



TONY BLAIR  
INSTITUTE  
FOR GLOBAL  
CHANGE

# Beyond Borders

## The Expansionist Ideology of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

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# Executive Summary

Unlike the Iranian army that protects Iran's borders, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is mandated by Iran's constitution to pursue "an ideological mission of jihad in God's way; that is extending sovereignty of God's law throughout the world."<sup>1</sup> Since the inception of this paramilitary force in 1979, the Guard has emerged as the principal organisation driving the Iranian regime's revolutionary Shia Islamist ideology, within and beyond the regime's borders. Over these 40 years, it has been linked to terrorist attacks, hostage-takings, maritime piracy, political assassinations, human rights violations and the crushing of domestic dissent across Iran, most recently with bloodshed on the Iranian streets in November 2019, leaving 1,500 people dead in less than two weeks.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the IRGC remains Lebanese Hizbullah's prime benefactor, with the Guard known to be providing arms, training and funding to sustain the group's hostile presence against Israel and its grip on Lebanese society, and key operational assistance that has resulted in attacks on civilians stretching from Argentina, Bulgaria to Thailand. Modelled on its support for Hizbullah, the IRGC has prepared an estimated 200,000 fighters—from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Pakistan and Afghanistan—to rise in support of a cause that is built on a perceived existential threat to the Shia Muslim identity and a hostility towards global powers and their allies.<sup>3</sup>

There is no shortage of concern about the growing influence and operational capacity the IRGC now represents, although its goals are long standing and consistent. Drawing from internal IRGC documents used to train an incoming generation of Guardsmen, this report lays out the Guard's core objectives and the key aspects of its well-established worldview, placing the IRGC's current activities in the Middle East region into much-needed context. The findings of this report show that within the IRGC ranks alone, the Iranian regime has prepared and invested in an elaborate programme of indoctrination that first set and then defined its course of action, long before the Guard's actions gained momentum as it has today. First published in 2011, these documents have been subsequently reprinted, and the latest, published between 2012 and 2016, form the basis of this report.

In April 2019, the US designated the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO).<sup>4</sup> This unprecedented step has placed the Guard on a list alongside the non-state actor groups it supports such as Hizbullah and Hamas, as well as the likes of ISIS and al-Qaeda. Since then, the status of the IRGC has been at the forefront of the international agenda. There appears to be good reason for this. The last six months of 2019 saw the IRGC attack nine commercial oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz (including a UK-flagged ship) and shoot down a US drone over international waters. It also conducted the Saudi Aramco oilfield strike causing the biggest disruption to global oil supplies in history, as well as ordering its proxies to ransack the US embassy in Baghdad. The year 2020 began with the IRGC taking its escalation further: orchestrating a strike that killed a US citizen and in doing so crossing Washington's red line. This led the US to respond with a targeted strike that left Qassim Soleimani, the Guard's notorious Quds (Jerusalem) Force commander, dead. But the Guards activities are not limited to the region. The uncovering of an Iranian-linked London bomb factory in 2019 and a chain of IRGC terror plots across European cities from 2017 and 2018 suggests the Guard's footprint and interests extend far beyond the Middle East.<sup>5</sup>

Tehran's most potent elements of its revolutionary Shia Islamist ideology pervade every aspect of the Guard's ethos and its training programme. As stated in the preamble to textbooks aimed at recruits of the Guard and written by supreme leader Ayatollah

Seyed Ali Khamenei himself, "If in the Revolutionary Guard there is not strong ideological-political training, then [the] IRGC cannot be the powerful arm of the Islamic Revolution."<sup>6</sup> Most recent escalations in the threat from the IRGC are the real-world outcomes of a worldview that Tehran has propagated for the last 40 years and that is reflected in black and white in the publications analysed in this study.

The Syrian conflict, from 2011 onwards, has no doubt emboldened Iran's leadership and raised the Guard's expeditionary ambitions. Yet the repercussions of the IRGC's operational presence in Syria are far greater than foreign policy towards the Iranian state. Just as the Afghanistan conflict of the 1980s proved to be the single most important development in Salafi-jihadism and Sunni radicalisation, the Syrian battleground may prove to be the gear shift for a renewed Shia Islamist militarisation. Understanding what arguments and beliefs are put forward to legitimise this potential escalation may prove key to establishing a narrative to discredit it and preventing it from spreading further.

To date, policymakers have focused on Sunni extremist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda when taking on the challenge of Islamist extremism and global terrorism. As the findings in this report highlight, however, the IRGC trains recruits and Shia militias in an expansionist and divisive worldview, encouraging them to give their lives in favour of a cause that seeks to correct injustice towards Muslims beyond Iran's borders. Policymakers should see the IRGC as the mobilisation of a violent and extreme ideology that has repercussions that resonate far beyond Iran's direct sphere of influence. Behind the recent instability in the Persian Gulf lies a force whose stated mission is to expand the Islamic Revolution beyond Iran's borders, but the ideas that permeate IRGC training manuals relate to conditions facing oppressed Muslims worldwide and attempt to speak to audiences as disenfranchised as those whom Salafi-jihadi groups have often succeeded to recruit.

This latest report, which forms part of the Tony Blair Institute's series *Shia Islamism in Focus: From 1979 to Today*, provides evidence as to why the IRGC and the network it controls should be viewed and treated through a counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism lens. It analyses IRGC textbooks used to 'ideologically and politically' train recruits in order to ensure their commitment to the Guard's

mission. While the Tony Blair Institute's earlier research analysed the rhetoric of Iran's leaders to understand Tehran's worldview, the material analysed here demonstrates that the IRGC is the physical embodiment and mobilising force of this transnational ideology. From the evidence available, it is clear that this ideology is violent, extreme and based on a perversion of Islamic scripture in order to glorify and prioritise armed jihad. It is also clear that the Iranian state and its clerical establishment are heavily involved and invested in this "ideological-political" training, with the supreme leader's office signing off on educational materials. Given that the material analysed was produced for internal IRGC consumption, it is perhaps the closest piece of evidence available in understanding the Guard's psyche and, likely, its future objectives.

## THE APPROACH: UNDERSTANDING THE IRGC TRAINING MATERIALS

A review of existing research and policy revealed a blind spot in relation to the IRGC and Shia Islamist extremism. There are serious shortcomings when it comes to understanding the IRGC's ideological, religious and cultural dimensions, despite the Guard being, fundamentally, an ideological force.<sup>7</sup> This is, in part, due to a lack of access to primary Persian-language material from Iran. This paper seeks to fill this research gap by analysing official IRGC textbooks that are used to ideologically train recruits and members of the Guard. The Persian-language textbooks, which have been authorised by Iran's supreme leader through his representative office in the IRGC, give a rare insight into the group's psyche, values and long game, particularly as this material has not been fully analysed until now. Using a qualitative approach, the methodology adopted in this report is centred on content analysis, which has been previously used to look at propaganda, examining recurring concepts, references to scripture and religious justifications for violence of known Salafi-jihadi entities. The textbooks cover issues from the exportation of Iran's extreme state-sanctioned model of Islamism, to the ideological basis for the subjugation of women and the distortion of scripture to justify violence against those who criticise the regime. This report provides a snapshot of the IRGC's violent and extremist ideology, with a view to informing Western policy in countering the threat from Shia Islamist extremism.

## KEY FINDINGS

- **IRGC officers and members are trained in state-sanctioned Shia Islamist ideology, which is violent and extremist.** From modules on jihad, to family values and *velayat-e faqih* (the Shia Islamist system of governance that transfers political power to the clergy), the IRGC is committed to what it refers to as "ideological-political" training of recruits. The worldview within which this training is framed is extremist and violent. It identifies enemies—from the West, to Christians and Jews, to Iranians who oppose the regime—and advocates supranational jihad in the name of exporting Iran's Islamic Revolution. The findings echo the main components of Tehran's Revolutionary Shia Islamism, highlighted by our earlier research.
- **IRGC ideological training documents frame a global conspiracy against Shiism.** The IRGC's documents propagate the idea that there is an existential threat to Shiism and Shia Muslims from a "[Sunni] Arab-Zionist-Western axis" and in doing so fuels regional sectarian tensions. This argument depicts the Sunni Gulf states as being in a tacit partnership with Israel, Britain and the United States (US) with the aim of eradicating Shiism and its holy sites, as well as diverting attention from the Palestinian issue. To crystallise this conspiracy, the IRGC claims Wahhabism and Salafism—subsects of Sunni Islam—have Jewish origins and were created by British colonialists to destroy Islam from within. IRGC documents also claim ISIS and al-Qaeda were created, and are supported, by the US, Britain, Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as Western media, including the BBC. This is not reserved for the textbooks. The theory has been repeated by key Shia leaders, from Iran's supreme leader to former Prime Minister of Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki. Such ideas leverage regional anti-imperialist and anti-Semitic views that have long existed and have historically been leveraged by Salafi-jihadi groups.
- **The IRGC has clear expansionist ambitions.** Beyond the Guard's constitutional mandate, IRGC textbooks make no mention of Iran or Iranians in their framing of their mission to recruits. This both serves to make the materials (and the ideology) more accessible for non-Iranian Shia militias, with which the IRGC works.

It also reaffirms that the goal of the IRGC—and indeed Iran’s revolutionary ideology—is to expand and ensure the survival of *velayat-e faqih*. Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, is presented as having the same jurisdiction as the Prophet Muhammad and the Twelve divinely ordained Shia Imams. Consequently, the textbooks underline that he has the religious authority to expand Islam’s borders and “use the public funds and public assets of the community to develop military, political, cultural and other programmes for exporting Islam to other countries.”

- **The IRGC shares the same enemies as Salafi-jihadi groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda.** The textbooks justify the killing of Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians on the basis that their holy books “have been distorted and changed” and that “they do not have true and acceptable faith”, polytheists on the basis that they are idol worshippers, as well as atheists (those outside of the “People of the Book”). The IRGC also prescribes the same measures—namely violence—against enemies and manipulates religious scripture to provide justification for these actions. The Guard states that “it is obligatory on the Muslims to fight them and to pressure them to give up their devious beliefs and to accept Islam.”
- **The IRGC ideology targets opponents of the regime within Iran as enemies of Islam.** The IRGC defines the “enemies of Islam” as being enemies of the Islamic faith not simply the Iranian state. Primarily, the IRGC’s global vision divides the world into Muslims (*dar al-Islam*) and non-Muslims (*dar al-Kuffar*). Within that, the textbooks include *baaghi* (“internal conspirators”) and *moharabeh* (“enemies of God”) as enemies for recruits to target. This includes those who “rise up, revolt and/or engage in conspiracies” against the “head of the Islamic government”, in this case Ayatollah Khamenei. The IRGC has sought to mainstream this narrative to justify the killing of Iranian demonstrators in the most recent anti-regime protests in November 2019.
- **The IRGC lays out for recruits what it fights for not just what it fights against.** The IRGC focuses not just on destabilising strategies, but also puts forward an alternative Islamic utopian vision for its recruits. It paints an image of Islamic society in the eyes of the Iranian state that is to be protected and secured by IRGC soldiers. This vision hinges on a return to Islamic order, with special focus on the sanctity of religious family values. Matters of women’s rights form a significant portion of training for its recruits, emphasising the responsibility to “enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong”, an essential observance for all Muslims according to Islamic teachings. This is extended in other contexts to form the basis of justifying the application of violence to Muslims and non-Muslims who break moral principles, including the removal of the headscarf.
- **The IRGC disseminates its violent and extremist ideological training manuals freely online and updates these periodically.** The ease with which these materials were accessed online points to a broader problem. The IRGC is producing and disseminating extremist material in Persian (Farsi), both in print domestically and online on official Iranian government websites. This content is not part of the debate when government and technology companies discuss the availability of extremist content online. This is in part due to a lack of Persian-speaking expertise but more fundamentally, a failure to recognise the distinctiveness of Shia extremism as a form of Islamist extremism.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from our research have implications beyond the question of the 2015 nuclear agreement and foreign policy towards Iran, which continue to dominate the policy debate. The IRGC and the extremist ideas that it promotes have a wide-reaching influence, not only on Iranians, but on Shia communities across the world. The nature of this problem will be familiar to those from within the fields of counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency and counter-extremism. As such, to limit the activity and reach of the IRGC, we propose a series of actions to be taken by governments, organisations and individuals.



## Actions for Governments and Supranational Organisations

Governments and supranational organisations should designate the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO). The UK government and the European Union (EU), as well as the remaining members of the Five Eyes security alliance—Australia, Canada, New Zealand—should follow and build on the recent US decision to designate the IRGC as an FTO. Designation will have both a practical and symbolic long-term impact on the IRGC's ability to function, both inside and outside of Iran.

Designating the IRGC an FTO will enable efforts to limit the spread and legitimisation of its message, and provide a clear mandate and responsibility for governments, civil society and technology companies to comprehensively sanction, challenge and restrict IRGC activity. The UK government's decision to designate Hizbullah an FTO has been motivated by a desire to limit the group's ability to raise illicit funds and disseminate its jihadi propaganda. Efforts to contain Hizbullah are significantly undermined while the IRGC remains able to provide ongoing ideo-political, financial and armaments support to the group. The uncovering of an Iranian-linked London bomb factory in 2019, and a chain of IRGC terror plots across European cities from 2017 and 2018 underscores the extent of its influence, and the urgency of challenging the core of a growing movement.

## Actions for Western Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Strategies

These strategies should target the full spectrum of violent Islamist extremism. To date, Western governments and supranational bodies have focused almost exclusively on Salafi-jihadi ideology in their CVE efforts. This reflects the focus on Salafi-jihadi extremism in the post-9/11 context. Systematic rebuttals targeting Salafi-jihadism plays into the hands of Shia Islamist groups including the IRGC, leaving them with a moralistic monopoly as their perspectives are not countered. Western CVE efforts should work in tandem with civil society groups and governments to develop an effective counter-narrative to Shia Islamist extremism, working with religious leaders within the Shia community, both in the West and in countries with sizable Shia populations.

## Actions for Civil Society Groups, Governments and Policymakers

These organisations and individuals should develop and expand counter-narrative efforts that challenge the violent and extremist worldview of the IRGC. The ideological basis that is used as justification for violence and global terrorism within Sunni Islamist extremism shares significant overlap with the ideological underpinnings of Shia Islamist extremism. The formative history of ideas that permeated political-clerical and Islamist circles within Sunni Islam had a parallel process in Shia Islam. Today, as is evidenced by these documents, there are shared ideological characteristics with a worldview that is associated with Sunni Islamist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda which are designated FTOs.

As with Sunni Islam, Shiism is not homogenous, and the narrow Shia Islamist ideology espoused by the IRGC and Iran's political-clerical establishment is not representative of the 200 million Shia Muslims across world. The ricochet of protests across the Shia heartlands in Iraq, Lebanon and Iran—with anti-Khamenei and anti-IRGC slogans and the burning of Iranian consulates in Iraq—are an indication of the growing rejection of Iran's state-sanctioned totalitarian Shia Islamist ideology.

Just as policymakers continue to engage religious leaders of the Salafi school in Islam to counter and challenge Salafi-jihadism, civil society groups and policymakers should identify and engage Muslim religious leaders with credibility and authority among Shia religious communities in order to counter the worldview and propaganda of the IRGC. This should be reflected in policies towards counter-narratives of all violent Islamist ideologies. The IRGC is inseparable from Iran's political clerical establishment and as the manuals analysed in this paper reveal, the Guard uses religious scripture to justify its violent and extremist worldview. Counter-narrative efforts will require engaging with different *Hawzas* (Shia seminaries) that sit outside the Iranian regime's control and empowering the voices of religious leaders, particularly those outside Iran, who are able to target the foundations of the IRGC's ideological framework from within the Shia intellectual and theological discourse. These voices, which should include dissident Iranian clerics, will be able to expose the weaknesses and contradictions inherent in their use of scripture and debunk the IRGC's theological foundation.

Beyond this, civil society groups and governments must fund online counter-narrative projects to ensure the dissemination of these voices more widely. For too long, policymakers concerned with rising Islamism have overlooked extremism within Shia communities. This has resulted in a blind spot in counter-narrative efforts with global consequences.

## Actions for Technology Companies

Technology companies should broaden their classifications on what is considered extremist beyond the realms of Salafi-jihadism to include Shia Islamist extremist content. To achieve this, technology companies should address language blind spots by investing in Persian-language expertise. While global technology firms strive to deliver a consistent and standardised experience to users, each language represents a unique set of challenges. This extends to the threat of extremist and terrorist activity online, with each region subject to a variety of distinct contexts that require a localised understanding, spanning language and culture.

In addition to technical responses, global technology firms should invest in bolstering human subject matter expertise to ensure accurate understanding of the threats and challenges in the Persian and Arabic-speaking world and strengthen policy enforcement capabilities. As a first step towards this objective, technology companies should ban IRGC-linked accounts. This should include taking down the social media accounts of senior IRGC officials. Despite the ban on the use of social media in Iran, IRGC figures use social media to disseminate violent and extremist ideology to those outside of Iran's borders.

# Introduction

On 15 April 2019, the US government formally designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO).<sup>8</sup> This unprecedented move placed the IRGC, the Iranian regime's ideological military force, on a list alongside non-state actors such as al-Qaeda, Hizbullah, Hamas and ISIS. To date, the debate around the IRGC's proscription has primarily focused on the group's hard power, with emphasis on acts of violence by the group since 1979. It has been discussed in tactical terms, not in terms of the IRGC's long-term strategy. Furthermore, policy circles tend to see the IRGC as a rogue force within the regime, that operates separately to the Iranian state.

Over the course of four decades, the IRGC has been responsible for plotting and executing global terrorist attacks, political assassinations on foreign soil and crushing domestic dissent in Iran. Since its inception, it has also been dedicated to nurturing Shia militancy across the Middle East: creating, arming, training and financing some of the deadliest Islamist terrorist organisations in the world. From Lebanese Hizbullah, which it helped create to destroy Israel and export Iran's Islamic Revolution to Lebanon, to Iraq's Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which it armed and ordered to conduct over 6,000 attacks on American and British forces in Iraq (2003-2011). But the IRGC's ties to terrorism are not restricted to Shia extremists. The Guard has also supported Sunni extremists such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, as well as having had ties with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Today, the IRGC has effectively become a 'franchise builder' for any militant group that embraces its revolutionary Shia Islamist ideology or Iran's broader aims.<sup>9</sup>

The group is also an economic powerhouse within Iran and has invested significant sums in pursuit of its hard power objectives and to disseminate its ideas across the region through soft power. According to estimates, Iran has spent \$30 billion since 2011 on efforts in Syria alone to prop up the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Reports have indicated that an estimated 80,000 Shia foreign fighters that were recruited and trained by the IRGC have travelled to fight in Syria.<sup>10</sup> Such investments are also exemplified by the surge in the number of IRGC-linked foundations, religious institutions, schools and educational centres across the Middle East. This has significantly increased the group's capacity to radicalise a generation of young, disenfranchised Shia men and women, in the same way Sunni violent extremist groups have done in the past.

Crucially, while proscription as an FTO has focused on the *outcomes*, namely violence, there has been far more limited attempts to understand the *causes*, that is to say, the ideas driving the IRGC's violence. This is primarily because conventional analysis has consistently mischaracterised the IRGC as a hard power actor, driven by realpolitik and regime survival. As a result, this misunderstanding has inhibited policy in dealing with the Guard.

In the years since the 9/11 attacks, Western governments have come to accept that, when dealing with Salafi-jihadi terrorist groups, an approach that focuses too heavily on the violence alone is not enough in the long term. This is because the strength of such organisations lies not only in their operational capabilities, but in their ability to inspire acts of

violence through their ideologies. Islamist extremist groups—from Salafi-jihadi organisations like ISIS and al-Qaeda to Shia Islamists such as Hizbullah and Iraq's Badr Brigade—advance a warped version of Islam, turning it into a political ideology that justifies violence. To be able to exist and function effectively, these groups not only rely on weapons, but on propaganda for recruitment and indoctrination of recruits.

