purging professors and students from universities.¹⁶⁴ The state has pursued the creation of a national intranet network separate from the global internet since the 2000s, and calls for such a network were redoubled following the 2017–18 mass protests; in 2018 alone, the Parliament Research Center estimated that about \$4.5 billion was spent on it.¹⁶⁵ The Islamic Republic successfully cut the internet during the November 2019 protests, allowing it to crush protests, and disrupt protestors' organizing.¹⁶⁶ In 2020, the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution announced that the capability for an intranet network was within reach.¹⁶⁷ In October of that year, the Supreme Council for Cyberspace approved the "master engineering design."¹⁶⁸

When it comes to producing content for such a network, the public money allocated has not translated to good products that attract audiences to the state's messages. Some indicators of the Islamic Republic's success in garnering Iranians' support would be an increase in religiosity and satisfaction with the government; as mentioned earlier, even officials are candid that these developments are not happening. The former commander of the Armed Forces General Staff Soft War Base, Ali Reza Afshar, remarked in 2017 that "we must accept that censorship will not get us anyone, so religious teachings must be injected into society."¹⁶⁹ Acknowledging the problem, Ali Khamenei admitted in August 2021 that "we have weakness" in fighting the "enemy's psychological warfare," and called on those who have "good will in this regard" to improve their efforts.¹⁷⁰ The problem has been addressed by other officials as well, such as IRGC Imam Hassan Mojtaba (Alborz) unit commander Yousef Moulaei, who called for better "planning" in an environment in which "the enemies train media doctorates...and can propagate [content] through virtual space robots..."¹⁷¹ The top-down, centralized approach and heavy censorship in the Islamic Republic have evidently stymied good content that can go viral online.

Semi-private media companies have produced some content that has gone viral. This includes the television series *Gando*, which covers the exploits of IRGC intelligence agents. The series has generated wide attention owing to its action sequences and controversial attacks against Rouhani administration officials, portraying them as gullible to Western spies.¹⁷² Some Basij members working in the media sphere have tried to appeal to Iranian nationalism—by using nationalist rhetoric, for example, to extol Soleimani.¹⁷³ The top command in the IRGC and its core support, however, continue to be heavily Islamist; thus, Ali Fadavi, former IRGC Navy chief and current overall deputy commander of the IRGC, remarked in 2018 that "the [name] Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' does not have any extra words in front of it, not even 'Iran.'"¹⁷⁴ The Guards ramped up their focus on ideological zeal

after discovering that many members of the 1990s generation had reformist sympathies.¹⁷⁵

The regime has experienced some successes in this sphere, however. One was the fostering of a cult of personality around late Qods Force chief Qasem Soleimani, which began as he took selfies on the frontlines of the anti-Islamic State war in Iraq in 2014 and became an internet sensation.¹⁷⁶ He transformed himself into the medium and message of Tehran's influence in the Middle East.¹⁷⁷ Soleimani's targeted killing in early 2020 brought hundreds of thousands to the streets for his funeral—the largest such crowds in years, indicating that at least some mourners were not from the state's traditional base of support.¹⁷⁸ The mood of adulation proved ephemeral, however, evaporating after dozens were killed during a stampede at Soleimani's funeral, followed by the shoot-down of a Ukrainian civilian airliner by the IRGC and its subsequent cover-up. So the worshipful attachment inspired by Soleimani did not translate into solid support for the state.

The Islamic Republic has had better success in generating content for the Islamist subculture in Iran. Its cultivation of Shia jihad in Syria and Iraq to defend holy Shia shrines electrified its support base, and socialized a new generation of Iranians—albeit fewer than the number inspired by the Iran-Iraq War—in the ethos of holy war.¹⁷⁹ The republic also produced new myths about the Afghan Liwa Fatemiyoun, which has fought in Syria and joined the pantheon of holy warriors—all steeped in Shia and revolutionary symbolism.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Shaking the convictions of Iranian Islamists on the matters discussed in this paper would be a tall order.

Ali Khamenei and the IRGC feel deeply threatened by expressions of American civil society and culture that promote mores they regard as contrary to their values. Further, Khamenei and the IRGC believe that Washington's unchanging policy, regardless of who occupies the White House, is to overthrow them. U.S. policymakers should not fixate on searching for a magic formula that would change these perceptions. A more feasible objective is to persuade Europeans and Americans alike that Washington does not desire regime change.

