



CHAPTER 1

Exporting the Revolution and Building Hegemony

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini arrived in Tehran on February 1, 1979. His tumultuous welcome was the crowning touch of the revolutionary turmoil which swept away the Pahlavi dynasty from power. The Islamic Republic of Iran that Khomeini established was destined to send shock waves throughout the Middle East and the world. Its subsequent politics have never left the headlines. In the name of exporting the Islamist revolution, Iran used assorted Shiite militias to carve out a sphere of influence known as the Shiite Crescent. These revolutionary foot soldiers engaged in terrorism and other forms of violence to destabilize neighboring countries and strike out against real and perceived enemies of Khomeini's brand of Islamism.

As in other cases of revolution regimes, underpinning the lofty rhetoric of revolutionary export were more pedestrian concerns of regime survival and national interests of Iran as a nation-state. These tangled imperatives could be best understood by analyzing the peculiar duality of Iran.

THE DUALITY OF THE NEW REGIME: IRAN AS A STATE AND AN EXPORTER OF THE REVOLUTION

There was nothing in traditional Shiite theology to indicate an inclination to partake in political activism. In the conventional Shiite jurisprudence, the issues of governance and government have rarely been mentioned. Known as quietism, this tradition stipulated that the leadership of the society rests solely with Imam Mahdi, the 12th Imam believed to be

hidden in the Major Occultation. Until his return to bring justice to the world, Muslims must tolerate the government and the concomitant idolatry and oppression. Because of this stipulation, the religious class, the ulama, remained largely apolitical and never proposed an alternative to the ruling system.

Shiite quietists justify their stance by referring to a hadith of Imam Jaafar al-Sadeq, the sixth Shiite Imam who asserted that raising any flag before the return of Imam Mahdi was idolatrous. According to this hadith, Shiites should avoid imposing their true belief on the government, no matter what its nature is, to give them a chance to live under adversity imposed by the unjust rulers.¹

Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Hossein Borujerdi, the *marja-e taqlid* (the Source of Emulation), who founded the Qom Seminary—the central religious authority in the Shiite world—was a strong advocate of clerical quietism. Borujerdi explained that politics is a highly complex issue, which the ulama were ill-prepared to tackle. For instance, he repeatedly noted that “the Constitutional Revolution in Iran taught me not to get involved in political affairs if I did not have a clear idea of their origins and outcomes.” During the tumultuous period of Mohammad Mosaddegh² rule and the debate about nationalizing Iran’s oil industry, Borujerdi forbade clergy to interfere in political affairs. Because the Grand Ayatollah was universally revered, quietism officially prevailed in Iran until his death in 1961.³

For all his influence, Borujerdi encountered opposition from activist clergy associated with the teaching of Ayatollah Abulqassem Kashani, a left-leaning clergy closely involved with the anti-colonial movement in Iran. Kashani, who opposed, capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism, was only of the clergy to defy Borujerdi to support Mosaddegh. Although he subsequently had a falling-out with the nationalist leader, Kashani has been considered a true leader of the activist camp. Indeed, to demonstrate the synergy between religion and politics, Kashani went on to serve in the Iranian parliament in the 1950s.⁴

¹ *As-Sahifa Al-Kamilah Al-Sajjadiyya*, published by Moasesat AlElmi Al-Matboat, Beirut, pp. 26–27.

² Mosaddegh was Iran’s prime minister from 1951 to 1953 when his government was overthrown by a coup d’état orchestrated by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the United Kingdom’s MI6.

³ Marjaeyat va Syasat: Ayatollah Boroujerdi Political Biography, www.broujerdi.ir/index.php/2016-03-25-16-38-40/2016-03-25-16-40-41/393-2016-03-26-07-11-50.

⁴ Nasrullah Shifteh, Relationship between Mosaddegh and Kashani, Islamic Studies Center, <http://iscq.ir/?part=menu&cinc=menu&cid=308>.

More consequentially, Kashani did not limit his activities to legitimate politics. He joined up with Navab Safavi, a devotee of the Sayyid Qutb, the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood who advocated political violence. Kashani and Safavi believed that the Muslim regimes needed to be “purified,” and it was up to the true believers to get rid of “corrupt” government officials by assassinating them. They founded the first Islamist terrorist group in Iran, the *Fadā’iyān-e Islam* (Fighters of Islam). The *Fadā’iyān-e Islam* was involved in several assassinations and assassination attempts. On December 25, 1955, Safavi and three other members of the group were executed. Ayatollah Borujerdi, who expelled the *Fadā’iyān-e Islam* from Qom in 1950, refused to intervene on his behalf.⁵

