

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM

PERCEPTIONS AND NARRATIVES OF SECURITY THE IRANIAN REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS CORPS AND THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

BY ANNIE TRACY SAMUEL



HARVARD Kennedy School

BELFER CENTER for Science and International Affairs

MAY 2012

Discussion Paper #2012-06

International Security Program Discussion Paper Series

Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs

John F. Kennedy School of Government

Harvard University

79 JFK Street

Cambridge, MA 02138

Fax: (617) 495-8963

Email: bcsia_ksg@harvard.edu

Website: <http://belfercenter.org>

Copyright 2012 President and Fellows of Harvard College

The author of this report invites use of this information for educational purposes, requiring only that the reproduced material clearly cite the full source: Annie Tracy Samuel, “Perceptions and Narratives of Security: The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Iran-Iraq War,” Discussion Paper, No. 2012-06, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, May 2012.

Statements and views expressed in this discussion paper are solely those of the author and do not imply endorsement by Harvard University, the Harvard Kennedy School, or the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

The complete collection of Belfer Center Discussion Papers can be found at <http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/series.html?id=10>.

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM

PERCEPTIONS AND NARRATIVES OF SECURITY
THE IRANIAN REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS CORPS AND
THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

BY ANNIE TRACY SAMUEL



HARVARD Kennedy School

BELFER CENTER for Science and International Affairs

MAY 2012

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the importance of the Iran-Iraq War for the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) by analyzing how the Guards have used the war to present their positions on Iran's national security. It examines how the Revolutionary Guards have constructed a particular history or narrative of the war based on their experiences in and understandings of the conflict. Drawing on IRGC publications and statements by Revolutionary Guards commanders, it argues that the IRGC narrative emphasizes key features about Iran's experience in the war and presents a set of lessons to guide Iran's national security policies.

In both the IRGC narrative and in the public discourse of the Islamic Republic, the war is given two specific appellations: the Imposed War, because it was imposed on Iran by Iraq; and the Holy or Sacred Defense, because Iran was defending not just the country but the Islamic regime and even Islam itself. The IRGC narrative is shaped by several key features that shed light on how the Revolutionary Guards view Iran's security. These features include the role of the West in the war, the continuation of the Holy Defense after the formal end of the Iran-Iraq War, and the expansion of Iranian power as a result of the war.

According to IRGC leaders, the experience and results of the Iran-Iraq War hold important lessons for Iran's security. Together, the lessons form a national security doctrine that combines ideological and military components. These components include a culture of Holy Defense, the idea that religious devotion and ideological cohesion play an essential role in guaranteeing Iran's security; unity under the Supreme Leader; independent deterrence, which is meant to ensure that Iran can independently maintain a deterrent capability to prevent future attacks; faith and firepower, which represents the interconnectedness of the religious and military aspects of Holy Defense; aggressive defense, which is the idea that Iran must pursue its enemies to ensure their defeat; and the exportation of the Holy Defense to other nations in the hope that those outside Iran will understand the Iranian experience in the Iran-Iraq War.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Annie Tracy Samuel is a research fellow in the International Security Program at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. She is also a Ph.D. candidate at Tel Aviv University (TAU) and a junior research fellow at the Center for Iranian Studies and the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, both at TAU.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank the International Security Program and the Dubai Initiative for their support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

The Revolutionary Guards and the Iran-Iraq War 2

Narrating the War 6

Key Features of the IRGC Narrative 8

The Role of the West 8

The Holy Defense Continues 9

Iranian Power 10

Lessons of the War and Perceptions of Security 12

The Culture of Holy Defense 12

Unity under the Supreme Leader 13

Independent Deterrence 14

Faith and Firepower 16

Aggressive Defense 17

Export the Culture of Holy Defense 18

Conclusion 20

INTRODUCTION

The Iran-Iraq War has had a profound and wide-ranging impact on Iranian politics and society. This paper explores one aspect of that impact: the importance of the war for the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). It does so by examining how the IRGC has used the Iran-Iraq War to present its positions on Iran's national security.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps is the military and political organization that helped consolidate the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the wake of the Iranian Revolution of 1979.¹ On September 22, 1980, about eighteen months after the victory of the revolution, Iraq invaded Iran. The ensuing war lasted eight years, which now amounts to one quarter of the life of the Islamic Republic. The IRGC, which is charged with guarding the revolution and republic, played a key role in defending the new regime.

After discussing the history and duties of the IRGC, this paper examines how the Revolutionary Guards have constructed a history of the war based on their experiences in and understandings of the conflict. It argues that the IRGC narrative emphasizes key features about Iran's experience in the war and presents a set of lessons to guide Iran's national security policies.

¹ Transliterations follow the guidelines set out in the International Journal of Middle East Studies. See <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/ijmes/pages/transliteration.html>. For Iranian publications, both the Iranian and Gregorian dates are given. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps [Sipāh-i Pāsdārān-i Inqilāb-i Islāmī] translates literally to the Army of the Guards of the Islamic Revolution. When I refer to the IRGC in this paper, I am referring to the organization's senior commanders and leaders. I am not describing the IRGC as a whole or all members of the IRGC and its affiliates, but only the top echelon of IRGC leaders who have a direct impact on Iranian policies.

THE REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS AND THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

The IRGC was formed from revolutionary militias, lower-middle-class urban guerrillas, and groups of militant youths from both urban centers and rural areas. Many of its members were associated with local mosques that were led by clerics who opposed the rule of Iran's shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. The largest organizational precursor of the IRGC was the Mujahidin of the Islamic Revolution, which was formed in 1977.² Composed of several different revolutionary groups, it included former members of the People's Mujahidin of Iran (MIK)³ who believed that the MIK placed too much emphasis on Marxism and not enough on Islam.⁴

On April 22, 1979, about one month after a national referendum established the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a decree ordering the governing Revolutionary Council to establish the IRGC, effectively consolidating various revolutionary militias into a formal organization.⁵ In accordance with the decree, the Council ordered the IRGC to guard the revolution against internal and external threats, to propagate the ideology of the revolution, and to support oppressed peoples fighting for freedom in other parts of the world.

The IRGC was further institutionalized in the constitution of the Islamic Republic, ratified in December 1979.⁶ The constitution's introduction states that "the Army of the Islamic Republic and the Guards Corps of the Revolution will be responsible not only for defending the borders, but also for the ideological mission of holy war in the way of God and fighting to expand the rule of God's law in the world." Principle 150 of the constitution further defines the IRGC: "[T]he Guards Corps of the Islamic Revolution that was formed in the first days of the victory of this revolution will remain active in order to continue its role in guarding the revolution and its offshoots."

The IRGC's broad, compound mission as outlined in the constitution is useful in understanding the Revolutionary Guards. The IRGC's military, religious, and revolutionary mandates are intertwined, and should not be understood as separable parts. The interplay of these three elements shapes the way that the Revolutionary Guards understand Iran's security needs and their role in guarding the Islamic Republic.

This combination of responsibilities reflects the role of the Supreme Leader in the Islamic Republic, who serves as Iran's military, religious, and revolutionary leader. The constitution

² Mujāhidīn-i Inqilāb-i Islāmī in Persian.

³ Mujāhidīn-i Khalq-i Īrān in Persian.

⁴ Kenneth Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (Boulder: Westview, 1993), pp. 31–32.

⁵ Frederic Wehrey, Jerrold D. Green, Brian Nichiporuk, Alireza Nader, Lydia Hansell, Rasool Nafisi, and S.R. Bohandy, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2009), pp. 20–21.