Although the gap between the Islamic Republic and

the vast majority of Iranians is growing, policymakers should not count on that leading to fundamental change, at least not in the short run. Hardline Islamists have adopted a siege mentality, believing that they are facing a multi-front assault and are not winning the hearts and minds of Iranians. Their actions indicate they will not acquiesce to Iranians' demands for more democratic change, which they consider playing into their enemy's hands; they believe they must fight to the death. Washington should offer its support for Iranian protestors, but it should take the long view and not assume that protests will lead to positive change any time soon. ❖

NOTES

- 1 Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).
- 2 See <https://ir.usembassy.gov/>.
- 3 For more, see Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996).
- 4 Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 179.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., 315–17; Homa Omid, *Islam and the Post-Revolutionary State in Iran* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 8–17.
- 7 Amanat, *Iran*, 369–76.
- 8 Efforts by Shia clergy to solidify an independent power center marked the culmination of multiple processes including adoption of the *usuli* school of jurisprudence, which granted qualified clergy the authority of *ijtihad*, or independent legal reasoning, and acceptance by the faithful of this higher religious authority without necessarily seeking proof. For more, see Heinz Halm, *Shi'ism*, 2nd ed., trans. Janet Watson and Marian Hill (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 95–97.
- 9 Omid, *Islam and the Post-Revolutionary State*, 8–17; Amanat, *Iran*, 317–23.
- 10 Amanat, *Iran*, 486–90.
- 11 Ibid., 492–93.
- 12 Ibid., 493.
- 13 Ibid., 446–86.
- 14 For more on the state-clergy alliance, see Ahmet T. Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 2019.
- 15 The fall of the Pahlavis, however, was not necessarily inevitable, at least not in 1979; the shah refused to keep fighting and chose instead to abdicate in the face of mass uprisings. For more, see Andrew Scott Cooper, *The Fall of Heaven: The Pahlavis and the Final Days of Imperial Iran* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016).
- 16 Ibid., 492–93.
- 17 Ibid., 492.
- 18 Ibid., 692.
- 19 Farzan Sabet and Roozbeh Safshekan, *Soft War: A New Episode in the Old Conflicts Between Iran and the United States* (Center for Global Communication Studies, Iran Media Program, 2013), <https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=iranmediaprogram>.
- 20 Amanat, *Iran*, 504.
- 21 Ibid., 525–60, 897. It bears noting that a significant tranche of CIA files on the coup d'état remains unknown even after declassification in 2017; for a related discussion, see Morgan Carlston, “Six Myths About the Coup Against Iran’s Mossadegh,” *National Interest*, September 2, 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/six-myths-about-the-coup-against-irans-mossadegh-11173>; for an example of missing data, note that Document 285 in the declassified files is labeled TEHE 737, while Document 286 corresponds with TEHE 742. The content in Document 285 reflects a sense of panic about a failed coup on August 19, 1953, while the next available document expresses calm that the Mossadeq overthrow is on the “verge of success.” See Morgan Carlston, “New CIA/State Department Docs on the 1953 Iran Coup (Part 6),” *Persophilia*, June 22, 2017, <http://persophilia.blogspot.com/2017/06/>. Also see “285. Telegram from the Station in Iran to the Central Intelligence Agency” and “286. Telegram from the Station in Iran to the Central Intelligence Agency,” both from Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951, 1954, U.S. State Department, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951-54Iran/d286>.
- 22 Sabet and Safshekan, *Soft War*, <https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=iran-mediaprogram>.