Does the same apply to the IRGC, which until 2019 was not officially categorised as a terrorist group? What are the similarities and differences between the IRGC and other Islamist extremist terrorist organisations? Is the IRGC dependent on ideological indoctrination to function?

To answer these questions, this paper analyses internal IRGC textbooks that are used to indoctrinate IRGC members as part of a formalised ideological-political training programme. The textbooks cover issues from the exportation of Iran's extreme state-sanctioned model of Islamism, to the ideological basis for the subjugation of women and the distortion of scripture to justify violence against those who criticise the regime. This is the first time these documents have been translated from Persian, and the new evidence provides critical context to current policy debates on the status of the IRGC.

The answers to these questions are critical in assessing whether the West needs to recalibrate its policy towards the IRGC and treat the group not only as a military threat to the peace and stability of the region, but also an ideological one.

## What is the significance of the Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) designation?

The decision to designate the IRGC as an FTO aims to increase the cost for any person or company that seeks to engage with the group (either directly or indirectly). This decision enhances the criminal penalties for any person who provides "material support" to the IRGC. FTO designation makes it explicitly clear that doing business with the IRGC will be considered supporting terrorism. The move is unprecedented in that it is the first time the US has designated a state actor as a terrorist organisation.

Given that the IRGC controls between 20 to 40 per cent of Iran's gross domestic product (GDP), proscription will likely have a long-term effect not only on the group, but also on the Iranian economy.<sup>11</sup> The US Treasury Department has described the IRGC as Iran's "most powerful economic actor, dominating many sectors of the economy, including energy, construction, and banking." By proscribing the IRGC as an FTO, the US administration seeks to restrict the IRGC's economic network to constrain the group's nefarious activities, in particular its support for violent Islamist groups, such as Lebanese Hizbullah and Iraq's Badr Brigade. In the words of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the designation "will help starve the regime of the means to execute [the IRGC's] destructive policy."<sup>12</sup>

But what does proscription actually do? In essence, the FTO designation of the IRGC raises the stakes for any company that wishes to do business in Iran. As of April 2019, any company that is found providing “material support” to the IRGC will be providing material support to a terrorist organisation.<sup>13</sup> Under US law, the penalty for such actions is a sentence of 20 years to life imprisonment. Crucially, the law also includes extraterritorial jurisdiction clauses, enabling the US government to extradite and prosecute violators outside the US.

## A COMMON IDEOLOGY

The Tony Blair Institute is committed to tackling the ideologies behind extremism so that people can co-exist peacefully. Our past research has shown that at least 121 violent Islamist groups inspire and orchestrate attacks around the world. In 2017, at least 84,000 people died because of this problem.<sup>14</sup> To date, however, Western policy has treated Salafi-jihadi and Sunni Islamist terrorism differently to other forms of violent Islamist extremism. While vital, this has overlooked Shia extremists.

The debate on the UK government’s decision to proscribe Hizbullah in its entirety as an FTO, or the more recent US decision to designate the IRGC as an FTO, are cases in point. The pushback levelled at these two decisions would be unimaginable for groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. On the surface, this may be understandable in the context of the IRGC given its state-actor status. But this ignores the fact that the IRGC began as a non-state actor militia that was later institutionalised. As a result, the IRGC has never been able to escape its characterisation as a militia, which is a central part of its identity and which has shaped the way it behaves both internally and externally. The IRGC therefore can be most accurately described as an institutionalised militia.

Although there are marked differences in ideology and tactics, this report shows that the extremism espoused by Sunni and Shia Islamist extremists has striking similarities. Both Sunni and Shia Islamists believe in imposing a narrow rendering of Islam as state law and provide religious justification for violence.

A deeper look into the ideals and propaganda of the Guard reveals significant overlaps with Salafi-jihadi and Sunni Islamist ideology. As this report finds, the IRGC and its violent Shia Islamist client actors have far more in common with groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda than they have differences.

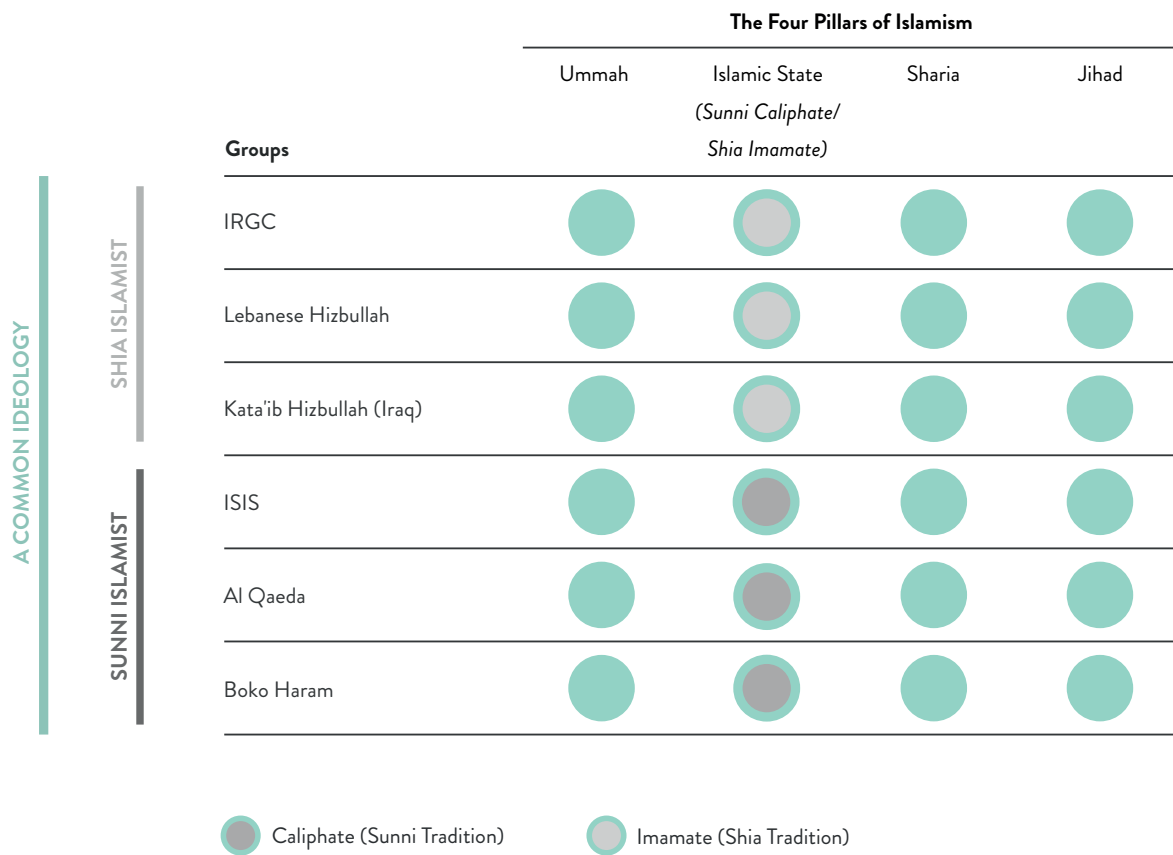
In 2019, the UK *Commission for Countering Extremism* published a series of papers, one of which identified the four pillars of Islamism: ummah, Islamic state, sharia and jihad.<sup>15</sup>

1. **Ummah:** This is understood as ‘the Muslim community’ worldwide. Islamists push for the belief that Muslim identity supersedes all other identities, whether national, ethnic or racial. The world can then be divided more simply by Muslim and non-Muslim people, land, and values.
2. **Islamic state:** either *Caliphate* (in Sunni Islamism) or *Imamate* (in Shia Islamism): Once a binary worldview, of Muslims and non-Muslims, is adopted, it effectively defines all Muslims worldwide as a separate nation. Therefore, the idea of a caliphate or imamate, as a separate Islamic nation-state for all Muslims of the world follows immediately.
3. **Sharia:** Having created an Islamic state, it must be governed by Islamic law, which Islamists naturally believe to be sharia, to be imposed and enforced on its subjects.
4. **Jihad:** The concept of jihad has been applied by Islamists by focussing on its physical or military aspects, as opposed to its spiritual aspects. The concept of jihad may then be deployed to justify resistance, insurgency, revolution, terrorism and to wage war relentlessly for the defence and expansion of an idealised ‘Islamic state’.

The ideology of all Islamist extremist groups, including violent groups, is based on these four pillars.

Figure 1 shows the commonality in ideology between Shia Islamist groups – including the IRGC – and Sunni Islamists groups.

**FIGURE 1** A Common Ideology: Similarities Between Shia and Sunni Islamist Groups



### OUR APPROACH

This report is the third in a series of publications on Shia Islamism by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. Published in February 2019, the first paper, co-written by Professor Ali Ansari and Kasra Aarabi, focussed on the significance of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the immediate and long-term consequences of the West’s short-sightedness in its policymaking towards Iran.<sup>16</sup> The second report in the series used original research to unpack the fundamentals of Iran’s Shia Islamist ideology by analysing Iran’s constitution and the speeches of seven Iranian leaders from 1979 to today.<sup>17</sup> This paper focuses specifically on Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Using IRGC original material, this report analyses textbooks used by the IRGC to ideologically train its recruits and members using qualitative data analysis. The methodology adopted in this report has been previously used to look at Islamist extremist literature (including propaganda), examining recurring concepts, references to scripture and religious justifications for violence.

All the textbooks are official IRGC documents that have been sanctioned by Iran’s supreme leader’s representative to the IRGC. The IRGC-published material was produced by the Imam Sadeqh Institute, based in Qom, Iran. The material evaluated in this paper forms part of the modules used by the IRGC as part of its ideological-political education programme, which experts have referred to as indoctrination.<sup>18</sup>

It is compulsory for all IRGC members to undergo ideological and political training as part of their service. The documents analysed in this paper provide rare insight into the way in which the IRGC ideologically indoctrinates its members.

The material was accessed via the IRGC's ideological-political training website, which provides e-learning on ideology for members of the IRGC (including the Basij, the regime's volunteer paramilitary force).<sup>19</sup> A broad range of IRGC training modules are available to access on the website, including 24 'vertical education' course modules, which are compulsory for all recruits upon entry to the IRGC. For the purpose of this paper, nine textbooks were analysed. These include:

- Jihad and Defence in the Quran
- The Contemporary Political History of Iran
- Jihad and Defence in Islam
- The Islamic Defence System
- Velayat-e faqih (volume one)
- Velayat-e faqih (volume two)
- Family Guidance
- Enjoin What is Right and Forbid What is Wrong
- The Ways and Customs of Youth

The nine modules above were chosen on the basis that they gave the most accurate representation of the type of content the IRGC is using to indoctrinate its recruits. All the textbooks were in Persian (Farsi) and are aimed at an internal IRGC audience. There are, of course, caveats to this research. Most important of which is that we do not have specific information on the frequency and duration of each course. There is also very little information on the order of the modules being taught. Despite these caveats, the textbooks analysed in this paper provide unique insight into the way in which the IRGC ideologically indoctrinates its recruits.

All translations from Persian to English were conducted by the author and all Quranic translations were sourced from "www.quran.com".





# Background: The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

There is no better example of the Iranian regime mobilising its ideology from the conceptual to the practical than the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Established in May 1979, the IRGC was created, as stated in the Iranian constitution, as an “ideological army” tasked with serving the Islamic Revolution’s Shia Islamist ideology both at home and overseas.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the regular Iranian army (the *Artesh*), whose primary objective is to protect Iran’s territorial integrity, the IRGC’s principal mission is to protect and advance the interests of Iran’s Shia Islamist theocratic system of *velayat-e faqih*.<sup>21</sup> For this reason, the IRGC is virtually inseparable from that of Iran’s clerical establishment. Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei serves as commander-in-chief of the Islamic Republic’s armed forces, including the IRGC.

By creating a dual military structure, with one force swearing allegiance to the Revolution rather than the nation, Iran’s first supreme leader and figurehead of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, sought not only to ‘coup-proof’ the military but also to create a loyal force that would be able to neutralise threats to the revolution. This has been borne out domestically. Since 1979, the IRGC has been deployed against waves of domestic protest in 1993-4, 1999, 2003, 2009, 2017-18 and, most recently, November 2019.<sup>22</sup>

However, ensuring the survival of the regime has not been the only goal. For Khomeini and his Islamist followers in Iran, the end goal was never a state, it was the expansion of the revolution and its ideology.<sup>23</sup> Khomeini himself declared that the Iranian Revolution was “only a point in the start of the revolution of the great world of Islam”.<sup>24</sup> The IRGC was therefore the Iranian revolutionaries’ attempt to form an Islamic army that would make this transnational Islamist utopia possible. The Iranian constitution confirms this objective. It states that the IRGC has an “ideological mission of jihad in God’s way, that is, extending the sovereignty of God’s law throughout the world”.<sup>25</sup> The constitution legitimises this objective through the following Quranic verse, which features in the IRGC’s motto:

*And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy, and others besides them. [al-Anfal, 8:60]*<sup>26</sup>

The first line of this verse forms the basis of the IRGC’s motto and can be seen on the Guard’s logo.<sup>27</sup> The use of scripture by the IRGC is also analysed in this report.

Staying true to this “ideological mission of jihad”, in 1982 the IRGC formed its Quds (Jerusalem) Force (IRGC QF), which would be tasked with “liberating Palestine” and exporting the revolution beyond Iran’s borders.<sup>28</sup> By creating the Quds Force, Tehran sought to establish a transnational Islamic army that would, in its own words, bring “millions of Muslims” together to “liberate Jerusalem”.<sup>29</sup> During the next four decades, the IRGC QF worked tirelessly to nurture Shia Islamist militancy across the region and beyond.<sup>30</sup> Since 1979, the IRGC has effectively functioned as the link between Tehran and Shia Islamist militia groups. It has become the ‘franchise builder’ for Shia Islamist militias, arming, training and financing groups from Lebanon to Pakistan.<sup>31</sup> Today the IRGC has boots on the ground in every conflict zone in the Middle East.

Previous research by the Tony Blair Institute found that Iran’s Shia Islamist ideology is virtually inseparable from the narrative used by senior Iranian officials, including the IRGC’s former QF commander, the late Qassem Soleimani.<sup>32</sup> To grasp the centrality of ideology in driving Iran’s hard power, this report looks beyond the rhetoric of senior figures and examines the way in which the regime educates IRGC recruits, who will lead the jihad on the front line.

FIGURE 2 Official Emblem of the IRGC



# Indoctrination: An Increasing Focal Point for the IRGC

What the Iranian regime terms ideological-political training, and others have called indoctrination, has been crucial to Ayatollah Khamenei's strategy in ensuring that the IRGC remains a protector of his leadership and obedient to the Revolution's Shia Islamist ideology.<sup>33</sup>

Just how much this matters to Iran's government is made clear in the IRGC's charter, which was published shortly after the formation of the Corps in 1982.<sup>34</sup>

This document, which is available online and outlines the IRGC's mission, stresses that "the training and nurturing [of] members of the IRGC according to Islamic teachings and principles [and] the guidelines of *velayat-e faqih* in the field of ideology" is fundamental for recruits to "gain the necessary power for the purpose of the assigned missions."<sup>35</sup>

Dependence on ideological indoctrination also stems in part from the fact that the Iranian regime lacks access to advanced military technology and therefore relies on manpower to pursue the Revolution's goals abroad.<sup>36</sup>

This means that the IRGC needs recruits to be totally committed to the mission, which, as stated in the constitution, is one of protecting and exporting the ideology of the Islamic Revolution. Such an approach was central to the IRGC's strategy during the Iran-Iraq War. At that time hundreds of thousands of Iranians, including children as young as 12, volunteered to participate in human wave attacks and to walk over minefields because they believed they would be rewarded as martyrs in the afterlife.<sup>37</sup> Accounts from the front line recall how volunteers would wish for death, believing that martyrdom was God's greatest reward.<sup>38</sup>

Given that the IRGC engages in asymmetric rather than conventional warfare it continues to rely heavily on human power. In turn, to achieve its external ambitions, Iran's leadership continues to regard indoctrination as a key tool for developing recruits.<sup>39</sup>

Commenting in 2013 on the IRGC's involvement in the Syrian conflict, the supreme leader's representative to the IRGC claimed that "the impact of ideological training on the missions of the IRGC's ground forces" was "perceptible and tangible".<sup>40</sup> Policymakers should be aware that, as part of the 2015 nuclear agreement, Tehran will have a UN arms embargo lifted in October 2020, which would give the IRGC access to purchase advanced military equipment.

The IRGC charter specifically states that the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, is responsible for "determining the content of ideological-political training of members of the IRGC" and that all publications "must be endorsed by the leader or the leader's representative in the IRGC". This top-down approach enables Khamenei to control the material used in IRGC classrooms. In practical terms, Khamenei's control over the indoctrination programme is aided by the regime's ideological-political organisations (IPO).<sup>41</sup>

### The IRGC's Ideological-Political Organisation (IPO)

The IRGC IPO, which is also known as the Office of the Representative of the supreme leader, is headed by the supreme leader's representative to the IRGC, who is directly appointed by, and accountable to, Khamenei. It effectively oversees and implements all ideological-political training within the Corps. Khamenei's emphasis on ideological training has also ensured intertwinement between the clergy and the IRGC, making the two bodies virtually inseparable. Indeed, although commentators often suggest that the IRGC may seek to wrest political power from the clergy following Khamenei's succession, such claims are often based on a failure to fully appreciate the clerical establishment's entrenchment within IRGC structures.<sup>42</sup>

The IRGC's IPO is responsible for all ideological-political operations across the organisation's branches: Aerospace Force, Ground Forces, Navy, Quds Force

and the Basij. Of the IPOs within the Islamic Republic, the IRGC's has received the most investment and is regarded as being the most successful. In line with the overarching objective—namely to ensure full conviction to the supreme leader and the regime's Shia Islamist ideology—the IRGC IPO's main duties can be broken down into: 1) indoctrination of members of the IRGC; 2) regulation of members ideological commitment; 3) dissemination of the ideology both inside and outside the IRGC; and 4) oversight over the implementation of sharia law in the military.

The IRGC IPO delivers its mission through several bureaux, which can be categorised as propaganda, political affairs and indoctrination (see Figure 2).