⁶ The Majlis Research Center, http://www.majlis.ir/majles/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=88.

names the Supreme Leader as commander in chief of the armed forces, gives him the power to appoint and dismiss the head of the IRGC, and states that the head of the IRGC will be a member of the Supreme Defense Council, now the Supreme National Security Council, which is in charge of formulating and implementing Iran's national security policies.⁷

In January 1981, the IRGC assumed control over the Basij,⁸ an organization created by Khomeini in a November 1979 decree calling for a massive, popular force to defend the revolution.⁹ The Basij consisted primarily of poor, uneducated boys from urban towns and rural villages who volunteered to support the revolution.

During the first years after the revolution, the IRGC was preoccupied with combating internal opposition to the new Islamic Republic. With the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, however, the Revolutionary Guards became increasingly concerned with external threats to the regime. Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq at the time who then presided over a Sunni-dominated, secular government ruling over a Shi'i majority,¹⁰ saw the policies of the new Islamic Republic as a threat to his power.¹¹ After steadily worsening relations between Iran and Iraq since the establishment of the Islamic Republic and a month of clashes along the countries' shared border, Iraqi forces invaded Iran and initiated an aerial assault on Iranian bases on September 22, 1980, marking the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War.

Iraqi forces advanced into Iran until the beginning of 1981, when Iranian forces halted the march and retook the Iraqi-occupied territory over the course of the next year. Iran then pursued the retreating forces into Iraqi territory in the summer of 1982, but was unable to move far. The war continued as a bloody stalemate until the summer of 1988. The conflict ended on August 20, 1988, when UN Security Council Resolution 598, which called for a cease-fire, came into force. Neither side emerged as the clear victor.¹²

⁷ Principle 110 of the constitution.

⁸ Formally the National Mobilization Organization [Sāzmān-i Basīj-i Millī], and informally the Mobilization of the Oppressed [Basīj-i Mustāẓa'fīn].

⁹ Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam*, p. 67; and Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, pp. 25–26.

¹⁰ For the period under question, the demographic breakdown between Sunnis and Shi'is in Iraq is unclear and has been the subject of debate because censuses were either not taken or are unreliable. In 1980, Shi'is composed between 55 and 65 percent of the Iraqi population. Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Iraq: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1988), pp. 87–93; Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 13–50; and Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 13–47.

¹¹ The new government of the Islamic Republic was based on the concept of guardianship of the jurist [*vilāyat-i faqīh*], in which the supreme religious leader serves as head of state. The leaders of the Islamic Republic advocated the centrality of Islam in public life, and Ayatollah Khomeini vowed to fight for the revival of Shi'ism and for the freedom of the oppressed throughout the world.

¹² For more on the Iran-Iraq War, see Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988); Edgar O'Ballance, *The Gulf War* (London: Brassey's Defence, 1988); Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Lessons of Modern War, Vol. 2: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder: Westview, 1991); Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (London: Grafton, 1989); Efraim Karsh, ed., *The Iran-*

The Revolutionary Guards played a significant role in prosecuting the Iran-Iraq War.¹³ During the course of the conflict, the IRGC grew dramatically in size and developed from a disorganized militia into a complex and powerful organization with specialized armed forces, the resources to produce weaponry, a cabinet-level ministry, and an array of economic, religious, and educational enterprises.¹⁴

Since its inception, the IRGC has been responsible for the internal and external security of the Islamic regime. It has units stationed throughout the country to suppress unrest and promote cultural issues that are important to the organization. For example, it commemorates the Holy Defense and teaches the Iranian people its lessons by leading pilgrimages to the sites of the war's important battles. The IRGC has its own army, navy, and air force,¹⁵ and it commands the Quds Force, an elite unit responsible for unconventional and asymmetric warfare and for supporting Iran's proxies and allies.¹⁶ The IRGC also operates its own intelligence branch, maintains close ties to several universities, and owns companies in many sectors of the economy. It controls Iran's conventional and unconventional weapons, dominates ballistic missile production, and plays a central role in the state's nuclear program.

The IRGC has expanded into a collection of military, political, economic, and cultural organizations. The vast size of the IRGC increases the likelihood of factionalism along a number of lines, but IRGC leaders have managed to limit dissension within their ranks, or at least they have managed to prevent dissension from becoming public.

The IRGC is the most important part of the security apparatus in Iran.¹⁷ Its members and former members hold positions throughout the government. The Revolutionary Guards have substantial influence over Iran's military doctrine and how the state defines its security and national interests. The IRGC's growing power in Iran is the result of its leaders' concerted efforts to expand the reach of the organization, which they justify in terms of the IRGC's broad and

Iraq War: Impact and Implications (Houndmills: MacMillan, 1989); and Lawrence G. Potter and Gary Sick, eds., *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

¹³ The Guards were overseen by three primary leaders. The organization and its military operations were under the command of Mohsen Rezaee, its government ministry was headed by Muhsin Rafiqdust, and its staff and public relations were directed by Ali Riza Afshar.

¹⁴ Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam*, pp. 10, 79; Sepehr Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 17, 211–212; Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009), pp. 246, 255, 278; Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, p. 74; O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, pp. 51, 107, 121; and Cordesman, *The Lessons of Modern War, Vol. 2*, pp. 57, 66, 122, 192, 201, 250, 431.

¹⁵ The IRGC consists of an army of about 150,000; a navy of about 20,000; and a small air force. Iran's regular army is about 350,000 strong. Iran's regular navy is about the same size as its IRGC counterpart, but its regular air force is much larger.

¹⁶ The Quds Force consists of about 5,000 to 10,000 troops. It supports Iran's proxies and allies in Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

¹⁷ In addition to the IRGC and the Basij, the regular armed forces, the Ministry of Intelligence, and law enforcement forces are part of the Iranian security structure.

inherently political mandate of protecting the revolution.

The breadth and meaning of the IRGC's mandate have been the subject of debate in Iran, especially in recent years, with some Iranian leaders arguing that the Revolutionary Guards have overstepped the limits on their activities set by Ayatollah Khomeini. To buttress their claims to power, IRGC leaders point to their contributions to Iranian defense during the Iran-Iraq War and to their role in reconstructing the country after the end of the conflict. Indeed, the war helped legitimize and strengthen the IRGC as well as the new Islamic Republic as a whole. The idea that "war made the state and the state made war" therefore applies to both the Islamic Republic and, specifically, to the IRGC as an organization: war made the Revolutionary Guards and the Revolutionary Guards made war.¹⁸

¹⁸ According to Miguel Angel Centeno, in words that evoke Charles Tilly's classic thesis, "Wars both build and are an expression of political power....The process by which a state acquires a monopoly over violence in its territory is often dependent on the conduct of armed conflict with other states. War provided both the incentive and the means with which the central power was able to dominate." Centeno, "Limited War and Limited States," in Diane E. Davis and Anthony W. Pereira, eds., *Irregular Armed Forces and Their Role in Politics and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 86–87; Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Theda Skocpol, "Social Revolutions and Mass Military Mobilization," *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (January 1988); Katharine Chorley, *Armies and the Art of Revolution* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), p. 185; Shahram Chubin, "Iran and the War: From Stalemate to Ceasefire," in Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War*, pp. 14–17; R.K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 19; Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, pp. 7, 9–10, 31–32, 37–40, 71–80, 133, 245–46; David Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), pp. 208, 228–230; Mohsen Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic*, 2d ed. (Boulder: Westview, 1988), p. 180; John Bulloch and Harvey Morris, *The Gulf War: Its Origins, History, and Consequences* (London: Methuen, 1989), pp. 10–11; and Stephen C. Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum* (New York: Praeger, 1992), p. 59.