- 23 Amanat, *Iran*, 645–64; Sabet and Safshekan, *Soft War*, <https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=iranmediaprogram>.
- 24 Amanat, “Development, Disarray and Discontent,” in *Iran*; Cooper, “Farewell the Shah,” in *Fall of Heaven*.
- 25 Amanat, *Iran*, 645–49.
- 26 Jalal Al-i Ahmad (as the author’s name is alternatively spelled), *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1984), 64.
- 27 Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals*, 63–65; Amanat, *Iran*, 692.
- 28 Amanat, *Iran*, 692–93.
- 29 Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals*, 65–77.
- 30 Amanat, *Iran*, 693.
- 31 Al-i Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 64.
- 32 Ibid., 16.
- 33 Amanat, *Iran*, 584–93.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 *Anthology of Imam Khomeini’s Speeches, Messages, Interviews, Decrees, Religious Permissions, and Letters*, Vol. 1 (in Persian), Institute for the Compilation and Publication of the Works of Imam Khomeini, 153, <https://farsi.rouhollah.ir/library/sahifeh-imam-khomeini/vol/1/title/100>.
- 36 Ali Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley, CA: Islamic Foundation Press, 1979), 4.
- 37 Amanat, *Iran*, 695–99.
- 38 Ibid., 591.
- 39 Homa Omid, “Freedom, Culture and Education in Khomeini’s State: What Price Islam?” in *Islam and the Post-Revolutionary State*, 153–178; Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 81–83, 182–83.
- 40 Parsa, *Democracy in Iran*, 182–83.
- 41 Mohammad Rezaie Yazdi, “Khomeinism, the Islamic Revolution and Anti Americanism,” PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2016, <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/6568/1/RezaieYazdi16PhD.pdf>; Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran’s Most Powerful Leader* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009), 14–27, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sadjadpour_iran_final2.pdf.
- 42 Karim Sadjadpour, “The Supreme Leader,” *Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, October 2, 2010, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/supreme-leader>.
- 43 Parsa, *Democracy in Iran*, 14.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Parsa, *Democracy in Iran*, 22; “Three Women Sentenced to 55 Years for Defying Compulsory Hijab in Iran,” Radio Farda, August 2, 2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/three-women-sentenced-to-55-years-for-defying-compulsory-hijab-in-iran/30088712.html>.
- 46 World Bank, “Urban Population (% of Total Population)—Iran, Islamic Rep.,” accessed June 20, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?end=2020&locations=IR&start=1979>.
- 47 Ammar Maleki and Pooyan Tamimi Arab, “Iranians’ Attitudes Toward Religion: A 2020 Survey Report,” Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran, 2020, <https://gamaan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GAMAAN-Iran-Religion-Survey-2020-English.pdf>; Parsa, *Democracy in Iran*, 17, 20.
- 48 Parsa, *Democracy in Iran*, 25.
- 49 Mahnaz Motamedi et al., “Paradoxical Attitudes Toward Premarital Dating and Sexual Encounters in Tehran, Iran: A Cross-Sectional Study,” *Reproductive Health* 13, no. 1 (2016): 102.
- 50 Mohammad Hossein Ziya, “The 13 Crises Facing Iran,” Middle East Institute, September 16, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/13-crises-facing-iran>.