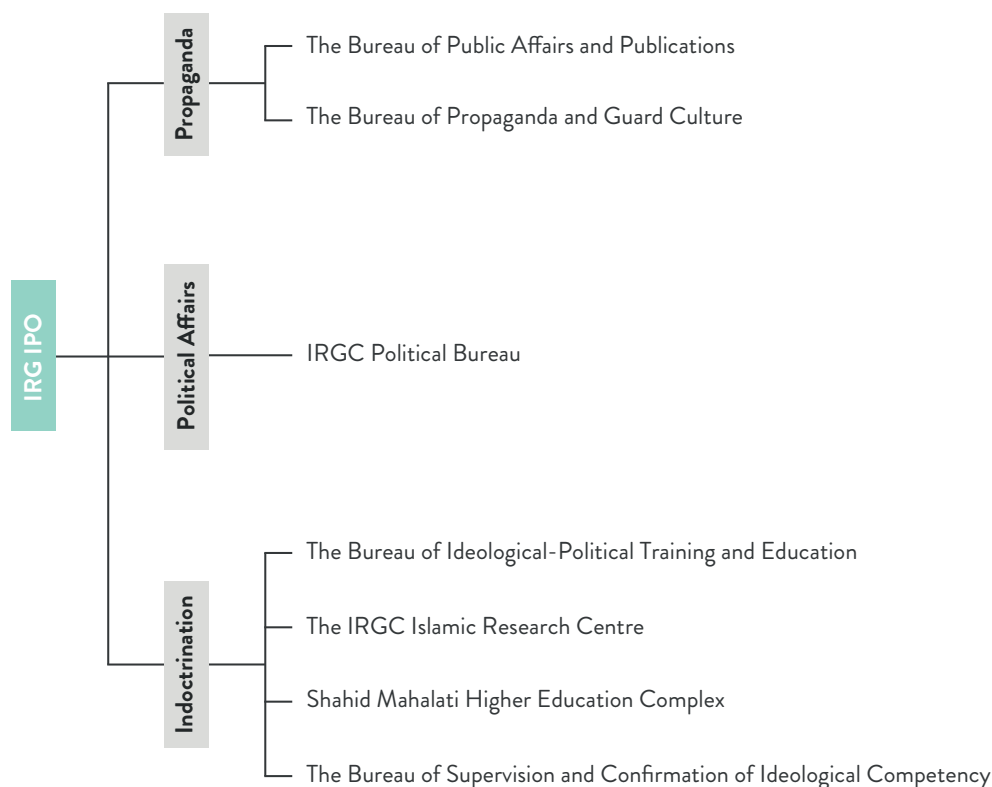
The Bureau of Public Affairs and Publications and the Bureau of Propaganda and Guard Culture fall under the IRGC's IPO propaganda responsibilities. The former is responsible for disseminating IRGC propaganda to an external audience (non-members of the Guard) and working closely with the mass media (specifically the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) of which Press TV is a part), as a way to increase the IRGC's popularity among the broader population of Iran, as well as globally.<sup>43</sup> The latter is responsible for propagating IRGC propaganda for an internal audience, targeting IRGC members and their families. One of the main audiences for the Bureau of Propaganda and Guard Culture are the children of IRGC members to ensure that their view are aligned with their parents' ideology. The IRGC IPO's Political Bureau is primarily charged with promulgating the IRGC's political vision. Given the IRGC's increasing involvement in politics within the Islamic Republic, the Political Bureau has, over time, become the most important bureau within the IRGC IPO.

The remaining bureaux deliver the IRGC IPO's indoctrination responsibilities, focussing on the indoctrination of IRGC members. Whereas communications underpin propaganda and seek to target a broader group of people, including non-believers, indoctrination within the IRGC serves as an internal, formalised and assessment-based process with the objective of ideologically radicalising recruits. This is the key difference between propaganda and indoctrination within the IRGC. The bureaux focusing on indoctrination include: the Bureau of Ideological-Political Training and Education, which is

responsible for ideological-political training of all IRGC members, as well as their families; the IRGC Islamic Research Centre (Imam Sadeqh Institute), which acts as the IRGC's research institute and publishes textbooks used for ideological-political training; the Shahid Mahalati Higher Education Complex,

which trains clerics for service within the IRGC; and the Bureau of Supervision and Confirmation of Ideological Competency, which assesses the ideological qualifications of any person looking to be hired, appointed or promoted within the IRGC.<sup>44</sup>

**FIGURE 3** IRGC Ideological-Political Structure



## Genesis of Indoctrination in the IRGC

Iran's leadership has increased its efforts with regard to IRGC indoctrination over the past two decades. The catalyst for this acceleration occurred in 1997, following reports that 73 per cent of IRGC troops had voted for the 'reformist' candidate Mohammad Khatami in presidential elections, despite Ayatollah Khamenei's preferred candidate being the more hard-line candidate, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri.<sup>45</sup> Such reports suggested that the second generation of IRGC members (1990-2000) were less loyal to the supreme Leader and less ideologically driven than the first (1979-1989). This prompted the Iranian leadership to accelerate indoctrination as a way to revive ideological fervour within the next wave of IRGC recruits.

Consequently, IRGC indoctrination became an increasing focal point for Ayatollah Khamenei. This led to profound changes in the IRGC's structures regarding both recruitment and training. In terms of recruitment, the IRGC decided to limit its intake of 50,000 new conscripts to members of the Basij. The Basij is directly overseen by the IRGC and effectively operates as a volunteer militia that seeks to uphold and foster loyalty to the regime and to the ideology of the revolution, often by force. It has been described as the "eyes and ears" of the Iranian regime and pervades virtually every aspect of Iranian society, with recruitment targeting children as young as 12.<sup>46</sup> It has been reported that at least 70 per cent of the IRGC's conscript intake today is from the Basij, with some larger cities allocating 100 per cent of their conscript spaces to Basij members.<sup>47</sup>

This approach was adopted because Basij members are ideologically aligned with the regime, and it was therefore believed that a higher proportion of Basij recruits would protect the ideological commitment of IRGC troops.

There has also been a significant increase in the ideological-political training of IRGC troops. Upon entry to the IRGC, all recruits enter the Imam Hussain University where they undergo compulsory, assessment-based ideological-political training, known as vertical education. Overtime, the IRGC IPO has significantly increased the amount of vertical education. Since 2002, the IRGC has increased this type of training by 50 per cent.

The IRGC also has 'in-service' ideological-political training for all its members and employees. To remain in the IRGC and to secure promotion within the ranks, all members are required to undertake this 'in-service' training. Like vertical education, the IRGC has regularly increased 'in-service' training. Prior to 2009, 'in-service' courses would take place for all members over one month every three years, but this has now been changed to an intensive ten-day course that takes place every year.<sup>48</sup>

These new measures, while fairly low cost, have been highly effective in radicalising the IRGC's third

generation (2001-2010). The IRGC's willingness to use violence in crushing the 2009 Green Movement protests illustrated its members' ideological zeal and loyalty to the supreme leader. Given the effectiveness of its indoctrination, the Iranian regime has continued to double down and invest in these efforts. In 2018, it was announced that the IRGC has a total of 9,000 'ideological coaches', 40 per cent of whom are clerics, who teach the training modules to recruits, and that the IRGC aims to increase this number by 50 every year.<sup>49</sup>

In the past five years, these efforts have been highly successful, with the newer generation of the Guard proving to be ever more zealous. Its members' willingness to be voluntarily deployed in Syria and Iraq shows that indoctrination has successfully radicalised troops in their belief in Iran's Shia Islamist ideology. As one IRGC commander recently asserted, it is "the [ideological] conviction of the youth...in defence of the shrines of the Imams" that is driving so many of the IRGC's members to fight in Syria and Iraq, since "it was not compulsory for [them to be] thousands of kilometres beyond the borders [of Iran]".<sup>50</sup>

Today, not only will every IRGC recruit go through a process of indoctrination, but reports also suggest the group is using the same ideological-political training methods on a network of foreign fighters from Lebanon to Pakistan.<sup>51</sup>

## Case Study: Who Are Iran's Basij Militia?

The *Organisation for Mobilisation of the Oppressed*, known as the Basij, acts as a domestic volunteer militia and as an arm of the IRGC. Formed in 1979, the Basij was set-up following Ayatollah Khomeini's call for the creation of a 20-million-strong people's force to uphold the interests of the Islamic Revolution, both at home and abroad. True to this mission, the Basij has played an integral role in carrying out the regime's more visible and contentious activities, from storming foreign embassies to crushing domestic dissent, as seen most recently in the November 2019 protests, which killed 1,500 in less than two weeks. Today, while official statistics claim membership of the Basij stands at 22 million, the actual figure is closer to around five million.<sup>52</sup>

The Basij has a presence in virtually every occupational sector in Iran. Not only does this enable the Basij to ensure ideological practices are carried out, but it also provides the regime with an added layer of surveillance, effectively operating as its 'eyes and ears' across all sectors of Iranian society.

One of the most important Basij associations is the Pupil Basij Organisation (PBO), which mobilises schoolchildren. In its own words, the PBO seeks "to nurture a generation of revolutionaries in schools".<sup>53</sup> To do this, the PBO has a presence across schools in Iran, including primary, middle and high schools. Children as young as seven years old can volunteer to join the Basij. Membership requires children to participate in camps where members of the IRGC will provide them with ideological-political as well as military training, including firearms drills (see figure 4).

Membership of the Basij brings with it many lucrative benefits. In return for their zealous commitment to the regime's ideology, Basijis often receive state benefits and privileges. As an example, 40 per cent of private university places for those who wish to study law in Iran are reserved for members of the Basij, and during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013) this was also implemented across national universities.<sup>54</sup> In essence, this model mimics a networking club, with Basijis expected to help fellow members. This has effectively created what is sometimes referred to as a 'deep society', where the Basij effectively operates as a privileged class that acts as a law unto itself.

**FIGURE 4** Basij Pupil Receiving Firearms Training from IRGC Member







# Inside the IRGC's Ideological Training Programme

“If in the Revolutionary Guard there is not strong ideological-political training, then [the] IRGC cannot be the powerful arm of the Islamic Revolution”, states a message from Ayatollah Khamenei in the preamble to the IRGC’s ideological-political training modules, dated winter 2016.<sup>55</sup>

The textbooks analysed in this paper illustrate clearly how the Iranian regime not only mobilises but also weaponises its Shia Islamist ideology to motivate the IRGC and train its soldiers. Extremist ideology pervades every aspect of the IRGC, with all recruits having to undergo indoctrination to progress through its ranks. The modules explicitly demonstrate that the Shia Islamist ideology of the Iranian regime is based on a warped, supremacist and violent interpretation of Islam.

**FIGURE 5** Timetable excerpt from the ideological-political training delivered to IRGC members in 2011

دوره عقیدتی سیاسی دوره تربیت و تعالی سربازان سال 91

هدف: معرفی افزای دینی و سیاسی و تقویت رفتار و منش اسلامی سربازان

نوع و کارگاه سانس و فرم	شده های بدین	نقد سانس	حیثه های اهداف	محتوا و سرفصل تربیتی - آموزشی
1. مقاله نویسی 2. پرسش و پاسخ 3. آزمون کتبی (در صورت امکان)	1. توضیحی، تئوری 2. عملی، موقعیت برای داوری 3. پرسش و پاسخ	12 جلسه 5/ اسامی	1. دانشی: افزایش شناخت سیاست به جوان و ویژگی های جوانی در گامهای مختلف. 2. رفتاری: افزایش توجه به اهمیت و استفاده صحیح از دوران جوانی در گامهای مختلف. 3. رفتاری: اهتمام به استفاده و پاسداری جوانی در گامهای مختلف.	درس اول سفر شهادت جوان و جوانی اهمیت دوران جوانی پاسداری جوانی جوان و جوانی جوان در تمام معنوسین این و جوان گری جوان از دیدگاه امام و رهبری درس دوم جوان و معنویت تاریخ معنویت معنویت جوان و جوان معنوی معنویت در اسلام پیشروان معنویت معنویت در برون دین داری کل معنویت در زندگی جوان انبار فرجه پایانی توان مطالعه یا مشکلات تکلیفاتی فکری قدرت دین داری در اختیار گرفتن جوان

Figure 5 shows the first page of an IRGC course timetable covering two of twelve lessons for the module *The Ways and Customs of Youth from the Viewpoint of Islam*, which was taught to IRGC members as apart of their ‘in-service’ ideological-political training. As stated in the text, the objective of this training was “Increasing religious and political knowledge and strengthening the Islamic behaviour and character of the soldiers.” Topics included “Youth from the viewpoint of the Imam [Khomeini] and the supreme leader” and “Religion and Youthfulness”. The timetable references the assessment expectations for recruits, including written essays, oral assessments and written examinations. This module is one of many that are taught to recruits. For the translation see [Appendix A](#).

The following section analyses the IRGC's indoctrination material for its members. The section is divided into four subsections: Objectives; Group Identity; Conduct; and The Enemy. This framework is based on an established methodology for content analysis, which has previously been applied to Islamist extremist literature and propaganda.<sup>56</sup> In the context of the IRGC, it is important to distinguish between propaganda and indoctrination, something the IRGC does itself (see page 20-21 for how IRGC distinguishes between both structurally).

The IRGC's propaganda targets a broad external audience—including disbelievers and outsiders—and often works in tandem with mass communications, with the aim of increasing the Guard's appeal and image. For this reason, IRGC propaganda fails to give an accurate representation of the Guard and should not be taken at face value when seeking to understand the IRGC's ideology and motivations.<sup>57</sup>

Indoctrination, on the other hand, exclusively targets an internal audience (members of the IRGC and their families) and is a formalised and assessment-based process, which seeks to inculcate the minds of IRGC members with the Guard's system of ideas to radicalise and mobilise them. This is why the official IRGC textbooks, which are used as part of ideological-political training, provide the closest and most accurate insight into the IRGC's true face and ideology.

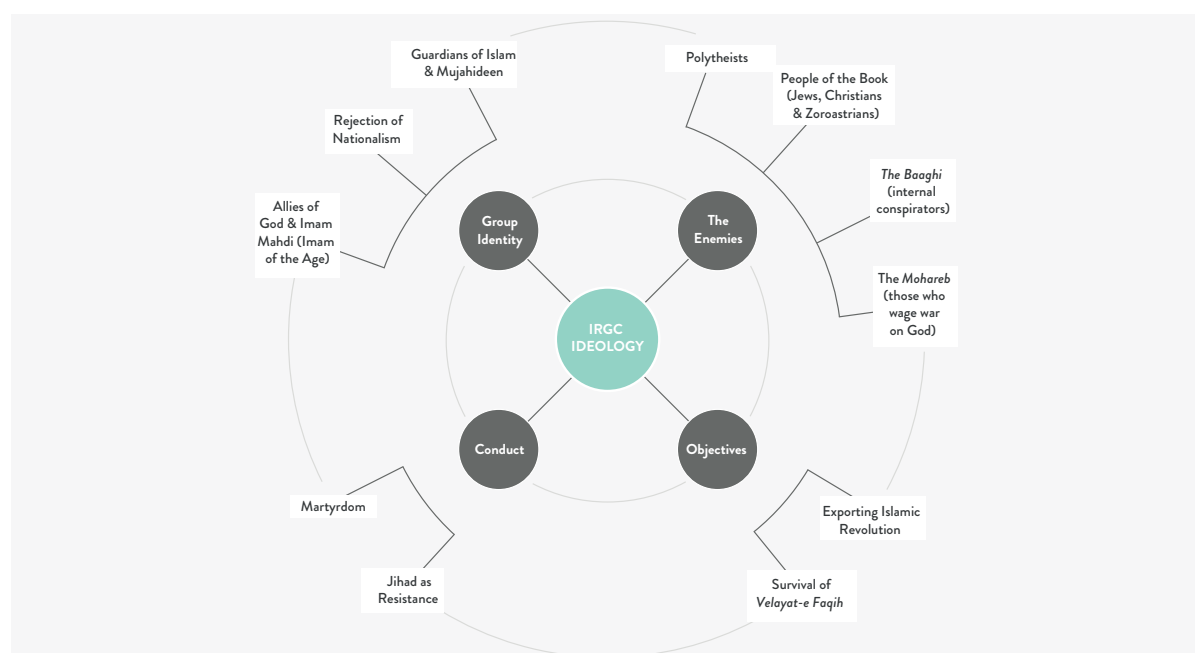
The textbooks cover issues from the stated purpose of exporting Iran's state-sanctioned model of Islamism, to the role of women in Muslim societies.

This section begins by assessing how the IRGC defines its objectives and conveys its grand vision to its recruits. This is crucial in understanding what the group is working towards. Next, it evaluates the IRGC's sense of identity and looks at the way in which the group defines its fighters and their characteristics. It then explores the IRGC's conduct, looking at the Shia conception of jihad. Finally, it analyses the way in which the IRGC defines its 'enemies'.

These four themes are categorised in the following way:

1. **Objectives:** Exporting Iran's Islamic Revolution; Survival of *velayat-e faqih*
2. **Group Identity:** Guardians of Islam and Mujahideen; Rejection of nationalism; Allies of God and Imam Mahdi (Imam of the Age)
3. **Conduct:** Jihad as resistance; Martyrdom
4. **The Enemy:** Polytheists; "People of the Book" (Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians); the *Baaghi* (internal conspirators); the *Mohareb* (those who wage war on God)

**FIGURE 6** Framework for Analysis



## OBJECTIVES: THE GRAND VISION

Understanding the IRGC's objectives is central to understanding how and why the Guard behaves in the way it does. The past 40 years have generated a wealth of research into the Iranian regime's overarching aims, with commentators and academics trying to make sense of the IRGC's mission and purpose. Yet, despite the abundance of research, the vast majority of these papers have analysed the Iranian regime's goals from an external perspective using secondary literature. Due to restrictions of access, very few studies have been able to evaluate the IRGC's mission from within the inner workings of the organisation.

The official IRGC ideological-political training manuals analysed in this report give a rare insight into those inner workings and offer a glimpse of the Guard's priorities and objectives as they prepare for future generations of struggle.<sup>58</sup> These textbooks provide a comprehensive account, not only of what the group is striving to achieve but also of the way in which it communicates its mission to recruits. Given that this material was sanctioned by the supreme leader's representative to the IRGC and is intended for an internal rather than external audience, it provides an intimate and unique insight into the group's psyche.

In this section we explore what the IRGC strives to achieve through the grand vision it communicates to its recruits as part of their ideological-political training. Its objectives are bound together by a narrative based not only on Islamic scripture but also on the depiction of Ayatollah Khamenei as having acquired divinely ordained infallibility, akin to the Prophet and the Twelve Shia Imams. The textbooks show the group's objectives to be both extreme and violent.

### Exporting Iran's Islamic Revolution

Since 1979, Iran's leaders have sought to export their Islamic Revolution overseas. This is in accordance with the Iranian constitution, which calls for "the continuation of the revolution at home and abroad" and emphasises that Iran "supports the just struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors in every corner of the globe".<sup>59</sup> This grand mission was a crucial feature of the ideology borne of Iran's Islamic Revolution.

For Ayatollah Khomeini, the end goal of the revolution was never a Westphalian nation-state, it was the expansion of the revolution.<sup>60</sup> The Ayatollah sought to use the creation of an Islamic state in Iran as a platform to establish a pan-Islamist order that would encompass the entire Islamic *ummah* (global Muslim community) with Iran at its centre. This concept was theorised by Mohammad-Javad Larijani (who now serves as a senior advisor to Iran's current supreme leader) as the "theory of *Umm al-Qura*" and was incorporated as a key pillar of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy strategy, alongside the separate pillar of exporting the revolution. According to the theory of *Umm al-Qura*, "after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Iran became the leader of the Islamic ummah (or world)" and "all Muslims have a responsibility to regard the guardianship and leadership of Imam Khomeini as the only leader of the Islamic ummah."<sup>61</sup> In essence, the *Umm al-Qura* doctrine, which has had very little global analysis, not only seeks to position Iran's supreme leader as the leader of the Islamic ummah (community), but it aims to shift the centre and capital of Islam for all Muslims from Mecca and Medina to the Shia holy city of Qom in Iran.<sup>62</sup> Over the past 40 years, the IRGC has been the central force working towards this objective. The constitution confirms this, stating that the group has "an ideological mission of jihad in God's way, that is, extending the sovereignty of God's law throughout the world". But beyond this stated objective, neither the constitution nor the speeches made by Iranian leaders elaborate on how and why the IRGC is to pursue its mission to export the Islamic Revolution.