Sayyid Ruhollah Mūsavi Khomeini, a rising star in Qom, however, was far more sympathetic to the cause of the *Fadā’iyān*. Although loyal to Borujerdi, the young cleric felt it was imperative for the ulama to get involved in the political realm. Indeed, Khomeini was well acquainted with both Kashani and Safavi who visited him in 1943 and 1944. It was also through Safavi that Khomeini became open to the Muslim Brotherhood idea of Muslim ecumenism. In one of his early writings, *Kashf al Asrar* (Uncovering of Secrets), Khomeini revealed his predilection for engaging in the political arena. The pamphlet was a radical denunciation of the secularization of the society and a thinly veiled attack on the anti-clerical activist and historian Ahmed Kasravi. Khomeini decreed Kasravi to be a *Madbur-al-Dam* (one whose blood needs to be shed by believers). On March 11, 1946, two members of the *Fadā’iyān*, Hoseein and Ali-Mohamed Emami murdered Kasravi and his assistant. Khomeini intervened with the Shah to spare their lives.⁶

If the Kasravi murders were an early indication that Khomeini was willing to embrace political violence, his subsequent history revealed a radical transformation in personality and ideology. Following an unsuccessful effort to derail the Shah’s White Revolution, an attempt to modernize and Westernize Iran, Khomeini was exiled to Turkey in 1964. Less than a year later, in November 1965, Khomeini was allowed to move to Najaf, the center of Shiite learning in Iraq, where many of his students followed him. Despite the shared faith, Khomeini found Najaf less than congenial, often referring to it as a “den of snakes.” What bothered Khomeini the most was

⁵ Con Cochlin, *Khomeini’s Ghost*, HarperCollins, e-edition, p. 106.

⁶ Amir Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah*, 1985, 98, 102; Con Cochlin, *The Ghost of Khomeini*, 104.

the fact that senior Iraqi Shiite leaders were quietists who frowned on his activism and especially his evolving notion of a theocratic state. Instead, he surrounded himself with a handful of like-minded activist clerics such as Ayatollah Mohammed Bakr al Sadr, the founder of the Dawa Party, and Musa Sader who became part of the so-called Najaf circle. Khomeini's former students in Qom who attended classes in Najaf noted the change in his demeanor: "In Qom he wanted to be a religious leader; in Najaf he wanted to be a political leader" in the words of one of them.⁷

Khomeini first articulated his political vision in a series of lectures in Najaf, "The Islamic State," which appeared in a 1970 book published in Beirut. In a radical departure of historical Islamic practices, Khomeini used post-Occultation theology to postulate that a proper Islamic order needed to be based on a principle of *velayat-e faqih*, the rule of a capable jurist. The government of the *faqih* was essentially a form of guardianship awaiting the arrival of the truth ruler, the Hidden Imam. While the theocratic feature captured much of the popular attention, a deeper analysis of Khomeini's teaching revealed that it amounted to a radical revision of Shiism, known as neo-Shiism or Khomeinism.

It is not entirely clear how many of participants in the anti-Shah revolution realized that the rule of the monarchy would be replaced by an all-encompassing neo-Shiite philosophy. However, shortly after the arrival of Khomeini, decisive steps were made to turn the *velayat-e faqih* theory into practice.⁸

Although Khomeini received a tumultuous welcome, his top advisers, Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, realized that the democratic fervor which toppled the Shah needed to be acknowledged. To satisfy the democratic impulse without undermining too much of the rule of the *faqih*, the Khomeinists created a complex system of representation. The Majlis (parliament) members and the president were elected by popular vote, albeit from a list of names approved by the

⁷Con Coughlin, *Khomeini's Ghost: The Iranian Revolution and the Rise of Militant Islam*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2014, pp. 151–154.

⁸Ruhollah Khomeini, *Velayat-e faqih*, The institute for compilation and publication of the works of Imam Khomeini, 2005.

Council of Guardians. The Council was also in charge of making sure that the Majlis legislation was compatible with the Koran. The Constitution of November 1979, which codified this peculiar “theocratic democracy,” stipulated that an 86-member body known as the Council of Experts would choose the *faqih*, elevated to the position of a Supreme Leader.

Even with the added constraints of Islamist theocracy, Iran could have passed as a conventional nation-state. As in other countries, the Constitution provided for a hierarchical power structure in which a higher level indicates a more significant measure of power and control over the lower levels and the chain of command extends from top to bottom. According to the Constitution, the executive branch—that is, the president—the government, the state bureaucracy, and the security forces were in charge of the political and economic system. The Majlis and the duly elected officials were called upon to uphold the national interest of the state within the limits of international law and partake in the community of nations. Since the international community operated within the framework of the Treaty of Westphalia which elevated the principle of the sovereign state, the Islamic Republic was expected to refrain from interfering in the affairs of other sovereign nations.

However, Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers were not content with creating an Islamic Republic in Iran alone. *Velayat-e faqih* asserted that the mandate of the religious ruler extends beyond Iran to include the entire *Ummah*, the universe of Muslim countries. Indeed, according to Khomeini, the nation-state was a Western construct, and part of the imperial-colonial design considered heresy (*kufir*) in Islam. Liberating the *mustazafeen* thus required propagating Islam (*tabligh-e islam*) and exporting the revolution (*sudur engilab*). For instance, on January 14, 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini stated: “We are at war against the infidels..., I ask all Islamic nations, all Muslims, to join the holy war. There are many enemies to be killed or destroyed. Jihad must triumph.” In a New Year message on March 21, 1980, he announced that “we must strive to export our revolution throughout the world and must abandon all ideas of not doing so.”⁹

Khomeini was hardly alone in espousing revolutionary export. If anything, Grand Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, a one-time heir to Khomeini,

⁹Yossef Bodansky, *Target America: Terrorism in the U. S. Today*, S.P.I. Books, 1993, 167; Richard J. Leitner and Peter M. Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings: The Lost Reports of the Congressional Task Force*, p. 193; Shmuel Bar, *Iranian Terrorist Policy and Export of Revolution*, Institute for Policy and Strategy, Working Paper, 2009.

emerged as the most enthusiastic booster of a global Islamist revolution. In his words, exporting the revolution meant “supporting the oppressed [Muslim] nations.” Montazeri noted that the Prophet said “a person who spent one night while he does not care about the affairs of the Muslims, is not a Muslim, and a person who has heard an oppressed voice which calls for help from Muslims, but he does not answer to him, he is not a Muslim.” On another occasion, he stated that under Islamic ethics, it was the responsibility of Muslims to help each other and that this help should extend to the realm of foreign affairs.¹⁰

While highly enthusiastic, Khomeini and his fellow exporters faced considerable opposition from the government of the moderate politician Mehdi Bazargan. Even some stalwarts of the Islamic Republican Party (IRP), such as Ayatollah Mohamed Beheshti and Ali Akbar Rafsanjani who represented the landowning clergy and the merchant class, had little appetite for an immediate revolutionary push. Realizing early on that this kind of foreign policy adventurism would hurt the national interest of Iran, they tried to tamper the “Trotskyites.” With neither side holding the upper hand, the bitter debate about “the logic of the state versus the logic of the revolution” had underlaid the functioning of the regime and would periodically break public. In what was the most conspicuous display of this struggle, the hard-liners were forced to agree on the nuclear negotiations leading to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). A study of the nuclear project revealed that the international sanctions created a profound crisis of legitimacy and persuaded the embattled Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to side with the moderates.¹¹

However, the lesson that foreign policy adventurism could bring punishing costs was still in the future. In the meanwhile, even those worried about the potential damage stemming from “Trotskyite” impulse with Khomeini agreed that to safeguard the revolution, a set of dedicated institutions outside of the purview of the state needed to be created.

On April 22, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini announced the foundation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), known popularly as the Revolutionary Guards. Ostensibly, the IRGC was limited to domestic

¹⁰ Hossein Ali Montazeri, *Islam Dine Fetrat*, Nashr-e Sayeh, 2009, p. 400; Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards*, Oxford University Press, 2016, loc. 2435.

¹¹ Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, *Iran, Israel, and the United States: The Politics of Counter-Proliferation Intelligence*, NY: Lexington Books, 2017.

operations, but it was quite clear that spreading the revolution was also on the agenda. As Montazeri put it in a talk to IRGC commanders, “You Guardian brothers, should protect Islam and the Islamic Revolution, and with your efforts, our Islamic revolution will be exported to other countries.”¹² He added that “We want people of the region, affected by the essence of our revolution, to wake up and start their revolutionary movement.” In due time, the IRGC described its mission in transnational terms: “The Islamic Revolution does not have any borders... The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corpse does not have the word ‘Iran’ in its title. This means that it seeks to defend the Islamic Revolution and its achievements without regard to particular borders.” As one observer put it, the Guards declaration was nothing short of “an assault on the Westphalian system.”¹³

Rhetoric aside, the IRGC was given considerable independent resources to carry out its mission. The organization could count on a large number of foundation (*bonyads*) and other “charitable” institutions such as the *Mustazafeen Foundation*, *Astan-e Qods-e Razawi Foundation*, Martyr’s (*Shahid*) *Foundation*, *Imam Khomeini Emdad Committee*, *Setad-e Ejray-e Farman-e Imam*, known as *Setad* (the Headquarter for Executing the Order of the Imam), among others. In due course, the Guards would create a vast economic empire which made them largely independent from the state, let alone accountable to it. As would be discussed in later chapters, they used some of their assets such as the *Khatam al Anbia* Construction Company to build terror infrastructure in Lebanon and Sudan.¹⁴

This separate parastatal structure posed a considerable challenge to the statist part of the regime. Theoretically, the Supreme Leader was tasked with settling the debates between the state and the parastatal, but in practice the process was cumbersome and opaque, involving endless negotiations, bargaining, strong-arming, and intimidation. Due to absence of a clear hierarchical delineation of power, the complex negotiating political order made tracking decision-making difficult, a feature which observers have often complained about. As one of them noted, “decision making remained secret ... in a complex web of institutions and circles, constantly in flux.” Another likened the “bitter and complex infighting” to a

¹²Hossein Ali Montazeri, *The Memoir*, Ketab Corp, 2001, p. 565.