- 51 Omid, *Islam and the Post-Revolutionary State*, 153.
- 52 Ibid., 177.
- 53 Amanat, “Reshaping the Guarded Domains,” in *Iran*, 177–315.
- 54 Amanat, *Iran*, 372–73.
- 55 Ibid., 512–19.
- 56 Neil Hauer, “Stalin’s Great Crime in the Caucasus,” *Moscow Times*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.themoscow-times.com/2019/02/25/stalins-great-crime-in-the-caucasus-a64615>; Campana Aurelie, “The Massive Deportation of the Chechen People: How and Why Chechens Were Deported,” SciencesPo, November 5, 2007, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/massive-deportation-chechen-people-how-and-why-chechens-were-deported.html>.
- 57 Hassan Kakar, “The Story of Genocide in Afghanistan,” in *The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979–1982* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press); Vincent J. Schodolski, “Soviets Reveal Afghan Atrocities,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 16, 1989, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1989-02-16-8903050824-story.html>.
- 58 Amir Toumaj, Candace Rondeaux, and Arif Ammar, *Soleimani’s Shadow: The Fatemiyoun Division & Iran’s Proxy Warfare Propaganda* (Washington DC: New America, updated July 13, 2021), 25, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/soleimanis-shadow/>.
- 59 Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei*, 14, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sadjadpour_iran_final2.pdf; Alex Vatanka, “Iran’s Russia Conundrum,” in *Russia in the Middle East*, ed. Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank, (Washington DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2018), 97; “War Crimes in Chechnya and the Response of the West,” testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 107th Congress, 2000, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2000/02/29/war-crimes-chechnya-and-response-west>; “Revealed: Russia’s Worst War Crime in Chechnya,” *Guardian*, March 5, 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/mar/05/russia.chechnya>.
- 60 Stephen Fidler, “Putin Depicts Russia as a Bulwark Against European Decadence,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-RTBB-3876>.
- 61 Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *Atlantic*, September 1990, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1990/09/the-roots-of-muslim-rage/304643/>; Reuel Marc Gerech, “Perfect Partners,” *Weekly Standard*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2017/09/08/perfect-partners/>; Christian Toto, “Hooray for Hollywood—Unless You’re a Conservative,” *The Hill*, March 15, 2020, <https://thehill.com/opinion/technology/487640-hooray-for-hollywood-unless-youre-a-conservative>.
- 62 Dmitry Adamsky, “State-Church Relations,” in *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019); Kristina Stoeckle, “The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur,” *Religion, State, and Society* 44, no. 2 (2016): 132–51, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5012366/>.
- 63 *The Uyghur Genocide: An Examination of China’s Breaches of the 1948 Genocide Convention* (Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, March 2021), <https://newlinesinstitute.org/uyghurs/the-uyghur-genocide-an-examination-of-chinas-breaches-of-the-1948-genocide-convention/>; Reuters, “Iran and China Sign 25-Year Cooperation Agreement,” March 27, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-china/iran-and-china-sign-25-year-cooperation-agreement-idUSKBN2BJOAD>.
- 64 Reza Haqiqatnezhad, “Iran Hardliners Claim China Is Serving Islam by Suppressing Uyghur Muslims,” *Radio Farda*, August 4, 2020, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-hardliners-claim-china-is-serving-islam-by-suppressing-uyghur-muslims-/30766289.html>.
- 65 “Imam Khomeini’s Historic Letter to Gorbachev,” Institute for the Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini’s Work, February 1, 2020, <http://en.imam-khomeini.ir/en/n29222/Imam-s-letter-to-Gorbachev>.
- 66 Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei*, 18, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sadjadpour_iran_final2.pdf.
- 67 “Statements Among Officials and Executives of the Islamic Republic of Iran System” (in Persian), Office for the Preservation and Publication of the Works of Grand Ayatollah Khamenei, July 9, 2000, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3016>.
- 68 Ibid.

- 69 “Statements Among Officials of the Islamic Republic,” <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3016>.
- 70 “America’s Strategies in Soft War Against the Islamic Republic of Iran” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (2008): 4–5, available at <https://bit.ly/3GZQUx6>.
- 71 Sabet and Safshekan, *Soft War*, <https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=iran-mediaprogram>.
- 72 “Attacking the Corps and Basij Is a Component of the Enemy’s Overall Plan” (in Persian), Iranian Labor News Agency, March 2, 2013, <https://bit.ly/3wmdf2U>.
- 73 Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei*, 18, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sadjadpour_iran_final2.pdf; Jochen Bittner, “Is Rouhani an Iranian Gorbachev,” *New York Times*, December 5, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/06/opinion/bittner-is-rouhani-an-iranian-gorbachev.html>.
- 74 “Statements Among Officials of the Islamic Republic,” <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3016>.
- 75 Iranian Students News Agency, “America Achieved the Soviet Collapse by Establishing McDonald’s Branches” (in Persian), November 23, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3kfne5o>.
- 76 Iranian Students News Agency, “Repeating the Soviet Collapse Formula Is One Goal of the Dominant System Against Us” (in Persian), September 19, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3GZRgnq>.
- 77 Afshin Molavi, “Buying Time in Tehran: Iran and the China Model,” *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 6 (November/December 2004), 9–16.
- 78 “Clip of Professor Hassan Abbasi About Liberals’ Conspiracy Through Chinese Infiltration” (in Persian), video, Aparat, January 10, 2016, <https://www.aparat.com/v/UgGOt/>.
- 79 “Repeating the Soviet Collapse Formula,” <https://bit.ly/3GZRgnq>.
- 80 Chokami defines the “first wave” of soft war as psychological operations between governments and societies from ancient times until advances in mass communication in the sixteenth century. He defines the “second wave” as spanning the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, enabled by the rise of mass printing and corresponding with the age of imperialism and British dominance in the “Muslim world.” Chokami says that technology advances enabled “soft war” tools to affect “hard power,” while also expanding the models of “soft war,” including “infiltration.” The “third wave,” according to Chokami, corresponds with the post-industrial era following World War II, when “actors...in parallel to targeting the spirit and [psychology] of target societies, attacked the identity, belief, and cultural values with new and advanced tools and techniques, and sought to change and implode the target in various dimensions.” Chokami adds that the United States invested heavily in “psychological operations and cultural propaganda.” He defines the “fourth wave” as coming after the Cold War in the 1990s, and the attempt by the U.S.-led West to consolidate its new order. He adds that the IT revolution added new nonstate actors, such as social media companies. Chokami asserts finally that “the school of revolutionary Islam is capable of challenging the values of liberal democracy.” See Chokami, *The Fourth Wave of Soft War* (Qom, 2016), 48–80.
- 81 Ibid., 60.
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 Ibid., 63–65. For the cited text, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999).
- 84 Hamid Hazegh Nikru, summary and introduction for “CIA Cultural War in the Fields of Culture and Art” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Fall/Winter 2006), <https://www.magiran.com/volume/121406>.
- 85 Reza Seraj, “America’s Soft War Strategy Against the Islamic Republic of Iran” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Summer 2007), <https://www.magiran.com/volume/121404>.
- 86 Ali Fallahi, “Reasons for Formation of Color Revolutions, with an Emphasis on Case Studies in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Myanmar” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Fall 2007), <https://www.magiran.com/volume/121401>.
- 87 Steven Barraclough, “Satellite Television in Iran: Prohibition, Limitation and Reform,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (July 2001): 25–48.
- 88 Sabet and Safshekan, *Soft War*, <https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=iran-mediaprogram>.