NARRATING THE WAR

The Revolutionary Guards connect the Iran-Iraq War to Iran's contemporary security situation in the way they narrate the history of the conflict. They began issuing publications on the war in 1981, and have steadily produced new material since then. The monographs published during the war focused on promoting the political and social issues that were important to the Guards. Several periodicals documented the progress of the war, relevant political developments, and information on Iranian martyrs.¹⁹ The IRGC publications produced after 1988 include studies of the war's causes and effects, its phases, its impact on Iranian cities, and the roles of the participants, as well as memoirs, accounts of specific battles, and poetry.

Several IRGC organizations, including its political, education, and propaganda departments and the Basij, produce publications on the war. Imam Husayn University, founded by the IRGC in 1986, publishes a journal on defense policy that often includes articles about the conflict.²⁰ The Center for War Studies and Research, which the IRGC established after the war to produce analytical studies and general-use reference works about the conflict, is responsible for many other publications. All together, the Revolutionary Guards have published numerous periodicals and more than one hundred books on the subject.

Although other governmental and nongovernmental institutions in Iran have issued publications on the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC is responsible for a significant portion of this literature. Its studies are notable for several reasons. They cover a range of subjects and approaches, including ideological discussions of war in the Quran, a series of atlases tracing important battles, and several highly detailed and analytical chronologies of the war.²¹ The IRGC's Center for War Studies and Research is in the process of producing a fifty-seven-volume chronology of the war, which is the largest and most detailed study of the war that I have identified. Thirteen volumes have been published nonsequentially, and the others are in various stages of research and production.²² The studies published by the IRGC devote far more attention to the Guards themselves than do other studies of the war.

¹⁹ Two of these publications include *Payām-i inqilāb* [Message of revolution] (Tehran: Sipāh-i Pāsdārān-i Inqilāb-i Islāmī [Islamic Revolution Guards Corps]); and *Ṣubḥ-i āzādgān* [Morning of the liberated] (Tehran: Sipāh-i Pāsdārān-i Inqilāb-i Islāmī).

²⁰ *Majallah-i siyāsāt-i dīfā'ī* [The journal of defense policy].

²¹ *Jang va jihād dar Qurān* [War and jihad in the Quran] (Tehran: Vāhid-i Āmūzish, Sitād-i Markazī-i Sipāh-i Pāsdārān-i Inqilāb-i Islāmī [Unit of Education, Central Staff of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps], 1360/1981); Muḥammad Durūdiyān, *Sayrī dar Jang-i Īrān va 'Irāq* [Survey of the Iran-Iraq War] (Tehran: Markaz-i Muṭāla'āt va Taḥqīqāt-i Jang [The Center for War Studies and Research], 1376–81/1997–2002); *Atlas-i rahnamā* [Guide atlas] (Tehran: Markaz-i Muṭāla'āt va Taḥqīqāt-i Jang, 1380–85/2001–07); and *Atlas-i Jang-i Īrān va 'Irāq* [Atlas of the Iran-Iraq War] (Tehran: Markaz-i Muṭāla'āt va Taḥqīqāt-i Jang, 2001).

²² See the description of the project and the list of volumes with their stages in *Rūzshumār-i Jang-i Īrān va 'Irāq*, Jild-i 37: *Tawsi'ah-i ravābiṭ bā qudrat'hā-yi Āsiyāyī* [Chronology of the Iran-Iraq War, Vol. 37: Expansion of relations with the Asian powers] (Tehran: Markaz-i Muṭāla'āt va Taḥqīqāt-i Jang, 1383/2004–05).

Statements by IRGC leaders and articles published on IRGC-affiliated websites also underscore the importance of the Iran-Iraq War for the organization. For example, on *Fars News*, at least one article dealing with some aspect of the war appears daily. In 2011, on the days surrounding the anniversary of the Iraqi invasion, around sixty different stories about the war or the annual Holy Defense Week commemorating the war appeared on the website each day.

The huge amount of material that the IRGC has published on the war demonstrates the importance that the organization attaches to propagating the history of the conflict. One study expressly states that its purpose was to bring greater attention to the significance of the war.²³ Another study suggests that concern over public opinion and the importance of the war's legacy for the Islamic Republic contributed to Iran's decision to continue the war after the liberation of Iranian territory in 1982. It asserts that agreeing to a cease-fire at that point would have been unacceptable to the Iranian public and to future generations.²⁴ Such concern for public opinion indicates that grappling with the meaning and legacy of the war was important for the Guards both during and after the conflict.

The focus on how the war is perceived highlights one of many concerns that may have affected the way that the war was prosecuted, and indicates one reason why the Guards have devoted so much time to constructing the history of the war. Because the war played an instrumental role in shaping the identities of the Revolutionary Guards and the IRGC as an organization, the Guards have striven to give the war an instrumental role in shaping the Islamic Republic.

²³ Muḥammad Durūdiyān, *Naqd va bar 'rasī-i Jang-i Īrān va 'Irāq, Jild-i 1: Pursish'hā-yi asāsī-i jang* [Critical study of the Iran-Iraq War, Vol. 1: Basic questions of the war] (Tehran: Markaz-i Muṭāla'āt va Taḥqīqāt-i Jang, 1382/2003–04).

²⁴ Ḥusayn Ardīstānī, *Tajzīyah va taḥlīl-i Jang-i Īrān va 'Irāq, Jild-i 3: Tanbīh-i mutajāviz* [Analysis of the Iran-Iraq War, Vol. 3: Punishing the aggressor] (Tehran: Markaz-i Muṭāla'āt va Taḥqīqāt-i Jang, 1384/200–06), p. 11.

KEY FEATURES OF THE IRGC NARRATIVE

In both the IRGC narrative and in the public discourse of the Islamic Republic, the war is given two specific appellations: the Imposed War, because it was imposed on Iran by Iraq; and the Holy or Sacred Defense, because Iran was defending not just the country, but its Islamic regime and even Islam itself.²⁵ The IRGC narrative is shaped by several key features that shed light on how the organization views Iran's security. These features include the role of the West in the war, the continuation of the Holy Defense after the formal end of the Iran-Iraq War, and the extension of Iranian power as the result of the war.

THE ROLE OF THE WEST

According to the Revolutionary Guards, during the Imposed War the young Islamic Republic was not just fighting Iraq but also the Western powers, particularly the United States, which felt threatened by the emergence of a state that refused to serve U.S. interests. IRGC sources, therefore, tie the beginning of the war to the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.²⁶

Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, former commander of the IRGC and current senior adviser for military affairs to Supreme Leader Khamenei, said in an interview on the anniversary of the Iraqi invasion in 2007 that “Western powers, which were worried about the influence of the Islamic Revolution on regional Arab countries, encouraged Saddam to attack Iran.”²⁷ Similarly, in 2004 an IRGC spokesman stated, “It is well documented that Saddam was the aggressor in the war against Iran, but it was the great powers, particularly the United States, which guided Saddam.” He added that, at the time, the United States was also working to prevent “embarrassing revelations about its assistance to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war from emerging.”²⁸

After the invasion, U.S. support for Iraq continued through the provision of military aid and intelligence and direct involvement in the Gulf because the United States and the Arab states aligned with Iraq were determined to prevent Iran from winning the war. According to IRGC commanders, U.S. aid to Iraq was an important reason for Iran's military failures. In a 2007 interview, Mohsen Rezaee, the commander of the IRGC during the war, said that Iranian successes during the conflict prompted the West to supply Iraq with “technical, military, and intelligence advice” and “advanced weaponry” in response to “the perceived threat of Iran.” Iraq's increased capabilities, he said, were the reason why Iran was unable to win a decisive victory in the final days of the war.²⁹

²⁵ The names in Persian are *jang-i tahmīlī* and *difā'-i muqqadas*, respectively.