¹³Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising, Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East*, Lanham, MD. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, loc. 158; Montazeri, *The Memoir*, p. 565.

¹⁴Iran: *The Rise of the Revolutionary Guards’ Financial Empire*, *National Revolutionary Council of Iran*, National Revolutionary Council of Iran, 2017, loc. 427–438.

“kaleidoscope ... [for] as soon as one pattern formed, it was quickly shaken apart, only to reform in a different pattern.” Another lamented that “Iran’s lines of power and authority are almost impossible to follow. They seem to change between morning and night.”¹⁵ Whatever configuration *de jour* had emerged, the unresolved tension between the interest of the state and the interest of the revolution was always in the background. As Henry Kissinger famously quipped, “Iran must decide whether it is a nation or a cause.”¹⁶

Much as the international community hoped that Iran would revert to a traditional nation-state, the “Trotskyites” developed a powerful narrative against the West.

THE ENEMIES OF ISLAM: THE GREAT SATAN AND THE LITTLE SATAN

For Khomeini and Montazeri, and the cohort which came of age during the nationalist upheaval in Iran, the West was a primary enemy. In the early twentieth century, it was the British Empire that epitomized in their eyes the enemy that was aggressive and rapacious with imperialism and colonialism. It was also the source of collective humiliation and shame that, according to one historian, was growing since Napoleon smashed his way into Egypt in 1798. Together with the British, the colonial project robbed Islam of its dignity.¹⁷

By the early fifties, however, the United States had replaced Great Britain as the arch-enemy of Iranian nationalist clergy like Ayatollah Kashani. Khomeini had his reasons to oppose the United States which, in his view, pushed the Shah into a process of modernization embodied in the White Revolution. Anti-American sentiments were rife in the “Najaf circle,” which exposed Khomeini to the writings of Ali Shariati, a leading sociologist and philosopher who proposed a synthesis of socialism and Islam. Shariati, in turn, was influenced by the anti-Western crusader Jalal al Ahmad who warned his countrymen about the danger of *gharbzadegi*, Westoxification, his term for Westernization.

¹⁵Ofira Seliktar, *Navigating Iran: From Carter to Obama*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 29.

¹⁶Quoted in Sean Durnes, “Forty Years of Misreading Iran.” *Washington Examiner*, February 11, 2019.

¹⁷Ed Husain, *The House of Islam, A Global History*, 2018, 5.

Khomeini's speeches and writings were rife with anti-American sentiments. Typically, he would declare that "the biggest betrayal of America to our nation is imposing Pahlavi regime on us and supporting it unconditionally and this is only a part of America's oppressing our nation." He would add that "America is the number one enemy of Islam and our nation because it is supporting the Shah. America wants to humiliate the dignity of mankind. It is the responsibility of all Muslims to stand up against and eliminate America; otherwise, the world will remain corrupted as far as America is alive." Montazeri was in total agreement, writing in an open letter: "It is the responsibility of all Muslims to stand up against America and Israel. America wants to destroy Islamic countries by any possible means. People should not forget that America is the number one enemy of Islam."¹⁸

Seizing power only increased Khomeini's motivation to challenge the United States. To sacralize the struggle, Khomeini and numerous regime representatives had begun referring to the United States as the Great Satan. Chants of "death to America" were a routine part of every rally, whipping up a public frenzy and motivating vigilantes who thrived in the chaotic first year of the revolution. On November 4, 1979, one such group, Students Following the Line of Imam (SFLI), attacked the American embassy in Tehran and took the embassy staff hostage. Despite efforts by the Bazargan government to free the diplomats, they were held in captivity for 400 days. The unprecedented breach of international protocol cemented the regime's status as a revolutionary crusader and an uncompromising foe of the Great Satan.

While tracing the logic of the anti-American animus was easy, the origin of the hostility to Israel, the "Little Satan," was not clear. There was nothing in the traditional Shiite tradition to indicate an even passing interest in the subject of Jerusalem, the Palestinians, or the Jews. Since the return of the Mahdi was not conditioned on controlling any particular of real estate, Muslim holy places were only marginal to the Shiite eschatology. Mecca and Medina were worshiped sacred space where the revelation and the writing of the Koran took place but had no intrinsic value in the process of salvation through the coming of the Mahdi. To the extent that the clergy referred to the issue of Israel, the topic was political and not theological. For instance, in 1933, the Iraqi Ayatollah Sheikh Mohammad Hossein Kashful-gheta, apparently influenced by the tension between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, issued a fatwa urging Muslims to fight against Jews.

¹⁸ *Kayhan* Newspaper, November 2, 1979.