- 89 Ibid.; Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 151–58.
- 90 Mehdi Taeb, “An Overview of Psychological Operations in Islam,” *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Fall 2010), <https://www.magiran.com/paper/1109952>; Mohammad Hossein Jamshidi, “Psychological Operations in Early Islam: The Strategy of the Great Prophet’s Psychological Operation Against Infidelity and Polytheism” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Summer 2006), <https://www.magiran.com/volume/121407>.
- 91 Hojjatullah Moradi, “The Decisionmaking Process in Psychological Operations,” *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Summer 2006), available at <https://www.magiran.com/volume/121407>.
- 92 Mehdi Haq Vardi Taqanaki, “Video Games, Tools of Soft Power,” *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Summer 2007), <https://www.magiran.com/volume/121404>.
- 93 Mahsa Mah-Pishinian, “Cinema as a Tool of Zionist Soft Power with an Emphasis on Hollywood” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Summer 2007), <https://www.magiran.com/volume/121404>.
- 94 Ali Fallahi, “Hollywood Cinema and Psychological Operations Against the Islamic Republic of Iran” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Winter 2008), <https://www.magiran.com/volume/121395>.
- 95 Thomas Erdbrink, “Stung by ‘Argo,’ Iran Backs Conference Denouncing ‘Hollywoodism,’” *New York Times*, February 18, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/19/world/middleeast/stung-by-argo-iran-backs-conference-decrying-hollywoodism.html>.
- 96 Ibid.
- 97 Ibid.
- 98 Islamic Republic News Agency, “Hollywood’s Effort to Delay the Arrival of the Imam of Time” (in Persian), April 8, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2ZZxojg>.
- 99 Tasnim News Agency, “Cinema and Messianism 1: A Report About Hollywood’s Widespread Effort Against Messianism” (in Persian), September 24, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3CPGcXn>; Iranian Students News Agency, “Hollywood’s Plan for Apocalypse” (in Persian), June 22, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3woYZ9y>.
- 100 Alireza Mahmoudi, “Human Rights: Tools of America’s Soft War” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Summer 2007), available at <https://www.magiran.com/volume/121404>.
- 101 Mohammad Eslam Yari Shegofti and Seyyed Ahmad Askari, “America’s Soft War During Events Following September 11, with an Emphasis on Afghanistan, the Iraq War, and Tensions with Iran” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Winter 2008), <https://www.magiran.com/volume/121395>.
- 102 Ibid.; also Amir Toumaj, “Iran’s Resistance Economy: Implications for Future Sanctions,” Critical Threats Project, American Enterprise Institute, November 17, 2014.
- 103 Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020), 455.
- 104 “Mousavi Vows to ‘Pay Any Cost’ to Fight Iran Election Results,” CNN, June 15, 2009, <https://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/15/iran.elections.protests/index.html>.
- 105 Emily Blout, “Iran’s Soft War with the West,” *SAS Review of International Affairs* 35, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2015), 38–39.
- 106 Toumaj, “Iran’s Resistance Economy.”
- 107 Ruhollah Gholami, Meysam Balbasi, and Ali Ebrahimi, “The Definitional Framework of Soft Power: Case Study of American Soft Power Against the Islamic Republic of Iran” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Winter 2012/Spring 2013), 119–43, <https://www.magiran.com/paper/1171256>.
- 108 Mohsen Matlabi Jonqani, “The Enemy’s Tools in Soft War, with an Emphasis on Cyber Media” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Winter 2012/Spring 2013), 71–91.
- 109 Hojjatullah Moradi, “Introduction: ISIL Is the Obvious Face of Wahhabism” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Fall/Winter 2014), <https://www.magiran.com/volume/103617>.
- 110 Abbas Kardan, “America, Color Revolutions, and Networking in the Middle East” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* 22 (Summer 2009), <https://www.magiran.com/volume/121393>.
- 111 Mahsa Mah-Pishinian, “American Think Tank Approaches to Combat the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Winter 2010/Spring 2011), <https://www.magiran.com/paper/1109941>.