²⁶ Muḥammad Durūdiyān, *Sayrī dar Jang-i Īrān va 'Irāq, Jild-i 6: Āghāz tā pāyān* [Survey of the Iran-Iraq War, Vol. 6: Beginning to end] (Tehran: Markaz-i Muṭāla'āt va Taḥqīqāt-i Jang, 1376/1997–98), pp. 14–19.

²⁷ “Iran Has Become an Extra-Regional Power: General,” *Mehr News*, September 24, 2007, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=irgc%20war%20&NewsID=557521>.

²⁸ “War against Iran Saddam's Greatest Crime: IRGC Spokesperson,” *Mehr News*, July 4, 2004, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=irgc%20war%20&NewsID=92370>.

²⁹ “Liberation of Khorramshahr Marked Iran's Military Superiority in Region,” *Mehr News*, May 22, 2007,

When Iran invaded Iraq in 1982, the United States, Iraq's major patron during the war, stepped in to provide Iraq with additional support to prevent the state from collapsing. The United States also encouraged the Gulf states to increase their support for Iraq, and it moved naval forces into the Gulf in 1987, which led to direct confrontation between Iranian and American forces.³⁰ In October 2011, at a ceremony to honor martyrs of the IRGC Navy, IRGC Navy commander Gen. Ali Fadavi stated, "During the 8-year long Sacred Defense (against the Iraqi invasion from 1980 to 1988) we were defending against the Iraqis who were the endpoint of the arrow of the world arrogance (the US), but in the last one and a half years of the war, we were in vast and direct confrontation with the Americans in the Persian Gulf."³¹ Such confrontations lend credence to the IRGC belief that the United States has worked actively and aggressively to confront and contain the Islamic Republic. The reluctance of the international community to name Iraq as the aggressor or to condemn its use of chemical weapons also demonstrated to the IRGC the West's determination to bring down the Islamic Republic.³²

THE HOLY DEFENSE CONTINUES

Despite their efforts in the war, Iraq and its patrons failed to curb the power of the Islamic Republic. In the words of senior IRGC commander Yadollah Javani, "All [enemy plots against Iran] ended in failure. A clear example of that was the [Iraqi] imposed war.... The enemy believed it could defeat the Islamic Revolution through war, but it was the Iranian nation which emerged victorious."³³

The Islamic Republic's victory in the war did not lessen the determination of its enemies to confront it. This is a crucial aspect of the IRGC's narrative of the war, and one that continues to have enormous bearing on the way the organization understands Iran's security situation today: the Revolutionary Guards see the war as clear proof that the world wants to destroy the Islamic Republic. This belief is lodged in the IRGC worldview, and it underlies its leaders' aggressive defensive posture.

The Revolutionary Guards assert that, because Iran's enemies continue to threaten the Islamic Republic, the war is ongoing and the Holy Defense continues. During a May 2011 conference for the liberators of the Iranian city of Khurramshahr, IRGC commander and head of the armed forces social security organization Hossein Daqiqi declared, "The war has still not ended, and

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=irgc%20war%20&NewsID=490762>.

³⁰ "Nāguftih' hā-yi 'amaliyāt-i Karbālā-yi 5 bih rivāyat-i farmāndih-i sābiq-i Sipāh-i Pāsdārān [Untold of the Karbala 5 operations according to the narrative of the former commander of the Guards Corps]," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, Day 23, 1389/January 13, 2011, <http://irna.ir/NewsShow.aspx?NID=30186000>.

³¹ "Commander Reports 40 Armed Confrontations between Iran, U.S. in Persian Gulf," *Fars News*, October 7, 2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007130284>.

³² Ardistānī, *Tajzīyah va taḥlīl-i Jang-i Īrān va 'Irāq*, Jild-i 3, p. 11.

³³ "Intel. Service Foils Plots: Iranian Cmdr," *Press TV*, January 22, 2011, <http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/161361.html>.

today the enemies are waging a soft war against Iran.”³⁴ In 2010, Major General Safavi asserted that “certain countries, with the United States in the lead, which could not realize their hostile plot against Iran during the 1980-1988 war with Iraq, are making efforts to create problems for the Islamic Republic.”³⁵

IRANIAN POWER

According to the Revolutionary Guards, Iran is much stronger now than it was during the war. Gholam Ali Rashid, IRGC commander and Deputy Head of the Armed Forces General Staff, announced in April 2011 that “[t]he hegemonic system and its regional supporters should know that as they could not isolate or weaken the Iranian nation and could not trample upon [its] rights through their support for (former Iraqi dictator) Saddam Hussein,...they will not succeed in ignoring the inalienable rights of the Iranians” today.³⁶ Similarly, in an address to members of the Basij, IRGC commander in Northern Gilan Province Hamoun Mohammadi stated, “Iran’s national power has made the superpowers come into confrontation with the Islamic Republic because they view Iran’s national power as a major impediment to their domination over the region.... Iran’s accelerating move towards scientific progress and advancement has been the target of western attacks and plots, especially considering that Iran’s political power at the end of the US-backed Iraqi imposed war on Iran (1980-1988) brought the West to [the] conclusion that it cannot defeat Iran through military invasion.”³⁷

Because the Islamic Republic grew stronger through its experience in the war, the IRGC celebrates the Holy Defense as a source of Iran’s current power. The argument that Iran derived strength and purpose by fighting the war reflects the justifications for waging the war at the time, especially after Iran recovered its lost territory and decided to carry the war into Iraq. The Holy Defense is both a test of the Islamic Revolution and a blessing ensuring its success.

As told by the Revolutionary Guards, the liberation of the Iranian city Khurramshahr in May 1982 marked the beginning of Iran’s political and military ascendance. The war was a learning experience, and Iran took full advantage of it. The Islamic Republic not only surprised its enemies by surviving their aggression, it emerged from the war as a dominant regional power. “The liberation of Khorramshahr marked the commencement of Iran’s military superiority in the region,” former IRGC commander Rezaee proclaimed.³⁸ In 2008, Rezaee declared that

³⁴ “Gharbī’ha fikr fat’ḥ-i Khurramshahr rā ham nimīkardand” [Westerners also thought Khurramshahr couldn’t be conquered], *Fars News*, Khurdād 6, 1390/May 27, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9003067301>.

³⁵ “Iran Should Be Prepared for Every Imaginable Scenario: General,” *Mehr News*, August 30, 2010, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=irgc%20war%20&NewsID=1142807>.

³⁶ “Senior Commander Downplays Enemy Plots against Iran,” *Fars News*, April 30, 2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9002101259>.

³⁷ “Sanctions Signify Enemies’ Anger at Iran’s Scientific Progress,” *Fars News*, November 27, 2010, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8909061299>.

³⁸ “Liberation of Khorramshahr Marked Iran’s Military Superiority in Region,” *Mehr News*, May 22, 2007,

“Iran had not possessed remarkable political and military power in the beginning of the Iraqi imposed war, [but] it has [since] developed to the first rank in several fields including military and political power.”³⁹ Similarly, Deputy Head of the General Staff of Iran’s Armed Forces and IRGC commander Maj. Gen. Gholam Ali Rashid told *Fars News* that “Iran has now turned into a regional power” because it “prove[d] its righteousness and managed to promote the level of its internal stability and deterrence against foreign threats through its resistance in the Iraqi imposed war.”⁴⁰ Although these statements exaggerate Iran’s capabilities, they reveal how the Revolutionary Guards have sought to characterize the Islamic Republic’s experience in the war as a source of its continued survival and strength.