When the Shah recognized the State of Israel, Seyyed Javad Hosseini, an influenced cleric in Qom, attempted to mobilize his cohorts against the move. Ayatollah Borujerdi, however, banned him from public speaking.¹⁹

The lack of historical precedent did not bother Ayatollah Khomeini who launched a full-throated attack on the Jews while in exile in Najaf. In *Velayat-e faqih*, Khomeini quoted a passage from the Koran to claim that “from the very beginning Islam was afflicted by the Jews. They established anti-Islamic propaganda and engaged in various plots against the Muslims.” Khomeini described the Jews as sinful and as being constantly reprimanded by God for their wickedness. In his view, Jews plotted against Muslims more recently as well, seeking to undermine the most important feature of Islam to facilitate the imperialist penetration of the Muslim countries. As Khomeini put it, “the Jews may God curse them are opposed to the very foundations of Islam and wish to establish Jewish domination throughout the Islamic world. They meddle with the text of the Koran and published false translations that distort its meaning to slander Islam.” Echoing Shariati and Al-e Ahmad, Khomeini describes the Jews as fifth columnists in the Islamic world and as subversive agents of the West who attempts to undermine Islam. Most specifically, he argued that the Shah was a “Jew in disguise” who was subservient to Israel and used to destroy Islam in Iran.²⁰

Harsh as these statements were, they could be viewed as part of a classic anti-Semitic repertoire popularized by Al-e Ahmad and Shariati, an opinion espoused by the extensive literature on the regime’s anti-Semitism. However, to the surprise of many, Khomeini’s real radical innovation pertained to the place of Jerusalem and Palestine in the Shiite theology. In 1979, Khomeini declared that the liberation of Jerusalem the central component of Iran’s Islamic ideology. Following the 1979 revolution, Khomeini declared Shiite Islam to be the new liberator of Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Zionist enemy, or Little Satan. Khomeini argued that the Islamic Revolution in Iran was a prelude to the liberation of Jerusalem and the revolution would not be completed until Jerusalem was back in Muslim hands. He defined the conflict with Israel as the struggle between good and evil, adding that it was the religious obligation of all

¹⁹ Montazeri, the Memoir, pp. 145–147.

²⁰ Ruhollah Khomeini, *Velayat-e Faqih*; Hawzah, *Zionism Waist Broke in Iran*, Hawzah.net, <https://hawzah.net/fa/Magazine/View/5737/6768/80895>; Katajun Amirpur, *Iran’s Policy Toward Jewish Iranians and the State of Israel*, *Die Welt des Islam*, 52 (2012), 370–399.

Muslims to resist the profane Jewish entity. In other words, the liberation of Jerusalem was not considered to a Palestinian responsibility alone, but an undertaking of the entire Muslim world led by Tehran.²¹

Scholars who analyzed Khomeini's narrative pointed out that elements of it were adopted from the teachings of Qutab who considered the secular Muslim leaders to be "crypto-Jews" bent on destroying Islam from within. Indeed, Ayatollah Khomeini often charged the Shah of being a "crypto-Jew." However, others noted that the Islamic Republic of Iran espoused "the most radical anti-Israeli or anti-Zionist position in the Muslim Middle East." In this view, the regime practiced "redemptive anti-Semitism," a highly virulent form of anti-Semitism which considered the physical annihilation of Israel to be the highest callings. There is little doubt that redemptive anti-Semitism was an integral part of neo-Shiism. Still, the obsessive focus on Jerusalem might have had a realpolitik purpose as well. Since the Saudi Kingdom, the main rival of Khomeinism, was the custodian of Mecca and Medina, Khomeini tried to even the playing field by declaring the Muslim shrines of Jerusalem to be of equal value and essentially appointing Iran as its custodian.²²

ERECTING THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR REVOLUTIONARY EXPORT: ASYMMETRICAL WARFARE BY PROXIES

Although Khomeini declared America to be a "fake power" and boasted that "our nation will defeat this fake power," the new regime realized that Iran could not win a conventional war because of the huge disparity in power. Brigadier General S.K. Malik, an Islamist who served on the Pakistani General Staff, offered a solution to the quandary of power imbalance in his popular book, the *Koranic Concept of War*. Malik argued that unlike Western military strategy, Islamic warfare was rooted in jihad, the holy war which was, by definition, asymmetrical. He added that jihad allowed for terror operations, including suicide attacks on civilians. Malik explained that terror operations create fear and panic among the target population, lowering its morale and eroding its staying power in a conflict.

²¹ A Quick Look at the History of Struggle Against Zionism by Shiite Ulama, <http://revolution.pchi.ir/show.php?page=contents&id=4928>.

²² Meir Litwak, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Holocaust: Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism," *Journal of Israeli History*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2006; Ben Cohen, "Global anti-Semitism Now Has a Leader," *The Tower*, September 2015.