- 112 “Transcript: President Obama’s Full NPR Interview on Iran Nuclear Deal,” National Public Radio, April 7, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/04/07/397933577/transcript-president-obamas-full-npr-interview-on-iran-nuclear-deal>.
- 113 “Obama: The Iran Deal,” interview, The Mic, August 10, 2015, <https://www.mic.com/articles/123627/obama-mic-interview-transcript>.
- 114 Reza Rahmati, “Choice of Infiltration, America’s New Plan” (in Persian), Center for the Preservation and Publication of the Works of Grand Ayatollah Khamenei, August 18, 2015, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/oth-ers-note?id=30532>.
- 115 “We Will Not Allow America’s Economic, Political, and Cultural Infiltration of Iran” (in Persian), *Hawzah*, August 17, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3bNAYj9>.
- 116 “Meeting of IRGC Commanders with Leader of the Revolution” (in Persian), Center for the Preservation and Publication of the Works of Grand Ayatollah Khamenei, September 16, 2015, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=30767>.
- 117 “Diplomacy with Regard to Iran” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 2015): 103–19, <https://www.magiran.com/paper/1540990>.
- 118 Ibid.
- 119 Fatemeh Mersali, “Infiltration Through Public Diplomacy, with an Emphasis on Teaching, Cultural Communication” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* 42 (Spring/Summer 2015): 157–75.
- 120 Abdullah Moradi, “Post-JCPOA: Strategic Choices and Models of Enemy Infiltration in the Islamic Republic,” *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 2015): 119–39, <https://www.magiran.com/paper/1540991>.
- 121 Ibid.
- 122 “Qodrat Haji-Rostamli, “Teaching English Language as a Tool of Cultural Infiltration” (in Persian), *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 2015): 65–91.
- 123 Ronald Hughes, “Iran Nuclear Deal: When Will Tehran Get a McDonald’s?” BBC, January 16, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33549187>; Dariush Jafarzadeh Dashbalaq and Said Ebrahimi, “The McDonald’s Method of Infiltration Within the Framework of Soft War,” *Psychological Operations Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 2016): 131–47, <https://www.magiran.com/paper/1722987>.
- 124 Hughes, “When Will Tehran Get a McDonald’s?” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33549187>; Dashbalaq and Ebrahimi, “The McDonald’s Method,” <https://www.magiran.com/paper/1722987>.
- 125 Chokami, *The Fourth Wave of Soft War*, 67–81.
- 126 Ibid., 210.
- 127 Ibid.
- 128 David Rothkopf, *Superclass: The Global Power Elite and the World They Are Making* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 1–7.
- 129 Chokami, *The Fourth Wave of Soft War*, 210–40.
- 130 Ibid., 232–35.
- 131 Jon Gambrell, “Oil Tanker Attacks Echo Persian Gulf’s 1980s ‘Tanker War,’” Associated Press, June 14, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/navy-persian-gulf-tensions-international-news-iran-united-arab-emirates-ceb6e-7a86bf14a9a8d8ecf81c9dcc7ef>.
- 132 Ali Saidi, “Soft War Harder Than Hard War,” *Kayhan*, September 6, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3bS5Ij0>.
- 133 Shashanak Bengali and Ramin Mostaghim, “Young, Working-Class and Fed Up: Iran’s Deadly Protests Driven by a New Crop of Dissenters,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 2, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iran-analysis-20180102-story.html>.
- 134 Islamic Republic News Agency, “The Supreme Leader of the Revolution’s Note After Meeting with a Group of Broadcasting Programmers” (in Persian), November 28, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3c5MMgR>.
- 135 Ibid.