This idea also reflects the way that the Guards have sought to transform the war from an unfortunate consequence of the Islamic Revolution into its most impressive achievement. In March 2011, Mehdi Tahirkhani, the IRGC commander in Qazvin, stated that “the most important outcome of the Islamic revolution is the Holy Defense.”⁴¹ Ali-Reza Afshar, a former IRGC commander who was then the director of the Foundation for the Preservation and Publication of Sacred Defense Works, said in a speech, “The independence of the country and [the] development of the revolution are the two great achievements of [the] Sacred Defense....Among [its] other blessings are the domestic unity and integrity, the characteristic of deterrence during the war which is still beneficial to us, self-sufficiency for the armed forces, reconstruction of the army, progress of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), [and] the stabilization of the religious identity of the Islamic system.”⁴²

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=irgc%20war%20&NewsID=490762>.

³⁹ “Rezaei Terms Iran Top Military Power in Region,” *Fars News*, August 23, 2008, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8706021011>.

⁴⁰ “Senior Commander Downplays Enemy Plots against Iran,” *Fars News*, April 30, 2011. <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9002101259>.

⁴¹ “Āmrīkā va Isrā’īl bāzandih-i nahzat’hā-yi buzurg- kashvar’hā-yi minṭaqah hastand” [America and Israel are the losers of the big movements of the states of the region], *Sepah News*, Isfand 11, 1389/March 2, 2011, <http://www.sepahnews.com/shownews.aspx?ID=7974e677-dc75-4477-9e9d-b72e9b1fece9>.

⁴² “Independence, Greatest Achievement of Sacred Defense: Afshar,” *Mehr News*, September 26, 2003, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=irgc%20war%20&NewsID=26760>.

LESSONS OF THE WAR AND PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY

According to IRGC leaders, the experience and results of the Iran-Iraq War, and particularly the features of the war described above, hold important lessons for Iran's security. Together, these lessons form a national security doctrine that combines ideological and military components.

IRGC commanders frequently emphasize that the lessons of the Holy Defense are still valid today even though the nature of the threat against the Islamic Republic has changed. The Revolutionary Guards adapted to changes during the war, and they continue to adapt to new threats today. In a report on *Fars News*, IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari described how the force develops and adapts its strategies to counter the threats posed to the revolution, noting that the IRGC follows the same model now that it did during the war. Recently, the IRGC has focused on confronting soft threats.⁴³ An IRGC commander in the western city of Mehran addressed this new form of threat when he stated, "The enemies of Islam have stepped into the battlefield against the Iranian youth through launching different kinds of cultural invasions.... It is now our responsibility to identify the enemy's plots and plan against these plots to create a strong barrier similar to (what we did in) the era of the Holy Defense."⁴⁴

THE CULTURE OF HOLY DEFENSE

A key aspect of Holy Defense is the idea that religious devotion and ideological cohesion play an essential role in guaranteeing Iran's security. It is important to note the close correlation between religious ideology and security for the IRGC. When it comes to defending the country, the Revolutionary Guards see their religious ideology not as an end in itself, but as a strategy for bolstering the security of the Islamic Republic. They believe that ideological cohesion and strength are an essential part of national defense and superiority. IRGC publications classify the prosecution of the conflict as something that should be shaped by the revolutionary nature of the Islamic Republic because doing so would lead to military success. For example, one monograph describes how the use of "classical strategies and tactics" on the battlefield failed to lead to Iranian victories. When Iranian forces employed "revolutionary initiatives," however, they were able to recover their lost territory.⁴⁵

During the war, the IRGC effectively promoted the ideology of the Islamic Revolution to gain public support for the war and to convince the population to sacrifice themselves for the cause. The Revolutionary Guards believe that their commitment to Islam and jihad and their acceptance of martyrdom contributed to Iran's success in the conflict, especially given that Iran was short

⁴³ "Commander Stresses Dynamism in IRGC Strategies," *Fars News*, August 15, 2009, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8805241281>.

⁴⁴ "Commander Highlights IRGC Readiness to Push Back Enemies," *Fars News*, September 9, 2009, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8806181069>.

⁴⁵ Ardīstānī, *Tajzīyah va tahlīl-i Jang-i Īrān va 'Irāq*, Jild-i 3, p. 12; and Durūdiyān, *Sayrī dar Jang-i Īrān va 'Irāq*, Jild-i 1: *Khūnīnshahr tā Khurramshahr* [Survey of the Iran-Iraq War, Vol. 1: Khuninshahr to Khurramshahr], pp. 14–15.

on other resources. In publicizing an IRGC study of the war, an Iranian news agency wrote that the “book’s main focus is on jihad and martyrdom which were exceptionally prevalent during the Sacred Defense years among Basijis and the Muslim soldiers of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the role [those values] play in the continuity of the Islamic Revolution.”⁴⁶ The Guards also promote the values of Holy Defense by sponsoring pilgrimages to the sites of important battles, which an IRGC commander in Zanjan Province called “one of the most effective and strategic cultural programs.”⁴⁷

Because the Revolutionary Guards view the culture of Holy Defense as critical to the Islamic Republic’s security, they have worked to ensure that the post-war generations identify with and recognize its importance. Some IRGC publications state that their purpose is to impress upon future generations the importance of the conflict.⁴⁸ The IRGC commander in Zanjan Province, describing the pilgrimage of 11,000 of the province’s residents to battle areas, said that “the purpose of these pilgrimages is to promote the values of Holy Defense and transfer them to the young generation, to remember the saga and the martyrs of the eight years of Holy Defense.”⁴⁹

Similarly, in March 2011, a commander of the Basij Ashura brigades explained, “By presenting the examples of fighters during the Holy Defense we can transfer the culture of jihad and martyrdom to the next generations....In the Khaybar operations [of the war] we followed the pattern of Imam Ali. The martyrs of the Holy Defense are the best models for our society and by acknowledging them in our textbooks we can spread the culture of jihad and martyrdom among the present and future generations.”⁵⁰ In the words of IRGC commander Hossein Daqiqi, “The third and fourth generations of the revolution must understand the victory of the Holy Defense. The war has still not ended.”⁵¹

UNITY UNDER THE SUPREME LEADER

The Revolutionary Guards assert that future generations must understand how the unity of the

⁴⁶ “Soft War vs. Sacred Defense Values,” *Iran Book News Agency*, March 4, 2011, <http://www.ibna.ir/vdcgnw9y.ak97z4j5ra.html>.

⁴⁷ “‘Āzām-i kāravān’hā-yi rāhīyān-i nūr āz barnāmih’hā-yi farhangī-i tā’sīr’guzār āst” [Sending (pilgrimages) is an effective cultural program], *Fars News*, Bahman 27, 1389/February 16, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8911270802>.

⁴⁸ Durūdiyān, *Naqd va bar’rasī-i Jang-i Īrān va ‘Irāq, Jild-i 1*.

⁴⁹ “Yāzdah hizār Zanjānī bih manāṭiq-i jangī-i junūb ‘āzām mīshavand” [11,000 people from Zanjan Province are deployed to southern war areas], *Sepah News*, Isfand 9, 1389/February 28, 2011, <http://www.sepahnews.com/shownews.aspx?ID=3e80964b-c1e5-48e8-b388-102e81e6381e>. Mehdi Tahirkhani, IRGC commander in Qazvin, similarly described the pilgrimages as an important way to guard the memory of the martyrs and legacy of the Holy Defense. See “Āmrīkā va Isrā’īl bāzandih-i nahzat’hā-yi buzurg-kashvar’hā-yi miṭṭaqah hastand.”

