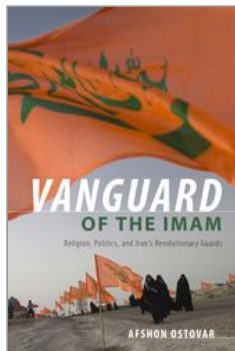


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Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards

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Warriors of Karbala

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Abstract and Keywords

Shiite Islam is central to the IRGC's organizational identity. This chapter examines the organization's approach to identity formation and how it expressed that identity through cultural work. Early on in its career, the IRGC placed emphasis on the production and distribution of its ideas. It published journals, books, and pamphlets, and created artwork such as political posters. Visuality was an important medium for expressions of IRGC identity. Its organizational emblem is the primary visual articulation of the IRGC's self-conception. Posters, photographs, and other artwork were also used by the IRGC to communicate its sense of self, politics, and religious perspectives. The war was the context for the development of IRGC culture and identity in the 1980s. The experiences of war helped forge IRGC identity, the development of which can be seen in the visual imagery produced by the organization in the 1980s.

Keywords: Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, IRGC, Shi'ism, Shiite Islam, martyrdom, religion, visual culture, modern Middle East history, modern Iranian history, Middle East cultural history

I am a Revolutionary Guard. A seeker on the path of the heroic men of Ashura. I have raised my head to shield the sapling revolution. I am the gardener of its cinquefoils and a staff of support for its wayfarers. With no gratitude and no expectations, I am a Guard.¹

—IRGC, *Payam-e Enqelab*

In establishing the IRGC, its founders were attempting to create an ideal Islamic military force. Achieving that, they believed, would require the organization's soldiers to possess the faith-driven fervor of Islam's earliest heroes and an ideological commitment to the revolution. To that end, the IRGC set religious requirements for its members and policed its ranks for ideological and political dissent—leading, for example, to the purge of leftists, Bani-Sadr supporters, and allies of Mehdi Hashemi at different points in the 1980s.² The organization presented itself as Khomeini's vanguard and the most faithful of his adherents.

Constructing an Islamic identity was also the work of imagination. When debating the color of its uniforms, the IRGC's Central Council decided upon plain green—the color of the Prophet.³ The birthday of Imam Husayn became an annual celebration in recognition of the IRGC called "Guard's Day." This not only aligned the organization with its religious tradition, it symbolized the belief that the IRGC was a continuation of Imam Husayn's epic struggle against injustice. By donning the color of the Prophet and marking its establishment on the birthday of Shiism's greatest hero, the IRGC inserted itself into the pantheon of Shiite history as the standard-bearer of a new form of Islamic military. The Guards became, in effect, the new warriors of Karbala.

Seemingly as important as the orthodoxy of its ranks was the manner in which the IRGC conceived of itself and conveyed that conception to its members and the public. Events such as Guard's Day—which presented guardsmen to Iranian authorities in a grand parade of military potential, religious virtue, revolutionary dedication, and an unwavering willingness to die in the path of Khomeini—were part of that effort. The Guards also employed less grandiose methods to help shape self-perception and their public persona. The IRGC produced (p.122) various types of textual and visual materials to communicate its values to rank-and-file members and those outside the organization. Much of the Guards' work reflected the government's broader propaganda and cultural campaigns during the Iran-Iraq war.⁴ Even so, the materials produced by the IRGC played an important role in forging its outward

identity. Through texts and images, the organization articulated understandings of itself, its members, and the Iraq war. These productions—such as publications, photographs, and artwork—are crucial sites of the organization's self-conceptualization during the 1980s.

The Islamic Model Army

From its establishment, the IRGC considered itself to be different from other militaries. Its leaders envisioned an organization that was Islamic in confessional identity and in deed. It was also to be revolutionary, and in certain respects, progressive and modern. The IRGC's leaders were not working with a blank slate in their attempt to engineer an ideal revolutionary Islamic force. Rather, their starting point was in part a reaction to what they perceived to be the pathologies that ran through secular militaries. In contrasting itself against these types of institutions—particularly the Shah's military and Marxist groups like the MKO—the IRGC crafted cornerstones of its organizational culture. Added to this were Islamic values and principles that the IRGC embraced and strove to integrate into their organization's practices.