- 136 Iranian Students News Agency, “Imam Banned Talks with America, and I Ban Them Too” (in Persian), July 29, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3BS40IH>; “No Talks Will Happen Between Iran and America at Any Level” (in Persian), *Mashregh News*, September 17, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3CUkrpf>.
- 137 “The Basij’s Role in the Framework of Soft War” (in Persian), Office for the Preservation and Publication of the Works of Grand Ayatollah Khamenei, November 27, 2019, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=44268>.
- 138 “Statements Among Workers Commemorating the Anniversary of the Martyrdom of Haj Qasem Soleimani and Martyr Soleimani’s Family” (in Persian), Office for the Preservation and Publication of the Works of Grand Ayatollah Khamenei, December 17, 2019, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=46944>.
- 139 Tasnim News Agency, “Martyrdom of Commander Soleimani Was Firm Slap to Generals of Enemy’s Soft War,” January 7, 2021, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1399/10/18/2428152/>.
- 140 “Coronavirus and Soft War Against the Islamic Republic of Iran,” Defa Press, March 18, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3GYZQmi>; “Coronavirus: Iran Cover-Up of Deaths Revealed by Data Leak,” BBC, August 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53598965?piano-modal>.
- 141 Ali Alfoneh, *What Do Structural Changes in the Revolutionary Guards Mean?* Middle Eastern Outlook 7 (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2008), <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/what-do-structural-changes-in-the-revolutionary-guards-mean/>.
- 142 Ibid.
- 143 Ibid.
- 144 “Some Things Unsaid About IRGC Chief’s Life” (in Persian), *Asr-e Iran*, December 18, 2010, <https://bit.ly/305Rw3v>.
- 145 Nima Adelkhah, “Iran Integrates the Concept of the ‘Soft War’ into Its Strategic Planning,” Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor* 8, no. 23 (June 12, 2010), <https://jamestown.org/program/iran-integrates-the-concept-of-the-soft-war-into-its-strategic-planning/>.
- 146 Islamic Republic News Agency, “Soft War Base Formed with Order of Commander in Chief” (in Persian), January 25, 2013, <https://bit.ly/3ESkum1>.
- 147 “What Is the Soft War Base’s Mission?” *Mashregh News*, July 18, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3kien2N>.
- 148 Tasnim News Agency, “300,000 Basij Righteous Circles Formed Against Enemy’s Soft War” (in Persian), April 23, 2014, <https://bit.ly/3bPLwOM>.
- 149 Islamic Republic News Agency, “Representative of Supreme Leader in IRGC: ‘88 Sedition Was Enemy’s Soft War to Overthrow System” (in Persian), December 30, 2017, <https://bit.ly/31GwVDM>.
- 150 Tasnim News Agency, “Israeli Regime to Collapse in Coming Years: Ex-IRGC Chief,” May 31, 2019, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2019/05/31/2022954/israeli-regime-to-collapse-in-coming-years-ex-irgc-chief>.
- 151 “IRGC Commander’s Prescription for Combating Soft War” (in Persian), *Khabar Online*, July 13, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ESkZfT>.
- 152 “Soft War and Mismanagement” (in Persian), *Seday-e Modafean*, August 6, 2021, <https://www.sedayemodafean.org/akhbar/50532/>; “Exclusive: ‘Disruption’ in Iran’s 1400 [2020–21] Budget: Military Budget Increased by 1.5 Times in Parliament” (in Persian), BBC Persian, May 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/business-57175373>.
- 153 “Soft War and Mismanagement,” <https://www.sedayemodafean.org/akhbar/50532/>.
- 154 Ibid.
- 155 H. Rastgoo, “The Revolutionary Guards’ Media Cartels,” *IranWire*, January 31, 2020, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/6671>.
- 156 “Book Review Roundtable: Iran Reframed,” *Texas National Security Review*, September 8, 2020, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-iran-reframed/>.
- 157 “What Do You Know About the Shahid Avini Institute, Producer of the *Gando* Series?” *Seday-e Mardom*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.sedayemardom.net/?p=94993>.