⁵⁰ “Farmān-i Imām Khumaynī ‘āmil-i ḥifẓ-i jazīrih-i Majnūn dar ‘Amaliyāt-i Khaybar būd” [Imam Khomeini’s command was a factor in preserving Majnun Island during the Khaybar Operations], *Fars News*, Isfand 14, 1389/March 5, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8912140917>.

⁵¹ “Gharbī’ha fikr fat’h-i Khurramshahr rā ham nimīkardand.”

country under the Supreme Leader contributed to Iran's success in the war. During a ceremony held in September 2011 to commemorate Sacred Defense Week, Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces and former Basij commander Maj. Gen. Hassan Firouzabadi "pointed to the victories achieved by the Iranian forces during the eight-year Iraqi imposed war on Iran in the 1980s, and described obedience to religious leadership as the main cause of such remarkable triumphs."⁵²

The prescription that Iranians must remain united under the Supreme Leader to defend the Islamic Republic highlights the IRGC's tendency to conflate Iran's national security with the security of the regime. This reflects the way that Khomeini loyalists such as the Revolutionary Guards consolidated their power in the first years after the revolution: they discredited and subdued their rivals by accusing them of serving Iran's external enemies. The continuation of this practice has allowed the IRGC to steadily expand its role in Iran's external defense while remaining the guardian of the regime internally.

The head of IRGC public relations described the reason for the continuing connection between national and regime security when he said, "Psychological propaganda by foreigners against the Islamic Republic is not new. It began after the revolution. Our work is continuing the Holy Defense and establishing an exemplary state and pattern in the world of Islam."⁵³ In condemning the new "deviant current" in Iranian politics, which is accused, among other things, of placing too much emphasis on Iranian nationalism, former IRGC commander Rezaee said that "according to Imam Khomeini true nationalists are those Basiji members who liberated Khorramshahr from the Iraqi occupation."⁵⁴

IRGC commanders argue that insufficient adherence to the values of Holy Defense is precisely what allows foreigners and "deviants" to threaten the Islamic Republic's security. After the 2009 elections, current IRGC commander Jafari stated, "Foreign elements were behind the plot to cast doubts about the results of the June 12 presidential election....The fact that Islam and the principles of the Islamic Revolution have been neglected in the years since the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq war was one of the factors that provided opportunities for the enemies."⁵⁵

INDEPENDENT DETERRENCE

Perhaps the most important lesson of the Iraqi invasion was that Iran needed to be able to deter future attacks. During the war, Iran was able to use its superior strength in numbers to its

⁵² "Iran's Top Military Commander Stresses Armed Forces' Obedience to Leader," *Fars News*, September 28, 2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007040369>.

⁵³ "Kārkard'hā-yi vīzhīh-i Sepāh 'illat āšlī-i takhrīb-i īn nihād āst [Special actions of the Sepah are the main cause of the attacks on it]," *Javan News*, Isfand 23, 1389/March 14, 2011, <http://www.javanonline.ir/vdcdns0o9yt0oz6.2a2y.html>.

⁵⁴ "Persian Press Review," *Tehran Times*, June 14, 2011, http://old.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=242426.

⁵⁵ "Foreigners Behind Post-Election Plots: IRGC Commander," *Mehr News*, August 22, 2009, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=irgc%20war%20&NewsID=934060>.

advantage. IRGC commanders describe their forces' size and readiness to confront an invasion as a continuing part of their defensive doctrine. In 2008, IRGC commander Jafari declared to an assembly of Basij forces that they "have guaranteed the success of the Islamic Revolution." He "praised the Basij forces for their sacrifices during the Sacred Defense" and stated that their strength continues to deter Iran's enemies from threatening the country.⁵⁶ During the annual Sacred Defense Week in 2003, another IRGC commander, Ali Shamshiri, said that, in reaction to the recent threats against the Islamic Republic, the theme of the week was highlighting the readiness of the IRGC and the Basij to defend the country.⁵⁷

The war also taught the Revolutionary Guards that strength of numbers and commitment to jihad are not enough for national defense. Many of them were personally affected by Iraq's superior weaponry and chemical weapons capabilities, and recognized their decisive force. Ensuring that Iran possessed a quantity and quality of armaments more equal to that of its enemies thus became a top priority for the IRGC. Possessing such destructive power would prevent most enemies from attacking Iran in the first place, and it would make an attack costly for any state that chose to initiate a conflict.

Revolutionary Guards commanders frequently emphasize how their forces' military might has improved since the war. For example, Ali Fadavi, commander of the IRGC navy, described his fleet's deterrent power: "This force is mighty and capable of reacting to...[the] inspection of Iranian ships...Iran's power has increased indescribably and drastically compared to the (Iran-Iraq) war era...The Americans are quite unfamiliar with the capabilities of the IRGC Naval Forces."⁵⁸

In building their deterrent power, the Revolutionary Guards seem to have learned from their experiences in the war. When Jafari stated in 2008 that Iranian forces would strike U.S. bases in the Gulf if they were used for an attack on Iran, he warned that Iran would defend itself "with all its might and that this might is far greater than its strength at the time of the war against Saddam Hussein's regime." He added, "We realize that there is concern among Muslim countries that host U.S. military bases. However, if the U.S. uses these bases to attack Iran, then, through the

⁵⁶ "IRGC Commander Terms Basij Deterrent Power," *Fars News*, November 26, 2008, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8709061174>.

⁵⁷ "Prevailing Global Situation Demands Readiness to Ward off Threats: Substitute Commander," *Mehr News*, September 30, 2003, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=irgc%20war%20&NewsID=25692>.

⁵⁸ He also stated, "The Americans and their shaky allies would probably not dare to sneer at [our] ships maliciously anywhere in the world waters, anyway....If they would resort to such a silly act in accordance with their illegitimate and illegal resolution, we would in the Persian Gulf and at the Strait of Hormoz react with a very special and very appropriate move, relying on the grace of God, and our might and capabilities that are drastically improved compared to the era of our sacred defense war....The Americans cannot survive without the Persian Gulf and we can exert as much pressure as we might wish to, at any time at this strait." "IRGC Warns to Retaliate against West's Cargo Inspection," *Fars News*, June 24, 2010, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8904030545>.

strength and precision of our missiles, we are capable of targeting only the U.S. military forces that attack us.”⁵⁹ His statement reassuring Iran’s neighbors in the Gulf reflects an awareness that Iran’s actions and policies during the war were viewed as threatening by the leaders of other states in the region.

The war also taught the Guards that they would have to rely on their own capabilities to acquire a deterrent force. On *Fars News*, almost every English-language article that deals with Iran’s missile capabilities notes that Iran launched its arms development program with the goal of reaching self-sufficiency during the “Iraqi imposed war on Iran” to compensate for a U.S. weapons embargo.⁶⁰ The announcement and unveiling of new domestically-developed missiles and the staging of military exercises often coincide with anniversaries of important battles of the war. In 2011, shortly after allegations that Iran and North Korea were exchanging information regarding missile production, defense minister and former commander of the IRGC Quds Force Ahmad Vahidi announced that new Qiam missiles would be delivered to the IRGC Air Force on the upcoming anniversary of the liberation of Khurramshahr. He added that “mass-production of Qiam missiles shows the country’s self-sufficiency in manufacturing all missiles and humiliate[s] those who claimed Iran is cooperating with other countries on the issue [of] (missile know-how).”⁶¹

FAITH AND FIREPOWER

IRGC commanders often emphasize the interconnectedness of the religious and military aspects of Holy Defense. Indeed, during the war the Revolutionary Guards were usually most effective when they combined religious-revolutionary and more traditional elements of warfare. In describing the liberation of Khurramshahr, Vahidi said that the operation was “one of the greatest prides of the Sacred Defense,” and that it enabled “the combatants of Islam” to regain their identity and reclaim their defensive and military power. “When the mobilization Basij and the classical military forces entered the battle fields under the command of the late Imam Khomeini,” Vahidi said, Iran successfully defended the country and liberated Khurramshahr.⁶² Another IRGC commander, Hassan Shahvarpur, also highlighted the combination of factors leading to the liberation when he said, “[T]oday the armed forces are defending the borders with unity and power under the auspices of the supreme leader. . . . Detailed planning, the direction of the imam,

⁵⁹ “Bush Trying to Foment Discord in Mideast: IRGC Commander,” *Mehr News*, January 27, 2008, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=irgc%20war%20&NewsID=628278>.