This is what sets the IRGC's ideological-political manuscripts apart from the conventional Iranian regime position on exporting the revolution. Not only are the textbooks clear in stating the IRGC's mission to export the revolution, but they also explicitly state how the IRGC strives to achieve this goal (by use of violence) and why it is tasked with this mission (its divine mandate). In essence, therefore, the textbooks provide a methodology for putting the ideology into practice, enabling the IRGC to ensure that its recruits are fully immersed in and committed to achieving its ideological mission. At the heart of this strategy is the aim of inculcating the belief that exporting the Islamic Revolution is not only an absolute necessity but also a religious obligation.<sup>63</sup>

As part of this indoctrination, the module *Velayat-e Faqih* (volume two) teaches recruits that the supreme leader bears the responsibility for exporting the Islamic Revolution overseas.<sup>64</sup> The textbook underlines that “there is no difference between him [the supreme leader], the Prophet and the [infallible Shia] Imams” in terms of administering the affairs of, and being responsible for, the Islamic ummah.<sup>65</sup> It states that “the supreme leader, like the Prophet and the Imams, can control [and manage] the affairs of all Muslims in all matters.” It adds that given this divine mandate, the supreme leader, “like the Prophet and the Imams”, has a responsibility to “spread Islam to other countries and regions of the world”.<sup>66</sup>

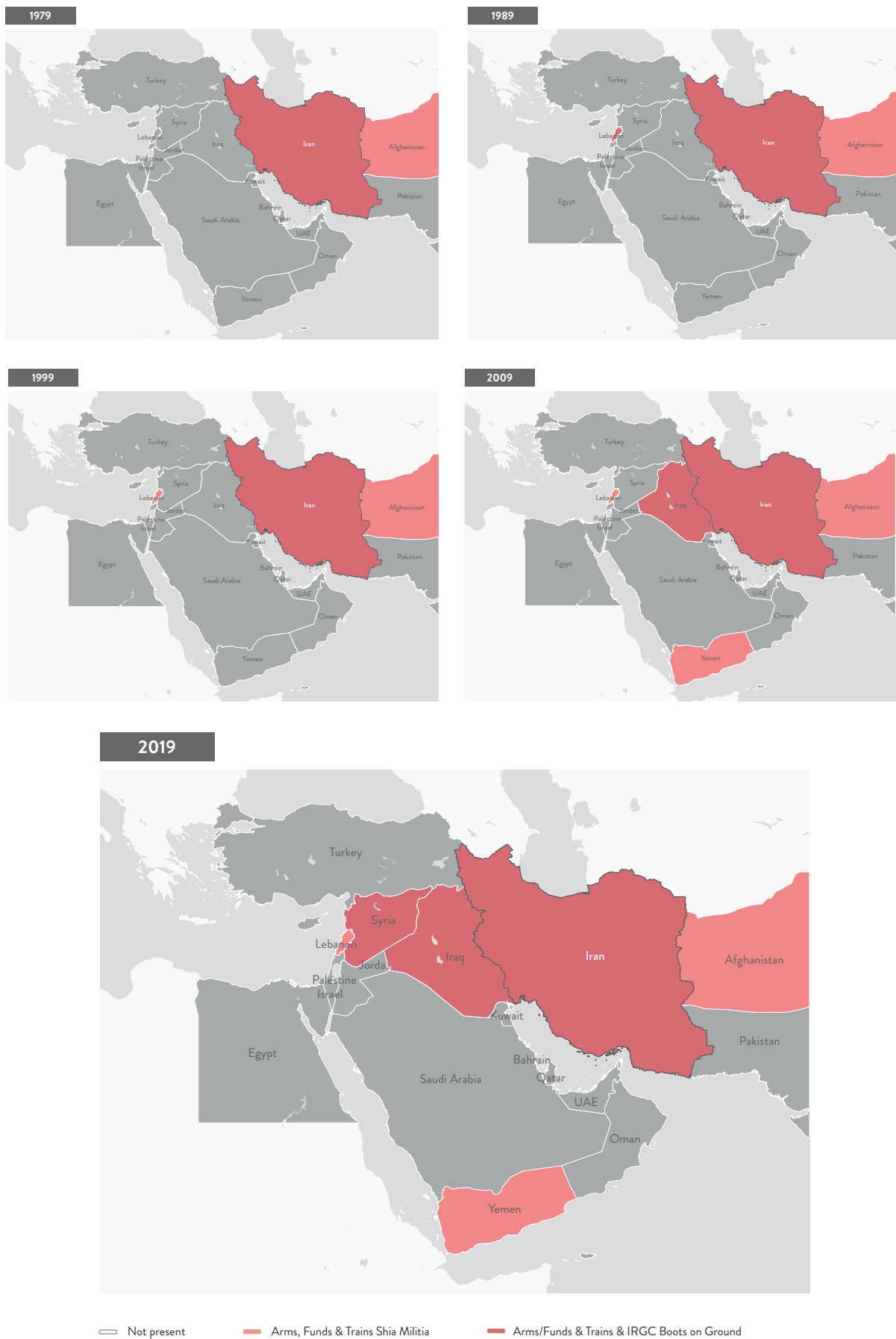
To achieve this Islamic utopia, IRGC members are told, the supreme leader is permitted to “use the public funds and public assets of the community to develop military, political, cultural and other programmes for expanding and exporting Islam to other countries”.<sup>67</sup> This is significant. Over the course of the past 40 years, despite domestic hardship, the regime has allocated Iranian resources overseas to fund, arm and train Shia Islamist proxies such as Lebanese Hezbollah, units within Iraq’s Hashd al-Shaabi, and the Houthi movement in Yemen. Tehran’s support for these Shia Islamist militias, via the IRGC, has conventionally been viewed as part of its deterrence strategy, with commentators and analysts generally dismissing the role of ideology in driving Iranian behaviour. However, as shown above, this conventional explanation contradicts the way in which the IRGC itself explains Tehran’s support for regional proxies. The IRGC’s men on the ground are being taught that their regime is supporting Shia militias in countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen not for deterrence but with the goal of “exporting Islam”.

It is critical, moreover, for the Iranian regime to legitimise the allocation of Iranian public funds abroad in the minds of IRGC recruits, not least because its prioritisation over the domestic needs of the Iranian population has been a major driver of anti-regime sentiment within Iran. The precedence of the regime’s ideological interests over the domestic national interest is consistent with Khomeini’s call for the Iranian population to “endure hardships and pressures” and allow the country’s officials to “carry out their main obligation, which is to spread Islam across the world”.<sup>68</sup>

Unable to escape their Shia identity, Iran’s clerical establishment and the IRGC gradually made this grand ambition to export their revolution the entire Muslim world more focused, targeting nations with Shia populations. In turn, over the course of four decades the IRGC has nurtured Shia militancy across region—beginning with Hezbollah in Lebanon in the 1980s to the Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq in 2014—with Iran’s supreme leader seeking to position himself as the supreme authority of Shia Muslims. While Khomeini had set his eyes on a pan-Islamist state to encompass the entire Islamic ummah, Khamenei and the IRGC have sought to implement a pan-Shia project. This sectarian project, pushed by Iran’s clerical establishment and implemented by the IRGC, has been one of the fundamental drivers of instability in the Middle East. Not only has this seen the IRGC impose Tehran’s narrow state-sanctioned Shia Islamist ideology on Shia communities in an authoritarian manner, but the IRGC and its Shia militias’ sectarian agenda contributed to the rise of ISIS and al-Qaeda.<sup>69</sup>

The IRGC textbooks further justify the pursuit of the objective to export Iran’s Islamic Revolution by explaining that “every non-Islamic political system is polytheistic [and] tyrannical”.<sup>70</sup> It teaches members that they, as an Islamic army, are “obligated to remove and eliminate the effects of *shirk* (polytheism, or idolatry) from the community of Muslims and from their lives”.<sup>71</sup> Recruits are taught that by exporting Iran’s Islamic Revolution across the globe they are preparing the foundation for the return of Imam Mahdi [the Twelfth Shia Imam] and his “Global Revolution”.<sup>72</sup> The IRGC tells its members, what it refers to as the “self-sacrificers of the followers of the Imam [Khomeini]”, that by fighting to export Iran’s Islamic Revolution they are fighting for the return of the Twelfth Imam.<sup>73</sup> Here again the Iranian regime is seeking to make its soldiers believe that they are on a divine path. The textbooks stress that “the absolute rule of the supreme leader is the most important factor in exporting and spreading the revolution and Islam during the era of the absence [of the Twelfth Imam].”<sup>74</sup>

**FIGURE 7** The Expanding IRGC Presence in the Region Since 1979



## The Survival of *Velayat-e Faqih*

The training modules also identify survival of *velayat-e faqih* as one of the IRGC's fundamental objectives. This is a consistent and enduring theme throughout the textbooks.

The way in which the IRGC conveys this message to its recruits is fundamentally different from mainstream discourse on this topic. Survival is not depicted as simply a political objective, it is relayed to recruits as a theological goal which portrays Iran's regime as an extension of the Prophet Muhammad's government. In both modules on *Velayat-e Faqih* (volume one and two), the narrative surrounding this objective focuses solely on portraying *velayat-e faqih* and the *vali-e faqih* (the supreme leader) as divinely ordained.<sup>75</sup>

The textbooks draw open parallels between the Prophet Muhammad's government and the Iranian system. IRGC recruits are told that "complete examples" of divine rule include the Prophet's "Islamic government of Medina..., [Imam] Ali's five-year-long Islamic government [and] the Islamic Republic of Iran's during the occultation, which was led by Imam Khomeini".<sup>76</sup>

Throughout the textbooks there is a deliberate attempt to blur the lines between Islamic history and the ruling clerical establishment in Iran. In doing so, the Iranian regime seeks to claim Islam as the basis for its legitimacy. Indoctrination seeks to instil in IRGC members the belief that *velayat-e faqih* is, as stated in the textbooks, "a continuation of the jurisdiction of the Prophet and [the Shia] Imams".<sup>77</sup> Ensuring that IRGC members believe in this proclaimed divine mandate is of utmost importance for the survival of *velayat-e faqih* in Iran, upon which the entire Islamic system hinges.

Efforts to depict the Iranian system as divinely ordained do not stop there, however. Given that Iran's totalitarian regime is built around Ayatollah Khamenei—who is also the IRGC's commander-in-chief—ensuring the IRGC's full conviction as to his leadership is essential for the regime's survival. Indoctrination therefore seeks to depict the supreme leader as a divinely chosen, infallible leader with a mandate akin to that of the Prophet and the Twelve Shia Imams.<sup>78</sup> In the introductory module on *velayat-e faqih* recruits are told that while sovereignty belongs

exclusively to God, "in the shadow of the rule of God the purest and most qualified human beings, like the Prophet, the Imam and the *vali-e faqih* (supreme leader) are obligated to take the leadership of the human community and to fulfil the will of God through the revelation".<sup>79</sup> The second module on *velayat-e faqih* takes this assertion a step further. It goes so far as to state that Khamenei, "as the "[*vali-e faqih*, has the same authority of the Prophet and the infallible Imams", something that would be considered blasphemous by an overwhelming majority of Muslims, both Shia and Sunni.<sup>80</sup> That the second module on *velayat-e faqih* is even more explicit than the first in asserting Khamenei's divine mandate suggests that the IRGC's ideological-political training intensifies as recruits progress through the modules.

By defining the supreme leader's authority as akin to that of the Prophet, the indoctrination programme seeks to ensure the IRGC's absolute subservience to his leadership. Disobedience to Ayatollah Khamenei is depicted as disobedience to God and Islam, a message that has been explicitly conveyed by senior Iranian clerics close to the IRGC, such as Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi.<sup>81</sup> To underline this, in 2011 the ideological-political office of the commander in chief issued an order making it compulsory for the IRGC to refer to Ayatollah Khamenei as "Imam", a title given exclusively to the Twelve Shia Imams descended from the Prophet Muhammad and also to Ayatollah Khomeini. This not only serves to bolster Khamenei's divine mandate to rule, but also reinforces the idea that IRGC recruits are fighting for a holy cause rather than a nation-state.

Having drawn on Islam as the basis for the legitimacy of *velayat-e faqih*, the module then focuses on the issue of the survival of the system. IRGC members are told that although the system has been endorsed by God there is "no guarantee of its survival in the long run".<sup>82</sup> Here the IRGC emphasises that despite them being allies of God (as discussed below), victory is not predestined.<sup>83</sup>

Drawing on Shia convictions, the textbooks speak of how "Islam and the divine system" became "ruthless" after the Prophet's death, due to deviations under the Sunni Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates.<sup>84</sup> The textbooks explicitly state that just as "the first Islamic system and the revolution of the Prophet were not immune from defeat so long as there were deviations



in society”, so Iran’s “Islamic Revolution will not have definitive immunity unless we learn lessons from the past and resist all factors and harms [to society]”.<sup>85</sup> Again, by drawing parallels between the Prophet Muhammad’s government and the Islamic Republic, the textbooks seek to depict the latter as the rightful continuation of the former. Here the IRGC’s goal is to make recruits believe that fighting for the survival of the Islamic Republic is akin to fighting for the survival of the Prophet or even Islam.

This kind of language is often used by Iranian leaders to motivate their supporters to defend the regime against domestic uprisings.

For example, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, a close ally of the supreme leader and head of the Guardian Council, recently claimed that “if the IRGC did not exist, the revolution, Islamic Republic and Islam, too, would not exist”.<sup>86</sup> As will be explored later in this paper, resistance to “deviations” against the Islamic Revolution is framed with reference to violence throughout the textbooks. Seeking to further legitimise violence against the “deviators”, the Iranian regime consistently refers to domestic uprisings as “*fitna*”—an Islamic term used to describe heretical uprisings against a rightful ruler—to legitimise their suppression. For example, the 2009 Green Movement is described as the “*fitna* of ‘88 [2009]”, with anti-regime protesters being likened to Umayyad forces rising against the rightful caliph of Islam, Imam Ali.

### Case Study: “The Failure of Liberalism”

Over the past 40 years, dissent has penetrated almost every level of Iranian society. The 2009 pro-democracy uprising, which saw millions of Iranians take to the streets only to be crushed by the IRGC, was symptomatic of public dissatisfaction with the regime. More recently, the November 2019 protests, which led to 1,500 deaths, saw even the core support base of the regime calling for the downfall of Iran’s system of *velayat-e faqih*. There is increasing evidence to suggest that the Iranian people no longer believe in their system of governance and are yearning for liberal democracy of the kind taken for granted in the West. This is best exemplified by the fact that Iran has the biggest ‘brain drain’ in the world, with an estimated 150,000-180,000 educated Iranians leaving their country to pursue an alternative future

in the West.<sup>87</sup> The population’s dissatisfaction is rooted in the country’s system of governance. The enforcement of a strict Islamic order on the Iranian population interferes with every aspect of public and private life: political, economic, social and cultural. Failure to abide by sharia law results in punishments such as flogging, imprisonment and execution. Dissatisfaction with the regime is now openly visible on the streets of Iran, with many Iranians questioning the country’s system of governance and even loyalists, including IRGC members, becoming vulnerable to such sentiments.

Aware of this context, as part of its ideological-political training of recruits, the IRGC promotes the superiority of sharia governance by discounting liberal democracy as an illegitimate, unholy form of governance that leads to societal corruption. In a particularly damning description, recruits are told that while liberal democracies may appear to be “supreme” among “non-divine governments”, such systems permit “alcohol consumption, gambling and homosexuality, which are harmful both to the individual and to the community”.<sup>88</sup> According to the textbooks, leaders in liberal democracies “provide all kinds of fun and entertainment” purely “to satisfy the people and preserve their power”.<sup>89</sup> The IRGC states that this dynamic, contrary to Islamic governance, ultimately “causes society to deviate and collapse in corruption”.<sup>90</sup> In contrast, the IRGC boasts that the Iranian system of “divine rule” emphasises laws based on “innate human innocence”. Therefore, prohibiting something “which is harmful to the individual or the community” can be justified even if it is “contrary to the will of the community”.<sup>91</sup> In essence, the textbook is justifying authoritarianism.

### GROUP IDENTITY: DEFINING THE ‘INGROUP’

Extremist groups develop ideologies that underpin their actions. A group’s identity, in turn, underpins its ideology and provides cohesion. A collective identity is a fundamental requirement for the group to function. It is also necessary for extremist organisations to define their essential enemies, those who sit beyond the parameters of their identity. The IRGC’s definition of its enemies will be discussed later (page 44).

The IRGC identifies itself as an Islamic army.<sup>92</sup> It portrays its commander, “Imam” Khamenei, as having “the same authority as the Prophet and the infallible Imams”, and its mission to “spread Islam to other areas of the world” as being sacred.<sup>93</sup> This messaging is at the heart of the IRGC’s communications strategy and is consistently relayed to recruits throughout their training programme. Indoctrination within the organisation focuses on making recruits believe that, by joining the IRGC, they are declaring their allegiance to God and becoming part of something much greater than simply a national army. Crucially, the way in which the IRGC defines its identity not only shapes high-level military affairs, as one would expect from an army, but also affects matters of everyday life, in the way it views issues from family values to women’s rights. This is indicative of the fact that the IRGC is an Islamist force and, like other Islamists, the Guard believes Islam should govern all aspects of life and their identity.

### IRGC Recruits Are Guardians of Islam and “Mujahideen”, Not Soldiers

It is striking that the IRGC uses religious terminology to describe its members, referring to them as “mujahideen”, the Islamic term for warriors of God, rather than as Iranian soldiers.<sup>94</sup> In contemporary discourse (post-Afghanistan 1979), the term “mujahid” has been almost exclusively associated with Sunni Salafi-jihadi propaganda, with groups using the term to give their cause religious legitimacy and credibility. “Mujahid” status is key to the IRGC’s self-proclaimed divine mission.

For the IRGC, the use of such terminology serves two purposes. Firstly, by referring to soldiers within the group as warriors of God, the IRGC seeks to instil a sense of divine status and honour into the minds of its recruits. In Islam, historically the title of “mujahid” was given to those who fought in the path of God to defend Islam or the Islamic caliphate. The Quran considers the status of the mujahid to be among the highest in Islam. Specific verses refer to the divine rewards the mujahid will receive both in life and in death. In the modern context, Islamist extremist groups have adopted the term “mujahid” to add religious legitimacy to their cause. This is crucial for their ability to recruit and radicalise members so that they will be willing to commit violence and put their

own lives at risk. The IRGC’s use of the term, with the majority of recruits already devout Shia Muslims, has a similar goal and can be understood in a similar light.

### The Rejection of Nationalism

By referring to its members as “mujahideen” rather than Iranian soldiers, the IRGC also seeks to denationalise the Guard. The training modules make no reference to Iran, referring to the mission of the IRGC in Shia Islamist, not Iranian nationalist, terms. Even where the modules specifically examine Iran’s history and politics, they avoid referring to “Iran” in isolation and instead use the term “Islamic Iran” to reaffirm the country’s Islamic identity and discount its pre-Islamic history, as well as nationalistic connotations. This rejection of nationalism and the Westphalian notion of the nation-state is fundamental to the group’s identity. Even visually, the IRGC’s emblem has no reference to nationalism or even patriotism but is distinctly Islamic both in terms of imagery and scripture.

Denationalisation is a key tool for Tehran in its bid to export the revolution. IRGC troops often fight side by side with non-Iranian Shia Islamist fighters from proxy militias. The fact that IRGC troops fight alongside Iraqi Shia fighters, many of whom were at war with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, indicates how effective this denationalisation has been. Iran’s Shia Islamist ideology is the glue that binds the IRGC and its Arab Shia Islamist proxies together. This ideology has enabled Iran, one of the only non-Arab states in the Middle East, to overcome its non-Arab identity in a region with a majority of Arab states. Since 1979, Tehran has sought to position itself as a representative of Muslim communities across the region, both Shia and Sunni, as a means to tap into the Arab street. This tactic was most effectively used by president Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad’s vehement opposition to Israel’s existence harnessed significant support for Iran on the Arab street. Opinion polls conducted in 2006 in Egypt, a Sunni Arab state that has historically had poor relations with Iran, ranked Ahmadinejad as the third most popular leader among Egyptians.<sup>95</sup> That said, following the 2011 Arab Spring and Iran’s sectarian interventions in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen and Iraq, Tehran’s reach has been confined to the Shia world, with its clerical establishment seeking to claim leadership over the Shia communities of the Arab world.