The IRGC articulated these ideas in a March 1980 essay published in *Payam*, its biweekly news organ.⁵ The IRGC explains that secular militaries have suffered from four major maladies: ignorance, moral corruption, rigid discipline, and the fostering of a low self-view or inferiority complex among the rank-and-file. These characteristics were the primary factors facilitating the oppressive impulses of militaries and the regimes they served. Ignorance of politics and immorality were especially harmful for soldiers, and at the root of the power of "colonialist and exploitative regimes." They directly link the banning of political and Islamic literature in the Iranian military under the Shah as an example of how autocratic regimes cultivate ignorance and immorality in their institutions. "Once a person is completely ignorant," they write, "he can be compelled [to commit] any crime." To the Guards, it was the lay soldier's ignorance that enabled the expansionary, imperial, and abusive policies of past militaries (they give several examples, including the Mongols and Ottomans), and the crimes of colonialist powers in the modern period. They blame centuries of ignorance and corruption in the states and institutions of the Islamic world for having enabled humiliations such as the crusades, the plague of autocratic regimes, conflict between the Shia and Sunnis, and ethnic divisions between Arabs, Persians, and Turks.⁶

(p.123) Beyond those concepts, inequitable relations between commanding officers and subordinates is also highlighted as

problematic. The harsh discipline of traditional militaries and abuse of subordinates by officers is singled out as especially damaging to armed forces. The article states:

In militias and armies such as these individuals do not develop brotherly ties, camaraderie and mutual fondness, but on the basis of bias, the privilege and snobbery of the commanders over the subordinates becomes entrenched [*ostovar bashad*]. It is natural that such relationships will cause hostility and rancor [to develop] among the soldiers.

Not only does such rancor erode the esprit de corps of military units, it causes “senior commanders of armies to become self-indulgent [and in effect] force their subordinates into servitude so that they must blindly obey the upper-ranks and become spineless.” They argue that this dynamic severely weakens military institutions, giving the example of the Persian Sassanid empire, which, despite its military’s manifold advantages in resources and manpower, withered in the face of Arab Muslims whose ranks were unpolluted by institutionalized inequities and held together by belief in God.⁷

Beyond these ill-regarded traits, the article lists the *Islamic* principles the IRGC strives to put into practice. The discussion begins with a Quranic verse:

God has verily bought the souls and possessions of the faithful in exchange for a promise of Paradise. They fight in the cause of God, and kill and are killed. This is a promise incumbent on Him, as in the Torah, so the Gospel and the Quran. And who is more true to his promise than God? So rejoice at the bargain you have made with him; for this will be triumph supreme.⁸

This verse instantly changes the conversation of what it means to be a military and a soldier. With it, the IRGC removes itself from the fold of traditional militaries and places itself within the domain of religion and the “cause of God.” The secular goals of power and conquest are eschewed in favor of the rewards that can only come through service to God. In this case, that is the promise of heaven (*jannah*) and the willingness to “kill and [be] killed” in the path of their lord. As the organization writes, it will embrace “that which was commanded in the [above] verse so that we remember the necessary attributes and characteristics of jihad in the path of God.”

The organization lists eight such attributes. The first of these is penitence (*al-ta'ibun*)—a term that evokes the penitent movement that arose in response to Imam Husayn's martyrdom at Karbala. The IRGC contrasts its understanding (p.124) of this Islamic virtue from the Marxist practice of self-criticism (a practice vigorously adopted by the MKO and other revolutionary groups), and charges that this practice has made these groups dogmatic and "inflexible in the face of [changing] conditions." Islam, however, is "mobile and dynamic" and "Muslims are progressive and also realist." The authors stress that this does not mean that Muslims "change their color" to suit the moment, but rather "they always strive to transform the ruling conditions to benefit the fixed principles of God." They continue, the "revolutionary Muslim and mojahed in the path of truth is always considering his 'God,' aim, and ideological principles," which, the authors stress, can only be done by "implementing" and "safeguarding the principle of penitence."⁹

Beyond penitence, the IRGC lists seven more Islamic principles that its soldiers should embody. The organization lists spiritual devotion (*al-'abidun*), giving praise to God (*al-hamidun*), holding the fast (*al-sa'ihun*), bowing in submission to God (*al-raki'un*), prostrating in adoration to God (*al-sajidun*), propagating virtue and prohibiting vice (*al-amrun b'il-ma'aruf wa al-nahun 'an al-munkir*), and safeguarding Islamic lands (*al-hafizun li-hudud allah*) as the other pillars of the organization. These principles are all described as religious and spiritual acts that contribute to the welfare of one's spiritual condition and political awareness. For example, in describing the quality of giving praise, the organization writes,