⁶⁰ “Commander: IRGC Mass-Producing Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles,” *Fars News*, February 7, 2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8911181179>.

⁶¹ “Iran’s Guard Corps Receive Mass-Produced Missiles,” *Iranian Students’ News Agency*, May 22, 2011, <http://www.isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-1772549&Lang=E>; and “IRCG Stages War Games in Tehran,” *Fars News*, May 25, 2009, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8803041448>.

⁶² “Sardār Vahīdī: Āzādī-i Khurramshahr, pīrūzī farhangī va khūdbāvarī-i buzurg barāy-i nezām va mardum būd [Commander Vahidi: The liberation of Khurramshahr was a great cultural and self-affirming victory for the system and the people],” *Islamic Republic News Agency*, Khurdād 3, 1390/May 24, 2011, <http://irna.ir/NewsShow.aspx?NID=30399686>.

and the unity of command were the most important factors in the liberation.”⁶³

A recent statement published by the IRGC demonstrates how the organization currently combines faith and firepower into its conception of Iran’s national security. Released on the occasion of Army Day in the spring of 2011, it read in part, “Today, because of deep religious spirituality and reliance on God, the determination and fortitude of the children of the revolution, the endeavors of the heroic epic of Holy Defense, the achievements in self-sufficiency,...and the increasing capabilities in military science and defense, the army of the Islamic Republic has become the fortress of the revolution and made it impregnable....All Iran’s forces are ready to respond quickly and decisively to any threat or aggressive plot against the holy land of Iran.”⁶⁴

AGGRESSIVE DEFENSE

Another military lesson that the IRGC took from the Imposed War is that Iran must pursue its enemies to ensure their defeat. The Revolutionary Guards assert that the decision to invade Iraq in 1982, after Iraqi forces had been pushed out of Iran, stemmed from the need to rebuke Iraqi aggression, to compel the international community to do the same, and to ensure that Iran would be safe from future attack. One IRGC study emphasizes that the decision to invade was made after the international community rejected Iran’s efforts to gain recognition of Iraq as the aggressor in the conflict.⁶⁵ In March 2011, Major General Safavi took part in a pilgrimage to battle sites in Khuzistan Province and stated that “in the period of Holy Defense we taught future aggressors that if they attack Iran we defend our territory. We entered Iraqi soil in order to attain a just settlement and to teach the Iraqis and future aggressors that if you attack Iran we will... defend our territory [and] we will even pursue you...towards the borders.”⁶⁶

The Revolutionary Guards warn that if Iran’s enemies are foolish enough to invade, they will be easily defeated. As Jafari said in 2005, “We drove the Baathist enemy out of our country within one and a half years....With the experience and skills gained from that war, in the event of any

⁶³ “Nīrū’ hā-yi musallah pāsdār-i marz’ hā hastand [The armed forces are guard(s) of the borders],” *Fars News*, Khurdād 3, 1390/May 24, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9003030720>.

⁶⁴ Army Day, celebrated annually on the Iranian date 29 Farvardin, commemorates the transformation of the Iranian military from the armed forces of the Shah to the armed forces of the Islamic Republic. “Bayānīyih-i Sipāh-i Pāsdārān bih munāsabat-i 29 Farvardīn: Ārtish ḥisn-i ḥasīn-i inqilāb va bāzū –yi mustahkam-i mellat [Statement of the Guards Corps on the Occasion of (Army Day) April 17: The army is the impregnable fortress of the revolution and the strong arm of the nation],” *Fars News*, Farvardin 28, 1390/April 17, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9001280173>.

⁶⁵ Ardīstānī, *Tajzīyah va tahlīl-i Jang-i Īrān va ‘Irāq*, Jild-i 3, pp. 11–12; Muḥammad Durūdiyān, *Sayrī dar Jang-i Īrān va ‘Irāq*, Jild-i 2: *Khurramshahr tā Fāv* [Survey of the Iran-Iraq War, Vol. 2: Khurramshahr to Fav] (Tehran: Markaz-i Muṭāla‘āt va Taḥqīqāt-i Jang, 1378/1999–2000), p. 1.

⁶⁶ “Sarlashkar Šafavī: Dushman rā dar šurat-i ḥamlīh, khārij āz sarzamīn-i khūd mān, ta’qīb, tanbīyih va munhadim mīkunīm” [Major General Safavi: In the case of enemy attack, we pursue to our borders, punish, and destroy], *Fars News*, Isfand 10, 1390/March 11, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8912200233>.

invasion, the invaders will be defeated in less than one and a half months.”⁶⁷ As described by *Fars News*, an IRGC statement released on the anniversary of the Iraqi invasion warned the West that the Islamic Republic would stand up to any aggression. It said that the brave Iranian soldiers made great sacrifices during the Imposed War and put an end to the myth of the invincibility of the arrogant powers, especially the United States. It also warned that, now that Iran has learned from its experiences in the war, its armed forces are even better prepared to deal with possible aggression.⁶⁸

EXPORT THE CULTURE OF HOLY DEFENSE

IRGC commanders also invoke the Holy Defense as an example for other nations to follow. They advocate the cultural export of the values of Holy Defense in the hope that those outside Iran will understand the Iranian experience in the Iran-Iraq War. One IRGC commander claimed that the Holy Defense does not belong to one people or one generation, and therefore books about the war must be written to suit various audiences.⁶⁹ Another suggested that books on the war should be translated into different languages in order to expose more countries to the literature. “The Holy Defense does not occupy its rightful place in the public opinion of other countries,” he said.⁷⁰

In 2008, Jafari praised the Basij forces for their sacrifices during the Sacred Defense, saying that “the resistance and perseverance which the Basij has taught the oppressed nations of the world has resulted in repeated defeats of the West.”⁷¹ In 2009, Major General Safavi described how the Holy Defense has been the model of resistance in the region. He said, “The strength of Iranian fighters during [the]...Iran-Iraq war has turned into an example for all freedom seekers, independence loving people and liberation movements in the world of Islam.”⁷²

⁶⁷ “Iran Capable of Fighting Endless Ground War: IRGC Official,” *Mehr News*, January 26, 2005, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=irgc%20war%20&NewsID=152516>.

⁶⁸ It also pointed to the role of the arrogant powers during the Iraqi imposed war and blasted them for equipping the former Iraqi dictator with advanced weapons and huge financial and intelligence support. “IRGC Warns West against Invasion of Iran,” *Fars News*, September 20, 2007, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8606290274>.

⁶⁹ “Rāvī-i kitāb ‘Mahtāb-i Khīn’ tā’kīd kard: Luzūm-i tadvīn-i āsār-i difā’-i muqaddas bar āsās-i niyāz-i mukhāṭabān” [The book “Moonlight of Khin” emphasized: Necessity of preparing Holy Defense works based on the needs of the audience], *Sepah News*, Isfand 14, 1389 [March 5, 2011], <http://www.sepahnews.com/shownews.aspx?ID=425bb47d-b2e9-49c8-a398-e0b67b4c9563>.