The training materials are clear: anyone who fights for the Iranian regime is a “mujahid” and guardian of Islam, regardless of whether they are Iranian or not. This also allows the Iranian regime to employ the same indoctrination methods on its Shia Islamist proxy groups.<sup>96</sup>

Ideologically, the Shia Islamism of the IRGC rejects the concept of the nation-state, in the same way as other Islamist extremist ideologies. Sunni and Shia Islamists both regard the nation-state as alien to Islam. In their training, IRGC troops are taught that “in Islam terrestrial borders are not the criterion for the division of countries”, but that countries “are divided into *Dar al-Islam* [the land of Islam] and *Dar al-Kuffar* [the land of the disbelievers]”.<sup>97</sup> This teaching echoes the position of the regime, corresponding with the views of Ayatollah Khamenei and senior Iranian clerics close to the IRGC. For example, senior Iranian cleric, Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, whose teachings are incorporated into the IRGC’s training modules, has consistently dismissed the concept of the nation-state, claiming that “nationalism is the motto of the age of *jahiliyya*”.<sup>98</sup>

Historically, in Islam, the term *jahiliyya* has been used to describe the “period of ignorance” before the coming of the Prophet. In the modern context, Islamists have used the term to refer to the “state of ignorance” of secular modernity. Similar anti-nationalist messaging has come from the senior ranks of the IRGC, which have been clear that the group constitutes an Islamic force, not an Iranian one. Ali Fadavi, deputy commander of the IRGC, recently highlighted that the IRGC does not even mention “Iran” in its name.<sup>99</sup> So while some commentators claim that the IRGC is motivated along nationalist lines, the group itself rejects nationalism and its ideological-political training programme teaches recruits that Islam does not recognise the Westphalian concept of the nation-state.<sup>100</sup>

Hence, it is clear that the IRGC does not operate as a conventional state military force and therefore should not be treated as one. Through the IRGC, Tehran has been instrumental in the paramilitarisation of the Middle East. The IRGC has not only been training foreign fighters in the region militarily, it has also been training them ideologically along the same lines as the ideological-political textbooks analysed in this paper.<sup>101</sup>

Given that rejection of the nation-state is central to this ideology, and that this ideology is both violent and extremist, the presence of Iranian-trained foreign fighters from the northern border of Israel to Pakistan presents a serious long-term security threat to the peace and stability of the region. Viewing it in this context, policymakers must treat Iran’s destabilisation of the region as more than just destabilising behaviour, and see it also through the lens of an extremist ideology with the potential to inflict severe and long-lasting effects on the Middle East.

## Allies of God and Imam Mahdi

A crucial part of the IRGC’s identity is the concept that they are in alliance with God and the Twelfth Shia Imam (Imam al-Mahdi)—a messianic figure in Shia Islam whom Shia Muslims believe was withdrawn into occultation.<sup>102</sup>

Drawing on Islamic scripture, the IRGC’s training modules seek to instil in its recruits a sense of divine superiority and the belief that they are on the right side of history. Troops are made to believe that by fighting for the IRGC they are declaring their allegiance to God and will in turn be rewarded, on and off the battlefield. The concept of divine support provides a significant explanatory lens for both victories and defeats in the eyes of IRGC fighters. It simultaneously provides both a source of hope and a submissive gratitude for divine intervention.

Imparting the mindset that mujahideen receive divine support in combat enables the IRGC to rely on manpower in lieu of a modern military arsenal. This belief therefore becomes a critical driver for motivating its soldiers on the front line when fighting against the odds. IRGC members are told that God honours this group as “they are executors of the divine will”, and “God will destroy his enemies with their (the mujahideen’s) hands”.<sup>103</sup> This claim is supported by reference to the following verse from the Quran:

*Fight them; Allah will punish them by your hands and will disgrace them and give you victory over them and satisfy the breasts of a believing people. [al-Tawba, 9:14]*<sup>104</sup>

Aware that the enemies of the regime in Iran may have superior technology, the IRGC textbook states that the “conditions of victory in war can be categorised into two: material and spiritual” and places greater emphasis on the latter. Recruits are taught that “the failure of the infidels against the believers is due to their lack of [belief]”.<sup>105</sup> The IRGC explicitly emphasises that God is on the side of the recruits and that “divine help comes in many forms for the mujahideen”.<sup>106</sup> Soldiers are told that they will receive “help from angels” and that God will “instil fear in the enemy’s heart”, with the following Quranic verses cited as proof:

*[Remember] when you said to the believers, "Is it not sufficient for you that your Lord should reinforce you with three thousand angels sent down?" [al-Imran, 3:124]*

*[Remember] when your Lord revealed to the angels, "I am with you, so strengthen those who have believed. I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieved, so strike [them] upon the necks and strike from them every fingertip." [al-Anfal, 8:12]<sup>107</sup>*

The IRGC also tells its recruits that, since “the function of everything, including natural factors, is by the divine absolute power of God, sometimes God uses these factors in favour of the Muslims against the *kuffar* (infidels)”.<sup>108</sup> On this point, the textbook cites the Quranic verse that speaks of God orchestrating a storm to aid the mujahideen in an early battle of Islam:

*O you who have believed, remember the favour of Allah upon you when armies came to [attack] you and We sent upon them a wind and armies [of angels] you did not see. And ever is Allah, of what you do, Seeing. [al-Ahzab, 33:9]<sup>109</sup>*

The Iranian regime has often used this verse as propaganda to indoctrinate IRGC members, as well as in communications to explain its actions both within the region and in Iran. For example, Ayatollah Khomeini used the verse to claim that the desert storm that downed US aircraft on a mission to rescue American hostages in Iran in 1980 was a gift from the “angels of God”.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, in the textbook on *The Contemporary Political History of Iran*, the IRGC specifically refers to the US operation being “defeated by the grace almighty God because of the sandstorm

in Tabas”.<sup>111</sup> The blurring of Islamic history and current events serves to reinforce in the minds of recruits the idea that Iran’s theocratic regime is divinely ordained.

## The Rewards and Values of a Mujahid

While emphasising collective group identity is a key part of its programme of indoctrination, the IRGC simultaneously adopts a very individualised approach to troop training, with its textbooks attempting to speak directly to each member. Indoctrination leads the recruit from broader goals to a personal journey. In essence, the textbooks adopt a ‘carrot and stick’ approach to prepare members for conflict, with scripture serving as the basis of the IRGC’s claims. Each recruit receives step-by-step instruction on the rewards for being a mujahid, or holy warrior.

The content throughout is guided by emotions and ideas, rather than military strategy. It often seeks to justify this lack of strategy by painting both victory and defeat as predestined outcomes. This kind of content—individualistic and denationalised—would be unusual in conventional state militaries but is highly typical of Islamist extremist and Salafi-jihadi propaganda aimed at radicalising recruits.<sup>112</sup>

## Gaining Superior Status

In attempting to prepare its troops to fight, the IRGC textbooks refer to the superior status of the mujahid. Recruits are told that the “mujahideen of God’s path” have “a special rank and dignity that distinguishes them from other believers”, and that the Quran “clearly emphasises the superiority of the mujahideen against the *qa’idoun* [believers who do not fight]”.<sup>113</sup> The IRGC uses these verses from the Quran to justify this claim:

*Not equal are those believers remaining [at home], other than the disabled, and the mujahideen [who strive and fight] in the cause of Allah with their wealth and their lives. Allah has preferred the mujahideen through their wealth and their lives over those who remain [behind], by degrees. And to both Allah has promised the best [reward]. But Allah has preferred the mujahideen over those who remain [behind] with a great reward: degrees [of high position] from Him and forgiveness and mercy.*

*And Allah is Ever Forgiving and Merciful. [al-Nisa, 4:95-96]<sup>114</sup>*

The IRGC tells its troops that “forgiveness of sins is another reward that God has given to the mujahideen”, citing from *Surat al-Imran*, “I surely forgive their sins.”<sup>115</sup> Such rewards act as essential incentives to encourage recruits to fight for the IRGC and are often under appreciated by the outside world. Indeed, instilling in recruits the idea that by fighting for the IRGC they will, as stated in the module on *Jihad and Defence in the Quran*, have all their “demands accepted” by God is a particularly attractive tool for recruitment.<sup>116</sup>

To ensure discipline and obedience to the regime’s leadership and ideology, the IRGC’s ideological-political training teaches recruits that while they are allies of God, support from God is conditional rather than outright. The conditions for his support are set out with reference to scripture, enabling the IRGC to instrumentalise religion to get recruits committed to the fight. Among the conditions described to the recruits, there is heavy emphasis on two factors: obedience to God and the supreme leader, and patience and endurance. Total obedience to the supreme leader is possibly the most important factor communicated throughout IRGC indoctrination.

The IRGC derives this from Islamic texts, with particular emphasis on *Nahj al-Balagha*, a collection of sermons given by Imam Ali, the fourth caliph and first Shia Imam. To ensure loyalty to Ayatollah Khamenei, the commander-in-chief of the IRGC, recruits are told that Imam Ali was defeated by the forces of Muawiya, the founder and first caliph of the Umayyad caliphate, because his troops were disloyal. In 657 AD, Muawiya, then governor of Syria, defeated Imam Ali’s forces at the Battle of Siffin. Citing *Nahj al-Balagha*, the IRGC textbook, *Jihad and Defence in the Quran*, states: “The biggest grievance and complaint of Imam Ali was the disobedience of his forces. For this reason, the Imam desired to exchange ten of his troops with one of the forces of Muawiya, because they obeyed their commander in their path of falsehood.”<sup>117</sup> The textbooks state that for the IRGC to be successful its members must demonstrate total obedience to the supreme leader and his orders. This has been termed the “Alavi [Imam Ali] Doctrine” and has been incorporated into the IRGC’s military strategy.

Crucially, to ensure blind loyalty, obedience to Ayatollah Khamenei is portrayed to recruits as akin to obedience to God. The parallels drawn between the supreme leader and God would be considered blasphemous by the majority of Muslims, both Shia and Sunni. However, the textbooks’ messaging is consistent with discourse used by senior clerics associated with the IRGC. The idea of comparing Khamenei’s authority to that of God became cemented during the anti-regime Green Revolution riots in 2009. At that time, to encourage the IRGC and Basij to crack down on protesters and strengthen the hand of Khamenei, the regime began to depict disobedience to the supreme leader as tantamount to disobedience to God. For instance, shortly after the 2009 riots Ayatollah Jannati declared that “rejection of the supreme leader is a denial of God”.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, in 2011 Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi contended that “opposing the supreme leader is akin to *shirk* to God”.<sup>119</sup> Both Jannati and Mesbah-Yazdi have close ties with the IRGC, and their teachings are taught to recruits as part of the IRGC’s ideological-political training.<sup>120</sup>

The IRGC also teaches its recruits that in order to receive divine support on the battlefield they must be patient and have high endurance in the face of hardships. The IRGC bases this claim on the following verses from the Quran:

*O you who have believed, when you encounter a company [from the enemy forces], stand firm and remember Allah much, that you may be successful. And obey Allah and His Messenger, and do not dispute and [thus] lose courage and [then] your strength would depart; and be patient. Indeed, Allah is with the patient. [al-Anfal, 8:45-46]<sup>121</sup>*

Troops are told that if these conditions are met, they will receive assistance from God, a claim based on the following verse:

*O Prophet, urge the believers to battle. If there are among you twenty [who are] steadfast, they will overcome two hundred. And if there are among you one hundred [who are] steadfast, they will overcome a thousand of those who have disbelieved because they are a people who do not understand. [al-Anfal, 8:65]<sup>122</sup>*

## CONDUCT: ACTIONS PERMISSIBLE AND NECESSARY

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US, global efforts against Islamist terrorism have focused almost entirely on Sunni extremist groups. The term “jihad”, Arabic for “struggle” or “effort”, has become associated with the likes of al-Qaeda and ISIS. Such Salafi-jihadi groups use Islamic scripture relating to the term to justify their calls for the use of violence in their jihad, or holy war. In the public imagination, jihad and the associated concept of violence are linked with such Sunni groups. This has led some analysts to depict jihadi violence as being exclusive to Sunni Islamism and non-existent in Shia Islamism.<sup>123</sup> Aware of the fact “jihad” has become associated with Sunni Islamist groups, the IRGC has openly stated that it took the conscious decision to refer to jihad in the public realm as “*moghavemat*” (resistance) to make a distinction. As Hojatoleslam Ahmad Rahdar, a cleric with close ties to the IRGC, has underlined, while the jihad project is sacred, its “[brand] has unfortunately been confiscated by the [Sunni] Takfiri layer in the last century. Therefore, as Rahdar stated, the Iranian regime created and attained a “positive brand called ‘resistance’”. Whereas “jihad now means al-Qaeda and ISIS”, as Rahdar highlights “resistance means Hezbollah, the IRGC Quds Force and Iran”.<sup>124</sup> Despite this “branding” difference, as the training modules for IRGC recruits clearly demonstrate, the concept of jihad is central to the way the IRGC portrays its conduct and its call for violence.<sup>125</sup> The organisation uses scripture to legitimise its call for jihad in a way that is not dissimilar to Salafi-jihadi groups. The IRGC textbooks analysed in this paper therefore offer invaluable insight into the Shia Islamist concept of jihad. The material also reveals that the IRGC’s approach to jihad breaks with traditional Shia convention in calling for not only defensive but also offensive jihad.

## To Fight for the Regime is Jihad on God’s Path, Not War

The IRGC material justifies conflict, not on the basis of the state, in this case Iran, but on Islamist lines. Throughout the textbooks, conflict is described as jihad, a holy war, against the enemies of Islam. This both provides the framework for explaining the IRGC’s involvement overseas and acts to communicate to recruits that taking up arms for the Iranian regime is akin to jihad on God’s path. Indeed, since 1979, each time Tehran has engaged in warfare it has sought to depict it through a religious narrative.<sup>126</sup> Most recently, the Iranian regime has justified the IRGC’s involvement in Syria and Iraq as “defence of the holy shrines of the Shia Imams” rather than support for Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.<sup>127</sup>

In its module entitled *The Islamic Defence System*, the IRGC depicts this holy war as being not between nation-states, but between Muslims and non-Muslims, or what the textbooks refer to as *Dar al-Islam* (the land of Islam) and *Dar al-Kuffar* (the land of the disbelievers).<sup>128</sup> Soldiers are taught that this holy war between Muslims and non-Muslims is permanent, until “*shirk* [is] removed completely from the earth” and everyone accepts Islam.<sup>129</sup> This permanent state of conflict is reflective of the language used by the founding father of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini. He asserted: “No Muslim should think peace is ever possible between Islam and disbelief or between Muslims and the disbelievers.”<sup>130</sup> The way in which the IRGC defines its strategy as jihad against the *kuffar*, or unbelievers, is indicative of the way it defines its objective: to export the Islamic Revolution abroad so as to extend sharia across the world.<sup>131</sup>

### Case Study: Breaking with Shia Convention – Defensive and Offensive Jihad

In Islam, armed jihad can be broken down into two categories: defensive jihad and offensive jihad. The former refers to defence of the Muslim ummah (global Muslim community) and Islamic world, with Muslims depicted as the oppressed. The latter is viewed as the quest to spread Islam and expand its borders across the world much like the early caliphs.

The vast majority of violent Islamist extremist propaganda legitimises armed jihad as defence. Previous research by the Tony Blair Institute found that reference to defensive jihad featured in 31 per cent of Salafi-jihadi propaganda.<sup>132</sup> This reflects the desire to legitimise violence as retaliatory through a narrative of grievance, which ultimately makes the call for war a more attractive and easier sell.

Indeed, the IRGC peddles a narrative of defence when it speaks about jihad. As part of their ideological-political training, recruits are taught that “the spirit of jihad is defensive jihad” because in conducting it “the mujahideen are defending humanity and *tawhid* (the doctrine of the oneness of God)”.<sup>133</sup> Members are told that “defending Muslim lives, property and honour [and] the land and message of Islam against the attack of the enemy” is a religious requirement in Islam. This narrative and the tenets of defensive jihad have been enshrined in the constitution of the Islamic Republic, which underlines that foreign policy will be based on the “defence of the rights of all Muslims” and “it supports the just struggles of the *mustazefin* (oppressed) against the *mustakbirun* (oppressor) in every corner of the globe”. Indeed, for the past four decades, Tehran has framed its involvement beyond its borders under this premise. It has most recently been applied to Tehran’s involvement in Syria, which has been framed as “defence of the holy [Shia] shrines” (see page 39 case study on Syria for more details).

But, unlike most violent Islamist groups, the IRGC also speaks about offensive jihad, that is, armed jihad to expand the borders of Islam. Offensive jihad features prominently throughout the IRGC’s indoctrination material, with troops being taught that the goal of offensive jihad is “to eliminate *shirk* and *kufr* (unbelief) and extend the scope of *tawhid*”. The group teaches its recruits that offensive jihad is justified through scripture and necessary in order to “remove *shirk* and idolatry, eliminate the barriers to joining Islam, fight the oppressors, and save the oppressed”.<sup>134</sup>

This fundamentally breaks with Shia practice, which has traditionally viewed offensive jihad as being impermissible during the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, which has been ongoing since 874 AD. The IRGC module, *Jihad and Defence in Islam*, in part acknowledges this tradition, stating, “Shia scholars generally believe that offensive jihad is not obligatory except in the presence of the infallible Imam (Twelfth Imam)”, but also adds that his “deputy” (a title given to Iran’s supreme leader) also retains this authority.<sup>135</sup> The textbook then clearly underlines that while there is “much debate” over the right to call offensive jihad, “the supreme leader retains the permission to call offensive jihad as the guardian of the Muslims, under the condition that it is required”.<sup>136</sup>

Why does this matter? The first major point of significance is that the IRGC’s position on offensive jihad is antithetical to traditional, quietist Shia thought. The idea is a modern one and would not have occurred prior to 1979. The orthodox Shia position views the call for offensive jihad as being an exclusive function of the Twelve infallible Shia Imams, in the same way that the caliph would have that authority in the Sunni tradition. By making offensive jihad conditional on Khamenei’s support, the textbooks not only justify violence through scripture but devolve the authority of the Twelve infallible Imams to Iran’s supreme leader. This means that, under the system created by Khomeini, Khamenei has assumed the leadership mantle of an infallible Imam. Crucially, this shows that whoever is supreme leader has the authority to declare an offensive jihad.

The fact that the IRGC is priming recruits to believe that jihad can be offensive and not just defensive is significant. In essence, the IRGC is teaching its recruits and the hundreds of thousands of young Shia Muslims that are under its command that should Khamenei call for an offensive military strike, they have a religious obligation to fight. This is particularly worrying in the context of the IRGC’s consistent statements, which have underlined that the Guard and the Shia Islamist militias are “awaiting [Khamenei’s] orders” for the “eradication of the evil [Israeli] regime.”<sup>137</sup>

While Iran has consistently justified its extraterritorial involvement as being in defence of Shia populations and sacred sites, the ability to declare offensive jihad provides the Iranian regime with religious legitimacy to intervene beyond Shia borders.