The mojahedin of Islam and the warriors in the path of Islam are alone in praising their God. They will never submit in the face of satanic foes, exploiters, despots, materialism, or hypocrisy. Nor will they don the garment of those inclinations. For they are neither greedy nor mercenaries, neither fearful nor spineless slaves, neither ignorant nor pawns.¹⁰

Each principle is similarly contrasted against the practices of secular militaries and packaged as an authentic Islamic element for an effective fighting force. They are the qualities required for the ideal Muslim warrior. In this way, the IRGC envisions its force to be Islamic, political, and spiritually pure.

These Islamic principles combined with the rejection of characteristics of secular militaries to form the organization's founding philosophy. They have had an important impact on the organization and its internal

practices. For example, beyond the establishment of religious requirements for its troops, an egalitarian, fraternal ethos was central to the IRGC's organizational culture. Initially this led the IRGC to reject official ranks for its soldiers and commanders. Although commanders were of de facto higher rank and status than their subordinates, they held no formal ranking, and were often referred to with simple honorifics (p.125) such as "brother" or "guard" (*pasdar*). The organization was later forced to adopt ranks after the war, but its commitment to Islamic fraternity has remained a core feature of the organization's culture and identity.

Power of the Pen

The political and religious values of the IRGC were communicated in its publications. The organization's membership swelled in its early years, increasing from an estimated 10,000 guardsmen by the end of 1979 to 25,000 in mid 1980, 50,000 by the end of 1981, and up to 350,000 by 1986.¹¹ In addition, the IRGC took over command of the Basij popular militia, and was charged with the martial and ideological training of its ranks (which grew to an estimated three million by 1986).¹² The majority of these new guardsmen and basijis differed from their commanders in both experience and ideological sophistication. Though they lacked the years of activism and ideological commitment, new recruits shared a deep-rooted faith in Shia Islam and a zealous commitment to the revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini.¹³ IRGC publications became a tool used by the organization to help build on these commonalities and educate its expanding ranks.

Central to this effort was *Payam-e Enqelab* (*Message of the Revolution*), a biweekly political journal that served as the organization's official newsletter (*organ*).¹⁴ Though it was similar in both form and content to other political journals that emerged after the revolution, *Payam* was unique in that it was primarily aimed at the IRGC's rank-and-file. Like its sister publication, *Omid-e Enqelab* (*Hope of the Revolution*), which was geared toward the Basij, *Payam* used articles, interviews, posters, and other content to express the spiritual, ideological, and political values of the organization. After the Iraqi invasion, the journal focused on the organization's role in the war, offered narratives of important campaigns, and celebrated those killed in action. IRGC editors also reserved space in each issue for international news and coverage on resistance movements throughout the Third and Islamic worlds. *Payam* created a space in which a sense of identity and purpose could be fostered among IRGC members and among interested civilians.

The IRGC also produced various books, booklets, and pamphlets. After the Iraqi invasion, these publications began to focus on the geopolitical context of the war and its deeper connections to Islam and Shiite history. An example is the series *Let's Learn from the Quran*, which began publication in 1981. The first volume of this series, *War and Jihad in the Quran*, coupled Arabic Quranic passages related to the subjects of warfare and jihad with translations and explanations in Persian. The authors argue that the book's publication was in response to (p.126) "the enemies [that] have [waged war] on the Quran and *hadith*." By providing an entryway to the Arabic Quran through Persian translations, the authors claim that guardsmen will be armed with the "fist of the Islam" in their battle with the "infidels of the world" and the "infidel Iraqi Baathists."¹⁵ The Persian translations also suggest the IRGC's awareness of their rank-and-file's general illiteracy of Arabic.