⁷⁰ “Āsār-i difā’-i muqaddas bāyad bih zabān’hā-yi dīgar tarjumih shavad” [Holy Defense works must be translated into other languages], *Sepah News*, Isfand 14, 1389/March 5, 2011, <http://www.sepahnews.com/shownews.aspx?ID=a0d08a6e-f347-441c-a413-d8c78c0bfd13>.

⁷¹ “Basij Makes Iran’s Enemies Quake in Their Boots,” *Mehr News*, November 25, 2008, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=irgc%20war%20&NewsID=790090>.

⁷² He spoke to a gathering of Basij, IRGC, and police forces in the southern Province of Bushehr. “Imposed War Brought Sustainable Security to Iran: Ex-IRGC Chief,” *Mehr News*, September 26, 2009, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=irgc%20war%20&NewsID=953299>.

The war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006 was an important example of the Holy Defense spreading to other countries. Maj. Gen. Qassem Suleimani, head of the IRGC Quds Force, declared, “The victory of Lebanese Hezbollah...was the fruit of the blood spilled in the Holy Defense. Without the Islamic revolution the victory of Hezbollah is unimaginable....Every event of the war...has been gradually transmitted to other states.”⁷³

IRGC commanders also view the events of the Arab Spring as a product of the Holy Defense. Captain Salami, deputy IRGC commander, stated, “The world saw that Islamic Iran could end American political and economic domination and saw it emerge victorious and powerful after eight years of war against world dominance. This historical pattern has provided a new path for self-determination.”⁷⁴

IRGC commander Gholam Ali Rashid stated in February 2011, “The victory of the Islamic Revolution as well as the success and victory of the Iranian nation during the 8 years of the Holy Defense (i.e. the Iraqi imposed war against Iran from 1980 to 1988 which was waged with the assistance of the US and other western states) made the US and the West face fundamental challenges. And now on the scene of the current developments (in the region) today they will once again be obliged to bow before Islam’s power.”⁷⁵ In ceremonies celebrating the Holy Defense at a Tehran university, Major General Safavi stated that “the new century has derived from and is influenced by the glorious revolution, the Islamic Revolution of the great nation of Iran; the repeated defeats of America and the Zionists in the political, economic, security and cultural arena have followed and today we see the culture of martyrdom-seeking that we witnessed during the eight years of Holy Defense spreading in the world of Islam.”⁷⁶

⁷³ “Pīrūzī-i Hizbāllah-i Lubnān dar jang-i 33 rūzih samarih-i khūn’hā-yi rīkhtih shudih dar 8 sāl-i difā’-i muqaddas būd” [The victory of Lebanese Hizbollah in the 33-day war was the fruit of the blood spilled in the eight years of Holy Defense], *Rasa News*, Khurdād 2, 1390/May 23, 2011, <http://www.rasanews.ir/Nsite/FullStory/?Id=105241>.

⁷⁴ “Sardār Salāmī: Miṣr langar’gāh-i ḥayāt-i aiyāsī-i rizhīm-i Siḥyūnistī āst” [Captain Salami: Egypt is the political life harbor of the Zionist regime], *Sepah News*, Bahman 12, 1389/February 1, 2011, <http://www.sepahnews.com/shownews.aspx?ID=97ff6e02-64de-4324-bca2-850f1e04dcc0>.

⁷⁵ “Senior Commander: Egyptian, Tunisian Uprisings Affected by Iran’s Revolution,” *Fars News*, February 9, 2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8911201665>.

⁷⁶ “Sarlashkar Šafavī: Millat’hā barāy-i ḥākīm shudan bih sarnavisht-i millī-i khūd, bāyad hazīnih’hā-yi sangīn bipardāzand” [Major General Safavi: Nations must pay heavy costs in order to control their own national destiny], *Sepah News*, Bahman 20, 1389/February 9, 2011, <http://www.sepahnews.com/shownews.aspx?ID=97a00177-6fcb-4cf8-842d-acb9806d13a2>.

CONCLUSION

Connecting the Holy Defense to the idea of self-determination reflects a central tenet of the IRGC's security narrative: that Iran is struggling to advance its own formula for national security and independent leadership in the region. The Revolutionary Guards frame their enmity toward the West as a response to the efforts of Western powers to prevent the Islamic Republic from reaching the level of power and independence that it strives for. Given the importance of the Iran-Iraq War and the culture of Holy Defense for the IRGC, it is critical that those concerned with the organization and with Iranian policymaking understand how the war and its legacy shape Iranian strategic thinking today.

Although the Revolutionary Guards may exaggerate the threats against the Islamic Republic, they see the Iraqi invasion and the actions of Western powers as proof that the threats are real. Further, keeping the Holy Defense alive allows the Guards to shape the historical and contemporary significance of the war and to secure their position as Iran's holy defenders. The Revolutionary Guards are therefore ensuring that the Holy Defense continues, and not just in memoirs and memories, but as a broad policy for the security of the Islamic Republic.

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM

The International Security Program addresses the most important challenges to U.S. national security and international security in the quarter-century ahead. As the first issue of the journal *International Security* stated in 1976, “We define international security broadly to include the full array of factors that have a direct bearing on the structure of the international system and the sovereignty of its members, with particular emphasis on the use, threat, and control of force.”

Program researchers analyze security issues rigorously, draw prescriptive conclusions, and communicate their recommendations directly to makers of public policy and shapers of public opinion. The program also seeks to advance scholarship in security studies by contributing to significant academic debates through its own research activities and by publishing the leading journal in the field, *International Security*. Each year ISP develops and trains new talent in security studies by hosting a dozen pre- and postdoctoral research fellows. The program also presents its research in the BCSIA Studies in International Security book series.

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

The basic mission of *International Security* is to publish peer-reviewed articles on defense and foreign affairs that combine policy relevance with scholarly analysis and research. The journal seeks to bridge the gap between contemporary security policy issues and academic research on international security studies. We define the field of international security studies broadly, to include nonmilitary as well as military threats to the security of states. Compared to some other journals, we also interpret policy relevance broadly to include many articles that bear on general theoretical questions—such as the causes of alliances or the role of international institutions—as well as historical topics, ranging from the origins of the First World War to U.S. nuclear strategy in the 1950s. As the editors of the journal wrote in its first issue, our intended audience includes the “scholars, scientists, industrialists, military and government officials, and members of the public who bear a continuing concern” for the problems of international security.

BELFER CENTER STUDIES IN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

In 1991, ISP created a new book series, the Belfer Center Studies in International Security, to provide an outlet for policy-oriented research and analysis in the field of international security. The first volume in the series, *Soviet Nuclear Fission: Control of the Nuclear Arsenal in a Disintegrating Soviet Union*, attracted considerable attention and contributed directly to the passage of the original legislation (known as the Nunn-Lugar Act) authorizing the expenditure of U.S. funds to reduce the nuclear dangers in the former Soviet Union. Since that auspicious beginning, further titles have covered a diverse array of topics, including nuclear, biological and chemical weapons; other aspects of the nuclear dangers emanating from the former Soviet Union; the CFE treaty in Europe; Russian foreign and security policy; transatlantic relations; security in the Middle East; and the democratic peace. The BCSIA Studies in International Security series is published by the MIT Press.

International Security Program

Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs
Harvard University, Harvard Kennedy School
79 John F. Kennedy Street, box 53
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138
<http://www.belfercenter.org/ISP>