## The Need For Jihad: A Global Islamist Struggle

The IRGC textbooks not only encourage jihad but describe it as necessary “to preserve society and protect human and Islamic values”.<sup>138</sup> The concept of jihad, which is defined as “anything that strives to confront the enemy”, is deemed necessary for “the stability of religion” and to ensure “society’s justice and security”.<sup>139</sup>

Consistent with the narrative used by Iran’s leaders, IRGC recruits are taught that jihad is a requirement to “defend Islam and Muslims, confront oppression and corruption, preserve God’s places of worship, and protect the oppressed against the oppressors”.<sup>140</sup> This is congruent with Ayatollah Khomeini’s pan-Islamist vision that sought to position Iran as leader of the Islamic world and therefore responsible for the “global ummah”. Not only has a commitment to this pan-Islamist aspiration consistently featured in the narrative of Iran’s leaders since 1979, but it is also enshrined in the constitution of the Islamic Republic. Iran’s constitution seeks to lay claim to leadership of the Muslim world by stating that the supreme leader is the authority responsible for both Iran and “leadership of the [Islamic] ummah”.<sup>141</sup>

In its attempt to position itself as the champion of the Islamic ummah, the Iranian regime has sought to identify itself with Islamic causes and has a history of involvement on the ground in cases where events were seen as significant. A former IRGC commander recently claimed that the IRGC had operated covertly in the Bosnian War in the 1990s and helped train global jihadi fighters, including al-Qaeda fighters. Saeed Ghasemi, a retired IRGC general, said: “In Bosnia, in the heart of Europe, there were many developments. We were side by side with al-Qaeda. The members of al-Qaeda learned from us. From all over the world, mujahideen poured into Bosnia, and there was a new development. Muslim jihadi units were established.”<sup>142</sup> Ghasemi’s statements are consistent with reporting during the Bosnian War, which underlines that the IRGC had sent 400 of its fighters to organise Bosnian Muslim terror groups.<sup>143</sup> It should not be forgotten that alongside wealthy individuals, including Osama bin Laden, the IRGC also broke a UN arms embargo by supplying arms to the Bosnian mujahideen.<sup>144</sup>

Indeed, in today’s context, while the rise in regional sectarianism may have sharpened the lines between Shia and Sunni fundamentalism, it should be acknowledged that there are far more similarities than differences between the ideology of the Iranian regime and that of Sunni political Islamist movements, from the Muslim Brotherhood to al-Qaeda.

## The Risks of Abandoning Jihad

The module on *Jihad and Defence in the Quran* teaches IRGC recruits about the importance of jihad and the consequences of abandoning it. Like other violent Islamist groups, the IRGC narrowly applies Islamic scripture to legitimise its propagation of violence. Its calls for jihad are based on a selective reading of the Quran and hadiths from the Prophet and Shia Imams, which makes it increasingly difficult for its members to doubt the mission and ideological framework of the IRGC. For example, members of the Guard Corps are told there is “an abundance of verses in the Quran about jihad and encouragement of it”.<sup>145</sup> Jihad is described as “the source of dignity of Islam” and the greatest action a Muslim can take. Similar to other Islamist extremists, including Salafi-jihadi groups, the IRGC goes so far as to place a higher priority on jihad than on personal piety.<sup>146</sup> Recruits are told that “some verses of the Holy Quran....place jihad on the path of God as being more important than the Hajj [pilgrimage] and maintenance of Masjid al-Haram (the Great Mosque of Mecca)”.<sup>147</sup>

The importance of jihad is coupled with the consequences of not seeing it through. Recruits are told that “global humiliation” is one of the “worst consequences of abandoning jihad”.<sup>148</sup> The IRGC also states that Muslims who “abstain from jihad” will feel “the agony of hell” in the afterlife.<sup>149</sup> Crucially, recruits are told, another “worldly consequence of abandoning jihad” is “the destruction of the institutions and places of worship. This is because the enemy seeks to destroy all centres of cultural development of nations, most important of which are places of God worshipping”.<sup>150</sup>

## Case Study: Iran's Unnoticed 'Shia Jihad' in Syria

In April 2013, two years into the Syrian Civil War, Salafi-jihadi fighters from al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra desecrated the Shia shrine of Hujr ibn Adi and exhumed his corpse. The group threatened to do the same to the Shia shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, the daughter of the first Shia Imam, Ali ibn Abi Talib.

The group's actions caused outrage among Shia Muslims across the Middle East and beyond, with Shia populations threatening to retaliate and detonate sectarian violence. Adding fuel to the fire, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei berated the attacks, claiming they had taken place "at the hands of the intelligence services of England and the United States".<sup>151</sup> Iran had already sent the IRGC to Syria in support of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad as early as 2011. Now, with the situation ripe for violence, it seized the opportunity to add a religious-ideological element to the conflict as a means to legitimise its deepening involvement, which by 2013 had already cost it an estimated \$14-15 billion.<sup>152</sup>

From April 2013 onwards, Tehran and its Shia proxies began to contextualise the Syrian Civil War as religious and ideological, with the concept of "defending Shia shrines" dominating the narrative around Iran's involvement. This discourse around Shia shrines being under attack was not intended to legitimise the conflict to an Iranian audience only. The Iranian leadership used the concept of "protecting Shia shrines" as a battle cry for Shia Muslims around the world to take up arms in Syria, and later in Iraq. As the IRGC Quds Force's (IRGC QF) former commander Qassim Soleimani declared, "I swear to God, if Syria falls at the hands of the [enemy], just as they destroyed [the Shia al-Askari shrine in the Iraqi city of] Samarra with a bomb they will destroy all the sacred Shia sites".<sup>153</sup> Soleimani's language mirrored that of the IRGC's ideological-political training textbook on jihad, which teaches troops that one of the "consequences of abandoning jihad is the destruction of places of worship". Iran had effectively called for a Shia jihad—one that would go unnoticed in the West.

This rallying cry would eventually see over 80,000 Shia Muslims from the region, including 3,000 IRGC soldiers, voluntarily take up arms to fight in Syria. Shia foreign fighters, coordinated by the IRGC, from Lebanon (Hizbullah), Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan would come to make up 80 per cent of the Syrian regime's manpower.<sup>154</sup> Not only did the presence of these Shia fighters tilt the balance in favour of Assad, thereby serving Tehran's geopolitical interests, but it also presented Iran with an opportunity to expand the scope of its ideology to places previously beyond its reach. Today, nine years on from the start of the conflict, Iran not only reportedly controls a network of Shia militias across Syria, but Tehran has also repopulated areas in Syria with Shia communities as a means to shift the country's demographic makeup in its favour.<sup>155</sup>

The ideological-political textbooks analysed in this paper confirm that the IRGC's ideology is both violent and extremist. The fragile Syrian context provides the Guard with an opportunity to radicalise a generation of Arab Shia Muslims. The consequences of such a course could be severe. The conflict in Syria has provided the Iranian regime with the capability to create a land corridor stretching from Tehran through to the borders of its archenemy, Israel. In 2018, the IRGC began constructing military bases on Israel's northern border. What started as a war "to defend the holy shrines" has now provided Tehran with another front from which, in the words of IRGC commander General Hossein Salami, "to erase Israel from the global political map".<sup>156</sup>

## The Greater Jihad: Fighting The Internal Struggle

While military jihad is the most frequently discussed throughout the IRGC's ideological-political training modules, the material analysed also touches upon the internal jihad, often described as the "greater jihad" (*al-jihad al-akbar*). The greater jihad refers to the internal struggle against oneself and one's emotions or desires. In essence, this concept relates to a spiritual struggle that calls on Muslims to abide by the teachings of God and resist the temptations of the devil or un-Islamic practices. The module called *Jihad and Defence in the Quran* teaches recruits that "the inner enemy is Satan, whose existence is invisible and in the human soul".<sup>157</sup> Citing one of the Prophet's hadiths, which states that the greater jihad is "fighting the inner devil", the module teaches members of the IRGC that they must constantly fight the devil and remain committed to their beliefs. Recruits are told that "before entering the arena of [external jihad], a mujahid must embark on [internal jihad]". In turn, members are taught that mujahideen must abide by certain values and practices. These include: repentance, submission to God, going to mosques, abstinence, and prostration before God. The textbooks state that if a recruit abides by the greater jihad and "stands firmly on his faith and adheres to it" his death will be classified as "martyrdom" – the greatest reward in Islam, according to the IRGC (see page 41).<sup>158</sup>

This strong emphasis on the inner struggle highlights the fact that violence represents only one aspect of the IRGC's Shia Islamist ideology, albeit the most crucial. The non-violent, 'softer' elements of this ideology, as referenced above, are critical to laying the foundation for the 'hard' aspects and preparing the recruits for violence. This is not to suggest that such Islamic practices, or more specifically spiritual jihad, are extremist in nature. But given that the IRGC's ideology would collapse without an Islamic foundation, it is necessary to ensure recruits resist un-Islamic practices, or "deviations" as the textbook calls them, in order to maintain their ideological fervour. Therefore, in the context of the IRGC, the greater jihad becomes a key component of indoctrination. Given that the IRGC has a network of mosques, religious institutions and educational centres, encouraging recruits to attend these places becomes another opportunity for the group to propagate its ideas.

Ultimately, if recruits do as the ideological-political training textbooks say, they end up isolated from the rest of Iranian society. This is because the Iranian regime's politicisation of Islam has left the public simultaneously disillusioned with the state and with the religion it sought to leverage. Paradoxically, at the same time that Iran's government has increased the theocratic and religious nature of its rule, Iran's population has grown increasingly secular.<sup>159</sup> Reports indicate that fewer Iranians are attending mosques, the overwhelming majority of women in Iran want freedom of choice over the hijab and alcohol consumption may be on the rise.

### Case Study: Conduct Beyond Military Life - From Family Values to Women's Rights

The IRGC focuses not just on destabilising strategies, but also puts forward an alternative utopian vision for its members. Crucially, this vision goes beyond the IRGC's military responsibilities, pervading every aspect of life in Iran. It paints an image of Islamic society in the eyes of the Iranian state that is to be protected and secured by IRGC members, both men and women.

To this end, a significant amount of ideological-political material focuses on promoting and preserving the Islamic order the regime has imposed on the Iranian population since 1979. In essence, the material is effectively citizenship training. Matters of religious family values and women's rights form a significant portion of training for IRGC members. In relation to women's rights, the utopian society the IRGC promotes can be best described as patriarchal and misogynistic. In a module named, *Family Guidance*, the IRGC's textbook teaches its members, both men and women, that: "[men] are superior to women in terms of physical and intellectual levels and are more capable of administering the family."<sup>160</sup> These beliefs are then spelled out in practice, with women lacking agency over the most basic aspects of their life. Crucially, this social order is accepted as the norm by women in the IRGC, who are required to enforce this code of conduct on other Iranian women.

This kind of citizenship training is not restricted to women. The IRGC also dedicates significant



attention to young Iranians. Much of the focus on young people seeks to promote what is described as “halal, Islamic practices.” One textbook, entitled *The Ways and Customs of Youth*, articulates how “good Muslim Iranian youths” should behave and the values they should uphold. This cuts across a wide array of topics, from encouraging young Iranians to attend Friday prayers to avoiding “vulgar Western culture” and “provocative tight clothes.”<sup>161</sup> Another document, entitled *The Causes of Ogling and How to Treat it*, teaches male recruits how to overcome their sexual temptations, which the IRGC blames on women for “not wearing their hijab, wearing makeup and fashionable, tight clothing.”<sup>162</sup> Marriage and “avoiding eye contact” with the person of the other sex, are among the many cures the IRGC prescribes to avoid “ogling” and sexual temptation.<sup>163</sup> Focusing on young members of the IRGC, including those in the Basij, is fundamental for regime survival. Despite state censorship, the Iranian population remains interconnected with the outside world. The forces of globalisation have made it increasingly difficult for Iran’s regime to control and indoctrinate its population.

This Islamic utopia is not just relayed to IRGC members. Recruits are also told that they are responsible for its implementation. A number of ideological-political textbooks focus on teaching *amr beh ma’roof nahee az monkar* (enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong), a central tenet of sharia law which is embedded within the Iranian constitution. Essentially, this provision calls on Muslims to preserve Islamic ethics and justifies the application of violence to Muslims and non-Muslims who break moral principles, including the removal of the headscarf. Members are told that “in the context of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps” enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong means “demanding serious promise to, and practice of, sharia, reason, and whatever the supreme leader and organisation of the IRGC considers to be good and not, and to refrain from doing whatever it considers bad and prohibiting it.”<sup>164</sup> Within the textbooks, particular attention is paid to countering the practice of “bad hijab”, with members being taught that women who practice bad hijab are “jeopardising [the] mental security of our youth.”<sup>165</sup>

## Martyrdom: The Highest Order

The fetishisation of martyrdom is at the core of the IRGC and, indeed, Iran’s Islamic regime as a whole. While the concept of martyrdom and its glorification serves to legitimise all variants of Islamist violence, it is particularly symbolic in the context of Shia extremism. This is because the concept of martyrdom is deeply rooted within Shia tradition and history.

In fact, Shia Islam cannot be understood without recognising the importance of the story of Imam Hussain’s martyrdom at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. Imam Hussain, the son of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first infallible Shia Imam, was martyred at Karbala after he and 72 followers rose against what they saw as the oppressive and morally corrupt Umayyad caliphate of Yazid I to stand up for the “true” Islam. Although Hussain and his followers ultimately lost the battle against Yazid’s army, Hussain’s courageous resistance and willingness to sacrifice himself in the face of tyranny was enshrined in Shia philosophy. For Shias, Hussain’s martyrdom symbolised the idea that justice was greater than life itself. To this day, Shias continue to commemorate the Battle of Karbala during their annual Ashura processions by flagellating themselves to honour the martyrdom of Hussain.

Since 1979, Iran’s Shia Islamist ideology has leveraged the story of Karbala to serve its political and extraterritorial objectives. The IRGC has formalised this historical concept and incorporated it into its combat strategy under the term *Ashurai* doctrine: troops are taught that they must resist the “oppressor”, regardless of the outcome.<sup>166</sup> With this in mind, it is unsurprising that the glorification of martyrdom features so prominently throughout the IRGC’s ideological-political training textbooks. The language around martyrdom is geared towards the afterlife, rather than death. The IRGC textbooks not only glorify martyrdom, depicting it as the ultimate reward, but specifically outline other rewards that martyrs will receive in the afterlife. Here, the IRGC’s aim is to portray its mission as being in line with scripture, in order to argue that those who sacrifice themselves for their cause, which they depict as being holy, will be rewarded in the afterlife:

*And never think of those who have been killed in the cause of Allah as dead. Rather, they are alive with their Lord, receiving provision [Al Imran, 3:169]<sup>167</sup>*

Again citing Islamic texts, the IRGC tells recruits that martyrs are “on the same rank with the Prophet, the Imams and the righteous”, stating that the Prophet said there is no higher goodness than when “man is killed for God’s cause”.<sup>168</sup> The way in which the textbooks speak about martyrdom is a key part of the IRGC’s messaging. It appears that the Guard’s ultimate objective is to ensure recruits are committed to their mission to the point of being willing to sacrifice their lives, welcoming death. In fact, the IRGC even calls on women, as part of their religious duty, “to welcome the martyrdom of young people” and “encourage their children and husbands to participate in jihad”.<sup>169</sup>

Since Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution, Tehran has politicised Imam Hussain’s martyrdom, using it to arouse and legitimise resistance against “the oppressors”—the enemies of the Iranian regime—both inside and outside Iran. Iran’s leaders have gone back to the Karbala metaphor again and again: to inspire and encourage resistance against the shah in 1979; at the time of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran in 1980 and Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982; during the 2009 Green Movement riots; and then during the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The textbooks relay the same message, telling members that if they are martyred they will be following “the path and characteristics of Imam Hussain”.<sup>170</sup>

The IRGC’s exhaustive focus on the rewards of martyrdom seeks to make jihad more appealing for its fighters. It seeks to inculcate in its soldiers a mindset that views death on the battlefield as reward rather than loss. This belief was successfully instilled in the minds of its troops during the Iran-Iraq War, with hundreds of thousands of Iranian soldiers willingly adopting kamikaze-style tactics against Iraqi positions.<sup>171</sup>

The concept of martyrdom is virtually inseparable from the IRGC’s identity. In fact, Ayatollah Khomeini sought to depict the IRGC as an army of martyrs and, since 1979, the glorification of martyrdom has featured consistently in the speeches of Iranian leaders, particularly those in the IRGC. Variations on the phrase “we love death as you love life” have consistently been expressed by numerous IRGC commanders, including the late commander Qassem Soleimani, who even before his death was referred to by the Iranian media as a “living martyr”.

Previous research by the Tony Blair Institute found that 100 per cent of Soleimani’s speeches idealised martyrdom, referring to it as “the highest order” of God.<sup>172</sup>

### Case Study: Comparing IRGC Materials With Salafi-Jihadi Propaganda

Salafi-jihadi groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda are often seen as the archetypal contemporary violent religious extremists. Given the IRGC’s recent designation by the US as an FTO, how does the Guard’s distinctive version of Islamism relate ideologically to theirs? By comparing the IRGC’s ideological-political textbooks with Salafi-jihadi propaganda we can see telling similarities, but also key ideological divergences.

#### Misuse of scripture

Both Sunni Salafi-jihadism and the IRGC’s Shia Islamism depend on a narrow reading of scripture to help form religious legitimacy for their worldviews. As with IRGC material, previous research has shown Salafi-jihadi propaganda to use a narrow and decontextualised application of Quranic verses to support a political ideology, based on a warped version of Islam.

Beyond adopting the same methodology, there is also evidence of a significant crossover of scriptural usage between Salafi-jihadi and IRGC materials. For example, the most frequently cited Quranic verse in Salafi-jihadi content, *al-Anfal* 8:60, not only features prominently in IRGC material but actually forms the basis of the group’s motto and its call for militancy:<sup>173</sup>

*And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy, and others besides them whom you do not know [but] whom Allah knows. And whatever you spend in the cause of Allah will be fully repaid to you, and you will not be wronged. [al-Anfal, 8:60]*<sup>174</sup>

The first line of this verse appears above a clenched fist holding a rifle in the IRGC’s official emblem, to denote the supposed religious legitimacy of violence.<sup>175</sup> The same verse, meanwhile, quoted in over one-third of Salafi-jihadi materials, also serves as the Sunni Islamist movement’s main justification for, and defence of, jihadi violence.

### Jihad first

Both Salafi-jihadi propaganda and the IRGC's ideological materials fixate on a violent interpretation of jihadism as the single most important Islamic obligation. Previous research by the Tony Blair Institute found that jihad was the most frequently referenced Islamic concept in Salafi-jihadi content and was prioritised over all other Islamic practices, including personal piety such as prayers and fasting. The IRGC's ideological-political textbooks also underline this message, teaching recruits that "jihad on the path of God is more important than the Hajj [pilgrimage] and maintenance of Masjid al-Haram (the Great Mosque of Mecca)".<sup>176</sup>

This statement is particularly telling. The Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five pillars of Islam and is obligatory for all Muslims. The textbooks also emphasise that "jihad is the source of dignity of Islam". The fact that the IRGC material prioritises jihad over one of the five pillars of Islam underlines its precedence. Similarly, Salafi-jihadi ideologues have referred to jihad as the sixth pillar of Islam.

### Fixation on martyrdom

The concept of martyrdom and the afterlife undergirds the Islamist rationalisation of violence. This stems from a belief that martyrs hold a superior status in the afterlife. Violent Islamist extremist groups focus particularly on the rewards of martyrdom in the afterlife in order to encourage their members to believe in self-sacrifice on the battlefield. Like the IRGC material, martyrdom features prominently throughout Salafi-jihadi content (present in over a third of propaganda) and focuses on its rewards. Salafi-jihadi material asserts that a mujahid will be rewarded for "throwing himself into the enemy's army alone, even if he knows he will be killed."<sup>177</sup>

The IRGC textbook and Salafi-jihadi material both refer to contested Hadith literature (the reported sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) to justify martyrdom, presenting variations of "the seven rewards for martyrdom".

Notably, however, IRGC materials place greater emphasis on martyrdom, supplementing religious writings by drawing on the precedence of martyrdom in Shia history and culture to romanticise dying for the cause. Using the story of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD, perhaps

the single most important event in Shia history and one that fundamentally shapes the basis of Shia Islam, the IRGC material frames contemporary martyrdom within the long arc of history.

### IRGC textbook *Jihad and Defence in the Quran*<sup>178</sup>:

1. All his sins are forgiven with the first drop of his blood (falling to the ground);
2. His head will rest in the skirts of his two wives, who are virgins of paradise (houris), and they will wipe the dust from his face and congratulate him;
3. He will wear clothes from heaven;
4. The officers of heaven will welcome him with pleasantly smelling fragrances and he will choose whichever he wants;
5. He will be shown his home in paradise;
6. It is said to him that he may be free in any part of paradise;
7. He will look at God's face, and this is for every prophet and martyr to feel comfortable and relaxed.