- 158 Seth Jones and Danika Newlee, “The United States’ Soft War with Iran,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 11, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-soft-war-iran>.
- 159 Ibid.
- 160 Yulia Talmazan and Ali Arouzi, “U.S. Seizes Over 30 Websites Linked to Iranian Disinformation,” NBC News, June 23, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-seizes-over-30-websites-linked-iranian-disinformation-n1272076>.
- 161 U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Iranian Entities for Attempted Election Interference,” press release, October 22, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1158>.
- 162 This insight and those preceding it are from *ibid*.
- 163 U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Iran’s Envoy in Yemen and University Facilitating Recruitment for Qods Force,” press release, December 8, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1205>.
- 164 Sabet and Safshekan, *Soft War*, <https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=iran-mediaprogram>.
- 165 “Iran’s Intranet: A Master Plan for Internet Censorship,” Iran News Wire, October 30, 2020, <https://irannewswire.org/irans-intranet-a-master-plan-for-internet-censorship/>; Peter Kenyon, “Iran Struggles to Create an Intranet to Block Global Sites,” National Public Radio, January 17, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/17/797220614/iran-struggles-to-create-an-intranet-to-block-global-sites>.
- 166 “Iran’s Intranet,” <https://irannewswire.org/irans-intranet-a-master-plan-for-internet-censorship/>.
- 167 *Ibid.*; “Iran Says Its Intranet Almost Ready to Shield Country from ‘Harmful’ Internet,” Radio Farda, May 20, 2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-says-its-intranet-almost-ready-to-shield-country-from-harmful-internet/29952836.html>.
- 168 “Iran’s Intranet,” <https://irannewswire.org/irans-intranet-a-master-plan-for-internet-censorship/>.
- 169 Fars News Agency, “Strategy of Dominant System to Infiltrate Iran” (in Persian), February 6, 2017, <https://bit.ly/37RiOe3>.
- 170 “Leader’s Complaint About Revolutionary Shortcomings in Fighting the Enemy’s Psychological Warfare” (in Persian), Jahat Press, August 5, 2021, <https://jahatpress.ir/fa/news/38776>.
- 171 Islamic Republic News Agency, “Combating the Enemy’s Psychological Warfare Requires Planning,” January 23, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3mUeEhD>.
- 172 Ramin Mostaghim, “Imagine *Homeland*, if All the Heroes Were Iranian. That’s *Gando*, Must-See TV in Iran,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-07-19/iran-hit-tv-show-gando>.
- 173 “Iran Reframed,” <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-iran-reframed/>.
- 174 “Commander Fadavi: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Has No More Words in Front of It, Not Even ‘Iran,’” (in Persian), *Iran International*, April 23, 2018, <https://bit.ly/30a8tKb>.
- 175 Saeed Golkar, *The Supreme Leader and the Guard: Civil-Military Relations and Regime Survival in Iran*, Policy Note 58 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2019), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/1179>.
- 176 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 226.
- 177 Toumaj, Rondeaux, and Ammar, *Soleimani’s Shadow*, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/soleimanis-shadow/>.
- 178 “Soleimani: Huge Crowds Pack Tehran for Commander’s Funeral,” BBC, January 6, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51004688>.
- 179 Toumaj, Rondeaux, and Ammar, *Soleimani’s Shadow*, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/soleimanis-shadow/>.

The Author



AMIR TOUMAJ is an independent Iran researcher, and a cofounder of Resistance Axis Monitor, which provides objective coverage and analysis of Iran and its proxies. Toumaj has previously worked for the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and the American Enterprise Institute as well as in the private sector.



THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY
1111 19TH STREET NW | WASHINGTON, DC 20036
WWW.WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG
©2021 THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY.
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.