As for Muslim civilians, Malik postulated they were bound by the Koran to sacrifice their life for the jihad. To the individual volunteer, the title of *mujahid* (holy warrior) gave meaning in life and bestowed greatness after death. Not incidentally, this type of redemptive sacrifice was the only way to avenge the Western-inflicted *Karama*, a notion that both the Shiite and the Sunni jihadis have shared. To them, jihadi terror was “holy terror,” to be used in the conflict between good and evil. Analysts subsequently confirmed Malik’s assumption. As one of them put it, “terrorism—use of violence by a non-state actor primarily against noncombatants,” creates a political and psychological reaction “which is out of proportion to the actual destruction it inflicts.”²³

While neither Khomeini nor Montazeri was a strategist, they could rely on a cadre of professional revolutionaries and guerrilla fighters led by Mustafa Chamran. A physicist who lived in the United States, in 1965, Chamran created the Red Shiism organization to train Shiite militants. Chamran propagated his ideas during his travels to Egypt and Cuba, eventually moving to Lebanon in 1971, where the Palestinians put him in touch with an international terror network. In 1972, George Habash, the head of the Popular Front of Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), organized a conference in Baddawi, a Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The Baddawi summit forged the International Center for Resistance of Imperialism, Zionism, Racism, Reaction, and Fascism, a loose alliance of Middle East terror groups which Chamran had joined. He established close links with Yasser Arafat who offered him and other Iranian militants, including the sons of Khomeini and Montazeri, to train with the elite unit, Fatah Force 17.²⁴

In 1979, these revolutionary cadres returned to Iran where they played a leading role in the Revolutionary Guards and *Sazman-e Enghelabi-e*

²³S.K. Malik, *The Quranic Concept of War*. Lahore, Reprint in India: Adam Publishers and Distributors, 1979; Ed Husain, *The House of Islam, A Global History*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018, 5; Daniel E. Price, *Sacred Terror: How Faith Becomes Lethal*, Praeger, 2012, 65, 183; Ronen Bergman, *the 30 Year Old War: The Secret Struggle*, 378; Nance, Malcolm, *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe*, Skyhorse Publishing, 2016, p. 12.

²⁴MNA, The story of the most powerful Lebanese Student of Shahid Chamran, Mashregh News Agency, June 23, 2014, <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/320827/>; ماجرای قوی‌ترین شاگرد لبنانی شهید چمران; ISNA, Martyr Chamran According to Adel Aoun, Iranian Students News Agency, June 21, 2015, <https://www.isna.ir/news/94033117479/>; شهید چمران به سروایت عادل-عون.

Todehay-e Jomhory-e Islami-e Iran (SATJA). Mohammed Montazeri, son of Ayatollah Montazeri, was in charge of SATJA, but after his death in 1981, Mehdi Hashemi, his close associate, took over the group, renaming it Office for Liberation Movement (OLM). In 1984, OLM joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ahmed Vahidi, the head of the intelligence department of the Guards, co-directed the foreign operations group SATJA and OLM, until in 1989 when he was appointed to head the newly created Quds Force (QF).

Even before the revolutionary project was formally institutionalized within the Quds Force, the IRGC launched a multipronged program to carry out Khomeini's mandate. At the theoretical level, the Guards invested considerable efforts in developing the asymmetrical warfare doctrine and tactics. Hassan Abbasi, a noted strategist, helmed the Center for Borderless Doctrinal Analysis (*Markaz-e Barresihay-e Doctorinal Amniyat-e Bedone Marz*), also called the Yaghin think tank (*Andishkadeye Yaghin*). In 2005, the IRGC's Imam Hussein University founded the Center for Asymmetrical Warfare. Ali Jafari, a future IRGC chief, served as the first head and, in a testimony to its importance, virtually all top IRGC-QF commanders either graduated or taught there.²⁵

Asymmetrical warfare has been used throughout history, but four innovations gave the Iranians a winning edge. First, the Guards networked with both Shiite and Sunni proxies on a sliding scale principle, according to network theory. Hezbollah and other Shiite militias enjoyed close and intense contacts with the Guard. On the other hand, relations with Sunni groups like Al-Qaeda were undertaken to achieve a narrowly defined goal, and were minimal and sporadic. The resultant network made intelligence work challenging. Terror network experts noted that “diffuse networks and unclear sponsorship” resulted in failure to connect the dots. Parts of the terror web could turn into the “dark network” with an “undetermined amount of missing data.” With regard to Iran—proxy network in particular—“the blending of jihadist groups Shiites and Sunnis is a hard target for intelligence agencies and law enforcement to track and interdict due to the fluid and sometimes short-lived nature of such alliances.”²⁶

²⁵ Hassan Abassi, *Soft Government and Doctrine of Asymmetrical Warfare*, <http://andishkadeh.ir/حکومت-نرم-سو-دکترین-اقدام-نامتقارن-در-جه/>.