### Salafi-jihadi literature: from the Sunni Hadith tradition<sup>179</sup>:

1. He is forgiven from the moment his blood is first shed;
2. He will be shown his place in paradise;
3. He will be spared the trial of the grave;
4. He will be secure on the Day of the Greatest Terror (the Day of Judgement);
5. There will be placed on his head a crown of dignity, one ruby of which is better than this world and all that is in it;
6. He will be married to 72 of the hoor al-ayn (houris);
7. And he will be permitted to intercede for 70 of his relatives.

Islamist suicide attacks as we know them today were first deployed by Shia Islamist groups that embraced the Iranian regime's ideology. In fact, the first organisation to carry out a suicide bomb attack in modern times was the Lebanese group Hizbullah, which was established by the IRGC. Its first suicide bombing took place in 1982, and the perceived success of the tactic led to it later being adopted by Sunni Islamist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

## THE ENEMY: DEFINING THE 'OUTGROUP'

Having defined the 'ingroup' and its conduct, the IRGC is very clear in its indoctrination about identifying the enemy, or 'outgroup'.<sup>180</sup> The outgroup is needed to build cohesion and give purpose to the group's conduct and cause. In building the profile of the enemy, the textbooks peddle a narrative of grievance as a means to legitimise their call for violence. Crucially, the material defines the IRGC's enemies as being "enemies of Islam".

This narrative of grievance plays a key part in the ideology of Iran's Revolutionary Shia Islamism. At the root of this grievance is the idea that the West is to blame for all of the Muslim world's problems. To convey this message, the IRGC draws on a Marxist-Islamist historiography, which refers to the enslavement of Islam and Iran at the hands of exploitative imperial powers, particularly the West. As part of *The Contemporary Political History of Iran* module, recruits are taught that prior to the Islamic Revolution Iran was a country that had been "dominated by kings and colonialists for several thousand years".<sup>181</sup> This historiography is particularly hostile towards the former regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, which is depicted as having been opposed to "the Quran and Islam" as well as being a servant to Western imperialism. The textbooks refer to Khomeini's assertion that "all of [Iran and the Muslim world's] problems are from America and Israel".<sup>182</sup> The history module cites a speech from Khomeini in which he describes the shah as being "an Israeli or a Jew" due to being "dominated by America and Israel".<sup>183</sup>

Meanwhile, this historical narrative paints the clergy and Islamists as defenders of justice, Islam and the oppressed classes. According to this narrative, which is woven throughout the IRGC's history textbook, Islam is under attack, with the outgroup defined as "the enemy of Islam and God". Here, the aim is to depict conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims as inevitable, a message that lay at the heart of Ayatollah Khomeini's belief system. Crucially, the outgroup is defined as anyone who is against the Iranian regime, and therefore may include fellow Iranians. The rejection of nationalism (even in relation to the state of Iran) enables the IRGC to depict subversive Iranians as enemies of God. Opposition to the regime thus

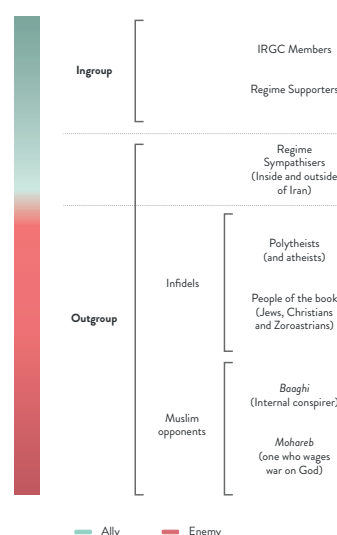
becomes not just tyrannical, but heretical. Instilling this idea into recruits' minds is fundamental, given the IRGC's historical role in crushing domestic uprisings.

Many of these ideas would already be familiar to new recruits through Iran's school curriculum, mass media and via mosques. In the framework of the Iranian government's Shia Islamist ideology, Iranian children as young as seven are taught this anti-Western historical narrative and are introduced to the "enemies of Islam" via school textbooks.<sup>184</sup> Where IRGC training materials differ from the narrative of grievance taught in Iranian schools, however, is that they not only identify the enemies of Islam but call for jihad against them, using Islamic scripture to justify the call for violence.

## Defining the Enemy

The IRGC is explicit in defining what it calls the "enemies of Islam" for its recruits. The material divides the "enemies of Islam" into four categories: the polytheists; "people of the book"; the *baaghi* (internal conspirer); and the *mohareb* (one who wages war on God). Again, the IRGC defines these groups as being enemies of the religion of Islam rather than of the Iranian state. Not only does this correspond with the IRGC's global vision, which divides the world into Muslims and non-Muslims rather than into nation-states, but, crucially, it reinforces the proclaimed divine mandate of the regime by depicting anyone who is against it as an enemy of Islam.<sup>185</sup>

**FIGURE 8** Ingroups and Outgroups: The IRGC's Spectrum of Allies and Enemies



## The Polytheists

The IRGC states that Islam identifies “the polytheists” as those who do not follow the “Abrahamic religions” and “do not accept *tawhid* (the doctrine of the oneness of God)”.<sup>186</sup> IRGC recruits are told that, “in Islam”, jihad against the polytheists is permitted, to “save the oppressed under their oppression”, to “eliminate the barriers of religious propagation”, and to “invite them to Islam”.<sup>187</sup> The textbooks state that jihad against this group should continue until they “get away from *shirk* and idolatry and turn towards *tawhid*”.<sup>188</sup>

## The “People of the Book” (Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians)

The IRGC textbooks refer to the “people of the book” as those who are “followers of the Prophets and Abrahamic religions [whose] divine law and holy books are distorted and altered”, more specifically, what the IRGC identifies as “Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians.”<sup>189</sup>

IRGC recruits are told that “although the people of the book on the face of it seem to accept the origin and the resurrection, but because their beliefs are mixed with deviations and *shirk*, it has been interpreted that they do not believe in God and the resurrection; that is, they do not have true and acceptable faith”.<sup>190</sup> By making this assertion, the IRGC seeks to tap into a belief that is shared by the majority of practising Muslims: the idea that successive generations corrupted and distorted the Bible and the Torah and that the Quran is the only unchanged holy book and therefore the only true word of God.

However, while this mainstream Islamic belief has the potential to promulgate intolerance, it is not in and of itself violent or extremist. Rather, Islamist extremist groups—such as ISIS and al-Qaeda—have manipulated this belief as a means to justify violence against the “people of the book”. The IRGC also does this. As part of its ideological-political training programme, the IRGC prescribes violence against Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians because they “do not have true and acceptable faith”, stating that it is “obligatory for Muslims to fight them to pressure them to give up their devious beliefs and to accept Islam directly.”<sup>191</sup>

The textbooks state that war with this group is justified if “they refuse to accept Islam, the domination of political Islam, and do not accept the payment of *jizya*”.<sup>192</sup> The concept of *jizya* relates to a historic tax levied on non-Muslim “people of the book” in areas under Islamic rule, in order for them to reside permanently within the land. Indeed, IRGC recruits are told that the “people of the book” are “no longer required to be attacked by Muslims” if they either “accept the religion of Islam” or “accept the giving of *jizya*”.<sup>193</sup> This assertion is legitimised through the Quranic verse that states:

*Fight those who do not believe in Allah or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His Messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth from those who were given the Scripture, [fight them] until they give the jizya willingly and are humbled. [al-Tawba, 9:29]*<sup>194</sup>

The IRGC makes it clear to its recruits that “contrary to what some people think, *jizya* is not ransom or a forcible acquisition.”<sup>195</sup> To further justify the collection of the *jizya* from the “people of the book”, the IRGC compares the *jizya* to taxes Muslims pay to reside within an Islamic state. Recruits are told, “just as Muslims pay taxes such as *khums* and *zakat* and the Islamic state uses these funds to provide public facilities and amenities for everyone, a religious infidel who wants to use these facilities must also pay their share.”<sup>196</sup> What is not explained is that Muslims who do not pay the *khums* and *zakat* tax do not face death, whereas the IRGC calls for Christians and Jews to be killed if they do not pay the *jizya*.

Despite what the IRGC is teaching its recruits, within Iran religious minorities are not expected to pay *jizya* tax to reside in the state. The fact that the IRGC’s uses of the concept of *jizya* as a viable condition for violence towards religious minorities and enemies abroad is an example of how the organisation promulgates a more extreme application of scripture than the Islamic Republic’s penal system. It is only in very rare cases, in fact with the Taliban and ISIS, where *jizya* is enforced in the modern context. Even so, throughout the IRGC textbooks the final word on non-Muslims appears to be unwavering intolerance. Members are told: “The people of the book cannot choose any other way except accepting monotheism and the religion of Islam”, as “*shirk* should be removed completely from the earth”.<sup>197</sup>



## Case Study: The Sectarian Fight - Shiism Under Attack from a "[Sunni] Arab-Zionist-Western Axis"

Since the expansion of Iran's involvement in the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the idea that there is an existential threat to Shiism and Shia Muslims from a "Arab-Zionist-Western axis" (*mehvar arabi-hebri-gharbi*) has been at the crux of the IRGC's communications strategy to recruit young Shia men to take up arms for its cause.<sup>198</sup> To this end, propaganda literature, as well as the narrative of IRGC figures, has become increasingly more polarising, with focus on inciting sectarian tensions as a recruitment and radicalising tactic—in a way that is not dissimilar to Salafi-Jihadi groups.

Official IRGC material analysed in this paper propagate the idea that the Sunni Gulf states, in particular Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are in tacit partnership with Israel, Britain and the US, with the aim of fomenting disunity among Muslims, eradicating Shiism and its holy sites, as well as diverting attention from the Palestinian issue. To support this theory, one of the primary arguments put forward by the IRGC is the claim that ISIS and al-Qaeda were created by the US, Britain, Israel and Saudi Arabia to destroy Shiism and facilitate the West's domination of the Middle East.<sup>199</sup> In addition, the IRGC combines a potent mixture of conspiracy and sectarianism to depict Salafism and Wahhabism, a subset of Sunni Islam, as being a British creation with Jewish origins that was constructed to destroy Islam.<sup>200</sup>

While the IRGC's focal point is this subset, the sectarian argument the IRGC promulgates targets Sunni Muslims more broadly, with anyone opposing Iran's Shia Islamism being labelled as a Salafi or Wahhabi and categorised as being part of the "Arab-Zionist-Western" conspiracy. This kind of discourse mirrors that of Salafi-Jihadi groups, who often refer to a "Shia-Zionist-Crusader" alliance as a way to radicalise young Sunni men and legitimise sectarian violence.<sup>201</sup>

### Wahhabism and Salafism: "A British creation with Jewish origins"

Central to building this narrative around a "Arab-Zionist-Western axis" is the notion that Wahhabism and Salafism—two strands of Sunni Islam—are of Jewish origin and were created by British Christian colonialists.<sup>202</sup> Documents on the IRGC's ideological-political e-training site dedicate significant attention

to Salafism and Wahhabism what it describes as "devious and takfiri (apostate) sects" and "two sides of the same coin."<sup>203</sup>

**FIGURE 9** Image on IRGC e-learning website under the heading "Wahhabism and Salafism"



Recruits are taught that Salafis and Wahhabis have "inflicted oppression on Muslims for many years, especially the oppressed Shias in the Arabian Peninsula" and that Muslims around the world need to understand the origins of this sect "so as not to be misled and oppressed" by them.<sup>204</sup> The narrative around Shia oppression is significant. Shia Muslims have historically seen themselves as a subjugated minority sect and as victims of centuries' worth of oppression at the hands of the Sunni majority sect.<sup>205</sup> The story of Imam Hussain's death in 680 AD perhaps best illustrates this historic oppression in the eyes of Shia Muslims. However, while Hussein's martyrdom reflects Shia subjugation, for Shia Muslims it is also emblematic that to stand up against tyranny is greater than life itself – a concept that Iran's regime has politicised to encourage Shia men to take up arms for its cause. Therefore, the IRGC documents' discourse around the "oppressed Shias in the Hijaz [Saudi Arabia], Pakistan, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria" becomes an important tool to tap into these deep-rooted, sectarian anxieties and rile up its recruits for war.<sup>206</sup>

### The toxic twist: Combining anti-Semitism, anti-imperialism and sectarianism

The training documents claim Wahhabism originated as a "political phenomenon stemming from British colonial aims to break down the authority of [the] Ottoman Empire" and, crucially, to "disrupt the unity of the Islamic ummah (community) and create a continuous divide [among Muslims]".<sup>207</sup> According to the IRGC's account, "almost two centuries ago, European Christian colonists sought to infiltrate the Islamic world and gain access to sensitive and

strategic centres of the Islamic world by designing all kinds of conspiracies.”<sup>208</sup> Recruits are told that out of “desperation to break up the unity of the Islamic faith” the Christian colonialists opted to support a sect with Jewish origins and an Islamic appearance and they discovered such a compound in the al-Saud [family] and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab” and “thereby promoted the spread of Wahhabism among Muslims.”<sup>209</sup> Seeking to draw a link between the US (Tehran’s ultimate ideological enemy) and Wahhabism, IRGC literature claims that “after the collapse of the British Empire, Wahhabism regarded the White House as its new *Qibla* (the direction Muslims pray towards).”<sup>210</sup> By linking the origins of Salafism and Wahhabism to Britain and Judaism, the IRGC seeks to latch on to anti-imperialist sentiments and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about Jewish global domination, which have long existed in the Middle East and are central pillars of Iran’s Shia Islamist ideology.<sup>211</sup>

**FIGURE 10** Caricature Supporting IRGC conspiracy, depicting Wahhabism as a product of Judaism and America.



A translated audio version of the controversial book *The Memoirs of Mr Hempher: Confessions of a British Spy* is also available for recruits to listen to as part of ideological-political training in the IRGC.<sup>212</sup> A message of endorsement from Ayatollah Khamenei is in the preamble of the audiobook. Originally published in the 19th Century under Ottoman rule, this book claims to be an account of British spy, Hempher, and his role in founding Wahhabism, as part of a British conspiracy to destroy and corrupt Islam. The book, which is recognised as a fabrication and has been referred to as an Anglophobic variation on *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* has been widely distributed in the Middle East, in particular Iraq. Reports as early as 2004, indicate that *Confessions of a British Spy* was being widely shared among Shia

militants and could have had an important role in radicalising young Shia men, not least following the surge of sectarian violence after the Ashura bombings.<sup>213</sup>

A deeply sectarian narrative pervades every aspect of this conspiracy theory that is promulgated by the IRGC. The documents describe this subset of Sunni Islam as a “troublemaking cult [whose] motto is subversion, destruction, atrocity”, claiming that this Anglo-Jewish creation was created to “impose its irrational thoughts on Muslims.”<sup>214</sup> The sectarian language the IRGC promulgates is hugely significant in the context of conflict in the Middle East today. The power balance in the region has often been depicted as a geopolitical, rather than an ideological, struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. But the fact that the IRGC is teaching its fighters and proxies, the young Shia men fighting in this proxy war, that Wahhabism, the dominant form of Islam in Saudi Arabia, is apostasy (*takfir*) underscores that this conflict is more than just a geopolitical rivalry between two states. This deeply sectarian and intolerant view held by the IRGC makes long-lasting peace and stability between Tehran and Riyadh effectively impossible.

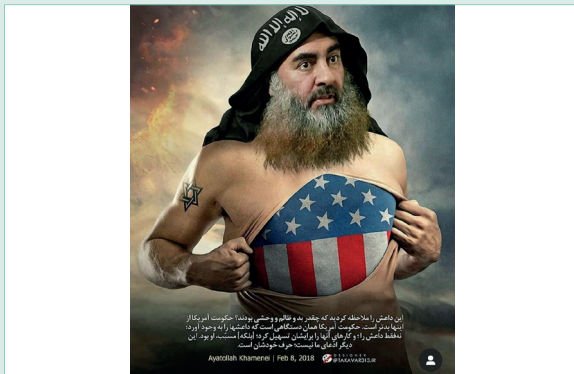
### Rewriting history: “ISIS and al-Qaeda were created and are supported by West”

Having laid the foundation for this “Arab-Zionist-Western axis” in the minds of its members, the IRGC then moves to depict it as an existential threat to Shiism and its holy sites as a way to encourage deployment to Syria and Iraq.

The ascendancy of the fiercely anti-Shia Salafi-jihadi group, ISIS, in Syria and Iraq from 2014 onwards, provided Tehran with an opportunity to crystallise the “Arab-Zionist-Western” conspiracy by claiming ISIS was created and is supported by the West, Israel and the Sunni Gulf states. This narrative was dictated by Iran’s supreme leader and commander-in-chief of the IRGC, Ayatollah Khamenei. Only months after ISIS announced the establishment of a caliphate in June 2014, Khamenei declared that the creation of ISIS was a conspiracy plotted by “America, the evil English and Zionism” to “divide and create enmity among Muslims.”<sup>215</sup> The IRGC soon mainstreamed this discourse, injecting it with a powerful dose of sectarianism, with officials such as Iraj Masjedi, then special advisor to the late Qassem Soleimani and

currently Iranian ambassador to Iraq, claiming “the Saudis, Americans, and Zionists are support[ing] the opportunity to destroy the line of authentic Islam, the frontline of which is the Shia movement, the holy shrines and the crescent of resistance.”<sup>216</sup> This notion, that ISIS was a product of the “Arab-Zionist-Western axis” was, and remains to be, fundamental to tapping into the minds of young Shia men and encouraging them to take up arms under the premise of protecting their faith.

**FIGURE 11** Image shared on IRGC-linked Telegram page depicting former Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi



The IRGC documents clearly and concisely state that: “It has long been clear that the two main [Syrian] opposition groups, ISIS and the al-Nusra Front, are in close contact with al-Qaeda, which is also supported by the US.”<sup>217</sup> The IRGC deliberately ignores the plethora of Syrian opposition factions—the majority of whom were not jihadi groups—to inculcate the minds of its recruits with a false binary: anyone opposed to Assad is ISIS and al-Nusra, which is part of a “Arab-Zionist-Western” conspiracy against the Muslim world. Indeed, recruits are told that ISIS, al-Nusra and al-Qaeda, which the text refers to as “Salafi and Wahhabi agents”, all receive “obvious financial, political and military support from the US, Zionist regime and the corrupt rulers of artificial Islamic countries, especially Saudi Arabia.”<sup>218</sup> This false binary has been echoed by key Iranian and Shia figures to justify support for Bashar al-Assad.

### Framing the West’s “support for terrorism”

There are three main reasons the IRGC cites for the West’s “support for terrorism”: regional domination, the State of Israel and the suppression of Shiism.<sup>219</sup> Members of the Guard are told that “one of the reasons for the America’s support for terrorism in Syria”

is because the Assad regime—what it later refers to as the “Syrian Islamic Resistance” (despite its secular nature)—“prevents the West’s absolute domination of the Arab world and is a threat to Israel.”<sup>220</sup> Seeking to tap into anti-imperialist sentiments, the IRGC tells its recruits that by toppling Assad, the main threat to the West’s ambitions and to Israel, will have been “eliminated.” The IRGC states that this seeks to inflict a “heavy blow” to the “Islamic Resistance Front”, the term Tehran has used to describe its crescent of influence stretching from Lebanon via Hizbullah to Assad’s Syria to the Shia militias of Iraq.<sup>221</sup>

In Iraq, the focus turns on the suppression of Shias. Recruits are told that “US support for ISIS in Iraq is to prevent the Shia minority [sect of Islam] from gaining power.”<sup>222</sup> Again, the narrative the IRGC seeks to build around the “Arab-Zionist-Western axis” is clearly sectarian and is centred Shia oppression. The “other goal of the Western governments is that if these groups succeed in overthrowing political systems in countries - such as the Syrian Islamic Resistance or the Iraqi Shia regime”, the IRGC states that they will be able to form “a government [of] terrorist groups like ISIS.”<sup>223</sup> Such an outcome, according to the documents would, “empower [ISIS] masters (the West) to implement and complete their semi-finished plans in the region.”<sup>224</sup> In essence, the IRGC alongside Iran’s clerical establishment have sought to depict the creation of ISIS and other Salafi-jihadi groups as a conspiracy against Shiism. The regime’s propaganda machine, as reflected in the documents, has developed a false dichotomy which states: if we don’t fight this conspiracy in Syria, we will be fighting it in Iran, the heartland of Shiism.