²⁶ Ian O. Lesser, et al. *Countering the New Terrorism*, Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1999; James F. Morris and Richard F. Deckro, *SNA Data Difficulties with Dark Network*, “*Behavioral Science of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, vol. 5, 2013 issue 2, 70–93; Dave

Use of proxies gave Iran deniability which “prevented the state actor from being tainted by the actions, allowed it to negotiate in apparent good faith by claiming they are not responsible for the actions of parties who are merely sympathizers or avoid being accused of belligerent actions or war crimes.” In the words of one commentator, these “connections were largely circumstantial, buried in complex, poorly understood networks of operatives, fundamentalist leaders and wealthy Arab donors.”²⁷ Even when linkage was suspected, the covert nature of IRGC’s project enabled the regime to either strongly deny or obfuscate its role. For instance, the Quds Force worked with cultural and philanthropic organizations to conceal its input or send “volunteers” in civilian clothing, acting as advisors, or removed markings from weapons and munitions. Financial contributions were so well concealed, making estimations difficult.²⁸

Second, by adopting suicide bombing as a weapon of choice, IRGC-QF achieved “the best of both worlds: the precision and sophistication of the most complex technology and the reliability and simplicity of delivery.” The Israeli military described this tactic as the “poor person’s smart bomb,” a tribute to the ingenuity of the Guards. Because the Koran forbade suicide, Ayatollah Khomeini had to break new theological grounds on this score as well. Initially, Khomeini praised the collective sacrifice of the teenage boys deployed by the Guards as human waves against the Iraqi military. When one of them, Hossein Fahmideh, threw himself on a tank in what was an act of suicide, the Supreme Leader declared him to be a martyr. Sheikh Fadlallah, the spiritual leader of Hezbollah, used the Fahmideh precedent to issue a fatwa declaring that suicide bombings are equivalent to combat action which could also be perpetrated against enemy civilians. Known also as “offensive jihad” or “martyrdom operations,” this so-called sacred terror became part of Islamist indoctrination disseminated in pamphlets and brochures to battlefield militants.²⁹

Dilegge, Iranian and Hezbollah Hybrid Warfare Activities, *Small Wars Journal Anthology*, 2016, 253.

²⁷ Assaf Moghaddam, *Nexus of Global Jihad Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actor*, New York: Columbia University Press, 73; John Miller, *The Cell: Inside the 9/11 Plot, and Why the FBI and CIA Failed to Stop It*, Simon & Schuster, 2002, 139.

²⁸ Austin Carson, *Secret Wars Covert Conflict in International Politics*, Princeton University Press, 2018.

²⁹ Daniel Helmer, “Hezbollah Employment of Suicide Bombing,” *Military Review*, vol. 86, July–August 2006; Dilegge, Iranian and Hezbollah Hybrid Warfare Activities, p. 287.

Third, the Guards instructed their proxies to embed within the local population whenever the occasion allowed. In the Guards parlance, embedding meant hiding the militants and their assets in private houses and in public spaces such as hospitals, schools, and libraries. As would be discussed in Chaps. 2 and 3, this practice has been most popular in the south of Lebanon and the Gaza Strip.³⁰ Khomeini considered it a duty of Muslim noncombatants to welcome embedding even at the risk of death or injury; international law denounced using civilians as human shields. By violating the laws of war, the Guards and their proxies risked international censure and terror-related sanctions. In 1984, the State Department designated Iran as a leading state sponsor of terrorism. In 1997, Hezbollah was added to the list.³¹

However, the advantages of embedding, especially in densely populated urban, have been considerable. Hassan Abbassi who was well versed in the law of war noted that mingling with civilians would hinder the response of regular armies bound by international conventions. Abbassi described asymmetrical warfare by using an analog from a football game: “Consider a football game, which has two half courts, our courts and theirs. We will play in our half-court based on our own rule, and our rival arranges its players based on its own rule. Then we will play in the rival’s half-court based on our own rule, which is called positive asymmetrical. The court is theirs, but we will set the game rule.” He took particular pride in the Hezbollah war with Israel in 2006: “Hezbollah skillfully used different places including the mixing of military forces with civilians rather than just military bases. And it also stashed military hardware and communication systems devices inside cities so that they could not be identified.”³²

Fourth, lacking nuclear weapons, the regime had used the far-flung terror groups as deterrence against its enemies, notably the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, or even domestic opposition. Officially, the ark of terror organizations was known as the Axis of Resistance. Unofficially,

³⁰ Mohammad Mahdi Shariatmadar, *Lebanese Hezbollah: Strategy, Past, and its Future*, Nashre Ettelaat, 2017.

³¹ USDS, Chapter 3: State Sponsors of Terrorism Overview, Bureau Of Counterterrorism Country Reports on Terrorism U.S. Department of State, 2014, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239410.htm>; USDS, Chapter 6—Terrorist Organizations, Country Reports on Terrorism Office Of The Coordinator For Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, April 30, 2007, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2006/82738.htm>.

³² Hassan Abbassi, What Does Asymmetrical Warfare Mean? https://www.aparat.com/v/PNQ4c/29%_دکتر_عباسی_جنگ_نا_متقارن_28%.

however, the militias played an important role in deterrence. As one observer summarized the unspoken rule of engagement as “either we are safe, or no one is,” meaning that attempts against Iran would trigger a wave of terror in the Middle East and beyond. Interestingly enough, after signing the nuclear agreement in 2015, threats to active proxy terror network had increased, much to the dismay of the Obama administration which hoped to convert Iran into a law-abiding member of the international community. As the following chapters indicate, the regime used terror threats and terror attacks against an array of its enemies.³³

To train militants, the IRGC opened a facility in Manzariah Camp (Shahid Bahonar Camp) in Tehran which Ayatollah Khomeini inaugurated on February 11, 1982. The sprawling facility was a laboratory for asymmetrical warfare tactics, known as “niche means.” Suicide bombings, hijackings of planes, bomb-making, large explosive devices, guerrilla warfare were among the skills taught. Ayatollah Fazlollah Mahdizadeh Mahalati, known as Fazlollah Mahalati, Khomeini’s representatives to the Revolutionary Guard, lectured in the suicide program for specially selected volunteers. The first commander of Manzariah was Abbas Golru, a Guardsman who distinguished himself in 1981. Golru and his successors reached out to experts from North Korea, Syria, and various radical Palestinian groups. Farsi-speaking KGB officers joined the foreign trainers. Between 1981 and 1985, a total of 3000 individuals were trained, making Iran the second-best terrorist state after the Soviet Union, according to some accounts. By the summer of 1996, intelligence sources revealed the existence of 11 camps which graduate some 5000 extremists annually.³⁴

In yet another innovation geared toward exporting the revolution, the IRGC-QF worked very closely with the Foreign Ministry to utilize the Iranian embassies. The idea was the brainchild of Javad Mansouri, the first commander of the IRGC who went on to assume the post of the Deputy Foreign Minister on March 20, 1981. Shortly after, on November 1, Mansouri was placed in charge of “transforming every Iranian embassy

³³ Chahram Chubin, *Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated*, Gulf Research Center, September 2012, p. 4.

³⁴ Richard J. Leitner, Peter M. Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings: The Lost Reports of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare*, Washington, Crossbow Books, 2007, p. 194; Bodansky, *Target America*, 10–11; Tabnak, In Memory of Martyr Fazlollah Mahalati, <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/149217/به-یاد-شهید-فضل-الله-محلانی>; Coughlin, Khomeini’s Ghost, pp. 325–329.

abroad into an intelligence center and a base for exporting the revolution.” Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, a disciple of Ayatollah Khomeini from his Najaf days and a collaborator of Mohammed Montazeri in SATJA days, became a prototype of the ambassador-revolutionary exporter. As would be discussed in Chap. 2, Mohtashamipour, who served as the ambassador in Damascus, was pivotal in establishing Hezbollah.³⁵

Along the military side, “soft measures” such as political activism, propaganda, education about Khomeinism, and other forms of outreach have been developed and lavishly funded. Iranian cultural centers became ubiquities throughout the Middle East as well as the Muslim communities around the world. The Quds Force identified promising “identity entrepreneurs,” who specialized “in articulating and publicizing ethnoreligious grievances.” After a process of “maturation,” these groups were counted upon to foment social protest. In more advanced cases, proxy groups morphed into political parties, a process which the Iranians encouraged and nurtured. These dual-use proxies garnered political legitimacy while offering a cover for terror. Altogether, the combination of tactics fits the characteristics of Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW), which described as a conflict where lines between politics and war, civilians and combatants, are blurred.³⁶

4GW experts explained that the simultaneous use of all available networks “political, economic, social and military” aimed at persuading the enemy decision makers that its “strategic goals were either unachievable or too costly.” Inflicting heavy casualties on the civilian population was one way to prove this point. Another way was to keep the enemy in perpetual violence-laced tension. This so-called strategy of tension was said to cause “psychological exhaustion” among policy makers and rank and file alike, causing a retreat.³⁷

The structure of the book is well suited to analyzing the working of the proxy system. Each chapter covers a project engineered by the Iranian regime acting through the IRGC-QF; it offers a detailed analysis of the way in which the goals of revolution export are melded with the imperative of regime defense and national interests. Chapter 2 covers the

³⁵ Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings*, 193.

³⁶ William S. Lind, “The Changing Face of War. The Fourth Generation,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1989; Matthisen, *The Other Saudis*, 2015, 17.

³⁷ Dilegge, *Iranian and Hezbollah Hybrid Warfare Activities*, 75; Jonathan Spyer, “Iran Response: The Strategy of Tension,” *Jerusalem Post*, June 1, 2018; Michael Griffith, *Islamic State, Rewriting History*, London: Pluto Press, 2016, 179.

Hezbollah in Lebanon, Chap. 3 analyzes Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Israel, Chap. 4 details Iranian manipulation of Al-Qaeda, Chap. 5 summarizes the extensive proxy network in Iraq, Chap. 6 looks at the pivotal role of the Revolutionary Guards and the Shiite Liberation Army in Syria, and Chap. 7 dissects the working of the proxy system in the Gulf.

The concluding chapter looks at the successes and failures of the proxy strategy, with a special emphasis on its performance during the challenging time.

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