When describing the “Arab-Zionist-Western axis” and its support for ISIS, the IRGC seeks to depict itself as a force defending the oppressed from the oppressor – a key division in its ideological worldview. There is a deliberate underdog mentality laced throughout the narrative. This not only serves to reinforce the scale of the conspiracy against Shiism, but it also seeks to draw parallels between the IRGC’s wars and Imam Hussain’s Battle of Karbala—the idea of the IRGC as an outnumbered force standing up to global tyranny. This is not restricted to the documents. IRGC-linked news outlets have consistently asserted that Syria and Iraq are “today’s Karbala”.<sup>225</sup>



**FIGURE 12** Caricature shared on IRGC-linked Telegram page depicting the late Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as a US puppet



In building the image of this conspiratorial force of tyranny, the IRGC tells its members that “ISIS has received highly sophisticated weapons and equipment from its Western backers” and that before their deployment in Syria, ISIS fighters were all “trained by CIA and Mossad officers in Jordan, Turkey and Pakistan for three years.”<sup>226</sup> Seeking to reinforce the idea that Wahhabism and Salafism are part of a global Jewish conspiracy, another IRGC document states that “the Zionists equip terrorist groups with advanced weapons, which Riyadh and Doha pay Tel Aviv for.”<sup>227</sup> The documents also state that “British and French assassination and intelligence squads have also infiltrated Syrian territory [to support terrorism]” and claim that this is “under the command of Bandar bin Sultan”, former Saudi intelligence chief, who the IRGC refers to as the “the first investor and supporter of terrorists” and a person who “has been associated with the Zionist security apparatus since his youth.”<sup>228</sup>

Depicting ISIS as a foreign-trained and well-equipped force is central to the IRGC’s propaganda and indoctrination strategy. First, it underlines the scale of the threat to Shiism and the urgency in challenging this which is essential for recruitment. However, this narrative is also effective in making it easier for the Guard to communicate defeat and glorify victory to its members. On the one hand, when the IRGC experiences setbacks, Tehran can claim that it is not only fighting ISIS, but it is in combat with the oppressive “Arab-Zionist-Western axis”. On the other hand, when the IRGC is victorious, it can claim that it has defeated the West (particularly the US), Israel and Sunni Gulf states. This propaganda tactic was deployed during the Iran-Iraq War, where Iran claimed it was not only

fighting Saddam’s Iraq, but the West and the Soviet Union.

### “BBC support for ISIS”

A particular interesting finding in the research was the IRGC’s attack on international media, in particular the BBC, which it claims is providing “media support” to ISIS.<sup>229</sup> IRGC documents state that as well as “providing intelligence [and] weapons”, the “prominent European countries (Britain and France), with US planning and the serious support of Saudi Arabia and other Arab allies of Riyadh” have given ISIS “media support”.<sup>230</sup>

The documents claim that the BBC’s—what it calls the “English government’s channel”—refusal to refer to ISIS as “terrorists” underlines its support for the group, referring to the BBC’s claim of impartiality as an “open lie”.<sup>231</sup>

The reason behind the BBC and Voice of America’s refusal to call ISIS terrorists, recruits are told, is to facilitate “US and British dominance in the region [Middle East], and in particular over Islamic countries” the policy of the West is to “create and support terrorist groups trained by themselves in military spaces or prisons such as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo to create and instigate religious and ethnic differences in Islamic countries.”<sup>232</sup> The IRGC documents explicitly accuse the BBC of promoting sectarianism, claiming that “false conflict between Shia and Sunni can only be achieved through the use of satellite channels.”<sup>233</sup> It does so, according to the documents, by referring to ISIS as “Islamic”, depicting them as being representative of Islam in order to deliberately cause a rift between Sunni and Shia Muslims.<sup>234</sup>

**FIGURE 13** Image shared on pro-regime website depicting the BBC as the flag bearer for ISIS <sup>235</sup>



## The *Baaghi* ('The Internal Conspirator')

The material analysed identifies the *baaghi* as someone who has “departed from [their belief in] the infallible [Shia] imams and opposes leadership of the Islamic community (Ayatollah Khamenei).”<sup>236</sup> Whereas the two previously identified categories of enemy are primarily external, jihad with the *baaghi* focuses on the enemy within. The textbook, *Jihad and Defence in Islam*, states that “this group (*baaghi*), unlike the previous two groups (polytheists and “people of the book”) who are infidels (*kuffars*), are in the circle of Islam and are Muslim in appearance, but because of intellectual and ideological deviations or misinterpretations or incorrect justifications, they rebel against the Imam (Ayatollah Khamenei) and become infidels.”<sup>237</sup>

Any person that “rises up, revolts or engages in conspiracies” against Ayatollah Khamenei is considered a *baaghi*.<sup>238</sup> IRGC recruits are told that “until their (the *baaghi*’s) opposition is verbal and they do not conspire or rebel against the Islamic regime, they are free and should not be attacked.” The text continues to state “but when they take action, Muslims are obliged to suppress them.”<sup>239</sup> This serves as a reminder that the impact of the IRGC’s violent Islamist extremist ideology has been felt first and foremost by the Iranian population.

More than the police and the army, the IRGC and its paramilitary force, the Basij, are the regime’s main tool of coercion domestically and have played a critical role in crushing domestic uprisings. As such, legitimising violence against the *baaghi*, or domestic conspirers, is a key part of the training of recruits. This is reinforced by Iran’s Islamic penal code, which criminalises “armed rebellion against the government and foundation of the regime of the Islamic Republic”, with reference to the term “*baaghi*” which is punishable by imprisonment or death.<sup>240</sup> The Islamic Republic has used the crime of the “*baaghi*” to detain Iranians that took the streets in the nationwide protests in 2009, 2017-18 and 2019.

IRGC members are told that “jihad with the *baaghi* or internal rebels should continue until they are fully suppressed”.<sup>241</sup> The fact that the IRGC refers to the suppression of this group as a holy mission mandated by God is indicative of how the Iranian regime seeks to portray anyone who opposes it as an enemy of God. This is particularly important in the context of domestic dissent, as Tehran needs to ensure that members of the IRGC are willing to use violence, sometimes lethal,

against fellow Iranians should they take to the streets. Again, de-emphasising Iran’s status as a nation-state, and making it rather an ideological cause, means that an internal opponent can be positioned as an ideological enemy of the state even if they are Iranian. Religious writings serve to legitimise this uncompromising position on domestic dissent, with the textbooks citing hadiths from *Wasael al-Shia*, a major Shia hadith compilation, which speak of how the infallible Imams endorsed such a response following Muawiya’s uprising against Imam Ali.

## The *Mohareb* ('One Who Wages War on God')

The IRGC defines the *mohareb* (one who wages war on God) as someone who seeks to intimidate the people, disrupt public order, spread corruption on earth and overthrow the Islamic regime.<sup>242</sup> The textbook, *The Islamic Defence System*, states that anyone “who corrupts the earth with criminality, promotes evil, violates human and religious values and ignores public order” is spreading corruption on earth and therefore becomes as *mohareb*. It teaches its recruits that anyone who seeks “to overthrow the Islamic regime”, “cooperates with the enemies of the Islamic government” or “conspires against the Islamic Republic” is waging war on God.<sup>243</sup> Coupled with this is a definition provided by Khomeini, which states that the *mohareb* is someone who wants to “corrupt the land” and who is punished equally whether male or female.<sup>244</sup> In reality, Iran’s leaders have used the term *mohareb* to describe anyone who acts against the regime.

While the *baaghi* and the *mohareb* may appear similar, there are subtle differences between the two. Unlike the *baaghi*, the IRGC textbooks state that the crime of the *mohareb* is not political; it is categorised as intimidation and “corrupting the land”. In the case of the *mohareb* repentance in court will not be accepted, whereas the *baaghi* can repent in court, significantly reducing their punishment.

The IRGC is clear that the punishment for these two crimes is also different. Whereas recruits are told that the only way to deal with the *baaghi* is to “fight and kill” them, the IRGC textbooks outlines four specific punishments for the *mohareb*: “execution, hanging, and cross-amputation (cutting off a hand and the opposite foot) and exile”.<sup>245</sup> Indeed, the Iranian regime justifies its punishment for *moharabah* (the crime perpetrated by

a *mohareb*) on the basis of its definition in sharia, namely “waging war on God”. In Iran’s Islamic penal code the punishment for *moharabah* is based on the following verse from the Quran:

*Indeed, the penalty for those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and strive upon earth [to cause] corruption is none but that they be killed or crucified or that their hands and feet be cut off from opposite sides or that they be exiled from the land. That is for them a disgrace in this world; and for them in the Hereafter is a great punishment. [al-Ma’ida, 5:33]*<sup>246</sup>

After the Islamic Revolution, the chief justice of the new Revolutionary Court, Sadegh Khalkhali (dubbed “the hanging judge”), invoked this criminal offence to legitimise the brutal executions of thousands of Iranians who were considered anti-revolutionary, such as former Iranian prime minister Amir-Abbas Hoveyda. This offence was again brought to light following the 2009 pro-democracy uprising, which saw millions of Iranians take to the streets in anti-regime demonstrations. Tehran accused anti-regime protesters in the Green Movement of spreading corruption and being enemies of God, and executed scores charged with the criminal offence of *moharabah*.<sup>247</sup>

More recently, following two weeks of protests in Iran during November 2019, which saw the IRGC kill over 1,500 people, the regime in Iran renewed efforts to mainstream *moharabah* offence to justify violence against protestors. In a programme aired by Iranian state-run television, a “religious expert”, Abolfazl Bahrampour, called on those who were arrested in the November protests to be punished by “cutting them into pieces, right hand together with the left leg” and then “exiled to a broken ship in the middle of the sea and live there until they die”. Just like the IRGC, Bahrampour cited verse 33 of *al-Ma’ida* chapter and argued that “killing” those who revolt against Islam should be interpreted as “torturing them to death”.<sup>248</sup>

### Case Study: Battle-Hardened Radicals - IRGC Violence Post-Syria

Since its inception, the IRGC’s ideological-political training mission has been programmed to cultivate ideological radicalism. From textbooks that compare Khamenei’s authority to the Prophet Muhammad to those that provide religious justification for

violence against anyone opposed to the regime in Iran, ideological-political training within the IRGC has sought to foster a generation of IRGC zealots who have unbridled commitment to Iran’s state-sanctioned Shia Islamist ideology. But like other violent extremist organisations, the IRGC has recognised the limits of nurturing extremism in the classroom. The outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011 provided the IRGC with an opportunity to operationalise these textbooks into practice.

The repercussions of the IRGC’s operational presence in Syria from 2011 onwards are far greater than foreign policy towards the Islamic Republic. Just as the Afghanistan conflict of the 1980s proved to be the single most important development in Salafi-jihadism and Sunni radicalisation, the Syrian battleground may prove to be the gear shift for a renewed Shia Islamist militarisation. Nine years on from the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, this IRGC investment is already having an impact. In November 2019, Iran witnessed the largest anti-regime protests since the 2009 pro-democracy Green Movement uprising. But unlike 2009, which killed 72 people, this time around members of the IRGC and Basij—many of whom now had experience on the Syrian battlefield—applied unprecedented lethal force against peaceful protestors in a way that mimicked violence seen across Syria. The result of this was 1,500 people being killed in less than two weeks.<sup>249</sup>

Even by the standards of the Islamic Republic, the level of unbridled force used against protestors in the towns and cities of Iran was shocking. The IRGC and Basij have, of course, been involved in quashing many protests, but in previous instances its members had demonstrated a degree of restraint in their application of violence. Indeed, despite the scale and length of the 2009 anti-regime demonstrations, violence against protestors was ad hoc, with many IRGC and Basij members ignoring orders to crush the uprising. During the November 2019 protests, not only did the IRGC and Basij—the same units deployed in 2009—not hesitate to use violence against demonstrators, they proactively did so.

The level of violence and the number of deaths witnessed on the Iranian streets in the most recent protests suggests that members of the IRGC and the Basij have become a more radical and violent force in

the past decade. While it is too early to definitively determine what factors resulted in this hardening stance, their participation in the Syrian Civil War has undoubtedly contributed this status quo. Prior to the Syrian Civil War, the majority of IRGC members and Basij volunteers would have received anti-riot training in the classroom and in seminars. Today, however, many of these same recruits will have been deployed to the Syrian frontline, to participate in the IRGC's Shia jihad "in defence of the holy shrines", and will have returned to Iran as battle-hardened men with experience in mass killings and violent suppression. This experience on the battlefield, coupled with the intensification of ideological-political indoctrination will have contributed to the radicalisation of the young Shia men of the IRGC—and the violence seen on the Iranian streets is a consequence of this.

However, it is important to highlight that this has ramifications beyond the Iranian state. In fact, this trend—namely, the use of unbridled violence against enemies of Iran's regime post-Syria 2011—can be observed by IRGC-backed militias across the Middle East. In Iraq, returning Shia militia fighters from the Syrian frontline have been at the forefront of crushing domestic unrest at Iraq. At the order of the IRGC in October 2019, these militias killed over 500 protesters and injured 27,000 in just two months.<sup>250</sup>

For now, these battle-hardened young Shia men have adopted the violence to crush their own domestic constituencies. However, as tensions rise in the Middle East and as the IRGC invests more in nurturing militancy, this status quo could easily shift and could lead to Shia militarisation that targets the IRGC's external enemies, a stated objective of the IRGC as underlined in the ideological-political textbooks analysed in this paper.

# Conclusion

For over four decades, the Iranian regime has worked tirelessly to impose a totalitarian state-sanctioned Shia Islamist ideology, both inside and outside of Iran. Nowhere is the engine of this ideology more visible than the IRGC. By analysing IRGC-produced and disseminated training documents that have been in use since 2011, this report reveals the ideological-political indoctrination programme through which the IRGC mobilises and radicalises its fighters. The documents cover issues from the exportation of Iran's extreme state-sanctioned model of Islamism and the ideological basis for the subjugation of women, to the distortion of scripture to justify violence against those who critique the regime. This is the first time these documents have been translated from Persian, and this new evidence provides critical context to current policy debates on the status of the IRGC.

This report shows the IRGC is a deeply ideological actor, underpinned through careful doctrinal training that seeks to nurture Shia militancy in its most violent form. Yet, for too long the IRGC has been mischaracterised as simply a hard power actor, driven by realpolitik and regime survival. This mischaracterisation has been costly, both in terms of policy towards Iran and, more importantly, in terms of human life.

The international miscalculation in relation to Tehran's involvement in Syria is a case in point. Throughout the civil war, which killed over 500,000 civilians to date, the international community consistently sought to rationalise the IRGC's support for the Assad regime as being driven by Iranian-state deterrence, rather than ideology. Nine years on, it is now clear that the IRGC's objectives in Syria were about much more than just Iranian deterrence. Today, the IRGC has used Syria as a platform to open a new front with the ideological enemy it formally promises to eradicate, Israel, building military bases adjacent to the Israeli border. What is more, with its presence in Syrian territory, the IRGC has constructed a land bridge that has connected Lebanon, Syria and Iraq to Iran, providing an artery for the supply of arms to its Shia Islamist militias and attaining Khomeini's long-stated goal of a pan-Shia state.

But beyond this, the Syria experience provided the IRGC and its Shia militants with, in their own words, "increased capability" and has served as a training ground to create a "more organised and more efficient [force]...for future operations".<sup>251</sup> This experience, coupled with the intense ideological-political training could have far reaching consequences for a renewed Shia radicalisation and militarisation, in a way that is not too dissimilar to the impact of the war in Afghanistan in 1979 in galvanising Sunni Islamist extremism. The events of Afghanistan 1979 would lay the foundations for the 9/11 attacks almost 20 years later. Policymakers should urgently take steps to address the IRGC challenge to mitigate history from repeating itself.

Pushing back on Iran's malign regional activity, as well as opening the space for progressive change within Iran, requires correctly calibrating the response to the IRGC—treating them as ideological terrorist actor, with the right narrative to undermine its doctrine and the right action to push back on its hard power spread across the Middle East. Designating the IRGC as an FTO is a policy step to inhibiting its scope and reach, as well as delegitimising the organisation's credibility.

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# Appendix A

## TIMETABLE EXCERPT FROM THE IDEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL TRAINING DELIVERED TO IRGC MEMBERS IN 2011

باسمه تعالی

دروس تبلیغاتی سیاسی دوره تربیت و تعالی سربازان سال ۹۱

هدف: معرفت افزایی دینی و سیاسی و تقویت رفتار و منش اسلامی سربازان

توضیحات و سایر نکات	موضوعات آموزشی	محتوا و مراحل آموزشی - آموزشی	مدت زمان	روش های تدریس	توضیحات و سایر نکات
درس اول	مفهوم دانش جوان و جوانی	1. دانش: افزایش شناخت نسبت به جوان و ویژگی های جوانی درک و درک مطلب	12 جلسه	1. پرسش و پاسخ	1. مفاهیم پایه
درس دوم	مفهوم دانش جوان و جوانی	2. نگرانی: افزایش توجه به اهمیت و استفاده صحیح از دوران جوانی درک و درک مطلب	12 جلسه	2. پرسش و پاسخ	2. مفاهیم پایه
درس سوم	مفهوم دانش جوان و جوانی	3. رفتار: افزایش آشنایی با استفاده و پنداشت جوانی درک و درک مطلب	12 جلسه	3. پرسش و پاسخ	3. مفاهیم پایه

Page 1 from the training module *The Ways and Customs of Youth from the Viewpoint of Islam*.

### IN THE NAME OF GOD

#### Ideological Political Courses for the soldiers of the Year 2011

Course Title: The Ways and Customs of the Youth from the Viewpoint of Islam

Course Objective: Increasing religious and political knowledge and strengthening the Islamic behaviour and character of the soldiers

Educational content and topics	Areas of purpose	Duration of training in hours	Teaching methods for teachers/coaches	The type and means of measurement and effectiveness
<b>Lesson One</b> The concept of the youth and being youthful The importance of the era of youth Honouring the youth The youth and chivalry The youth in the words of the infallible [Shia Imams] Religion and youthfulness The youth from the viewpoint of the Imam [Khomeini] and the supreme leader	<b>1. Knowledge:</b> Increasing knowledge about youth and the characteristics of the youth in different dimensions.  <b>2. Attitude:</b> Increasing attention to the importance and proper use of youth in different dimensions.  <b>3. Behavioral:</b> Attempting to use and protect youth in different dimensions.	12 Lessons 1.30 hours	<b>1.</b> Explain, explanatory  <b>1.</b> Creating a situation (debate) to referee  <b>3.</b> Questions and answers (Q&A)	<b>1.</b> writing articles  <b>2.</b> Questions and answers (Q&A)  <b>3.</b> Written examination (if applicable)
<b>Lesson Two</b> The youth and spirituality Definition of spirituality Spirituality of the youth and the young spiritual Spirituality in Islam Frontrunners of spirituality Spirituality in the light of religion The effect of spirituality on young life Individual effects Dynamics Ability to cope with problems Mental blossoming The power of focus Taking control of instincts				







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