Other publications, such as those produced by the IRGC's Political Office, more directly dealt with the war. An example is *War and Transgression: The Imperialist Front against the Islamic Revolution*, which, with chapters such as "Imperialist France, a Colluder with Saddam?" and "Will America Protect Saddam?" situates the early Iraq war into a larger context of imperialist and Western threats to the Islamic Republic.¹⁶ The Political Office also produced materials aimed at outside audiences, such as short-lived English and Arabic versions of *Payam-e Enqelab*, which instead of being translations of the journal's Persian edition were part of the Islamic Republic's coordinated white propaganda (*tablighat*) campaign aimed at influencing non-Iranian publics.¹⁷ Similar publications include *A Glance at Two Years of War*, an English translation of a Persian IRGC report that summarizes the organization's operations, strategy, and victories through mid-1982.¹⁸

In addition to the Political Office, the IRGC's Public Relations and Educational units supervised the production of materials aimed at fostering ideological awareness among the ranks.¹⁹ Later in the war, the IRGC established research centers and universities devoted to training guardsmen and producing materials on Islamic ideology, politics, and military science. In 1984 the Guards opened the Center for Investigation and Research in Qom, which produced "ideological and political" materials specifically geared to IRGC and Basij soldiers at the front.²⁰ As a collaboration between lay guardsmen and clergy from the Qom seminary, this center produced books such as *Wars of the Prophet*, which presented the battles fought by the Prophet Muhammad as parables for the war with Iraq in order to imbue the latter with a parallel sense of spiritual significance. Beyond this, the most important

training initiative undertaken by Guards during the war was the founding of Imam Husayn University and its Institute of Military Sciences and Technology in Tehran, which opened in May 1986.²¹

Wartime Cultural Activism

IRGC publications are an outgrowth of the organization's commitment to ideological and cultural activism. Six months into the Iraq war, the organization claimed that "90 percent" of its non-combat operations were devoted to promoting ideology. This work, which the IRGC defined as "cultural activities" (p.127) (*fa'aliyyat-ha-ye farhangi*), was a broad-based effort of promoting the religious and political values championed by the organization, the IRP, and esteemed clergy like Ayatollahs Montazeri and Motahhari.²² As cultural activism was a central duty of the IRGC throughout the war—and remains as such through the present—it is valuable to consider how the IRGC conceived of this effort. An example of this is provided in a February 1981 organizational review published in *Payam-e Enqelab*. This report, briefly discussed below, sheds light on how the Guards promoted their ideas, the mediums they found most valuable, and the material they found most convincing.

The IRGC divides this report into two sections focusing on the production and distribution of textual publications and of audio-visual materials. The report claims that IRGC units established over 2,400 libraries throughout Iran's major provinces during this period. In these and already existing libraries, the Guards donated 629,102 books and further distributed approximately 482,000 booklets throughout the country. In addition, Guards units produced approximately 440,000 publications, not including the organization's political journals. Many of these publications were donated pro bono publico. Others were sold as a source of revenue, resulting in 9.75 million *rials* in sales for IRGC units,²³ including three million in sales from the war-torn southwestern provinces.²⁴ Although the precise numbers are not mentioned, "ideological and political" publications were also given to "liberation fronts" outside of Iran.²⁵

The audio-visual and "artistic" (*honari*) materials produced by the IRGC during this period includes several media types. Part of this initiative organized 4,049 film showings around the country and the production of eighty-five theatrical presentations. Provincial units also distributed nearly sixty thousand audio cassettes. These cassettes focused on various religious topics, such as excerpts from the Quran (6,000) and Ayatollah Khomeini's *Guardianship of the Jurisprudent* (3,000), but the most widely distributed cassette (21,000) included sermons of the martyred ideologue, Ayatollah Motahhari, whose work continued to grow in popularity among more conservative Khomeinists. The IRGC distributed these items directly throughout its local bases and through

organized “art exhibitions,” which sold books and cassettes, and held slideshow presentations for the public (the Guards held 1,620 such exhibitions during this period).²⁶

The artistic medium most favored by the IRGC was the political poster.²⁷ Guards units produced and distributed roughly nine million sets of posters both within Iran and abroad. These posters—like the political posters produced by other official agencies and parties during the war—were often resized and altered to become the artwork for pamphlets, billboards, or even postage stamps.²⁸ IRGC posters (examples of which are discussed later) were commonly reproduced in issues of its official journals, particularly as inside and outside (p.128) covers. Although they ranged in content and composition, the posters produced by the Guards generally depicted issues related to the political, religious, and martial dimensions of the war.

Visual Identity

Similar to other revolutionary groups, such as the Mojahedin-e Khalq and the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution, the IRGC emblem is the primary enunciation of its organizational identity.²⁹ As mentioned earlier, the IRGC based its emblem on that of MIR and in so doing assumed a similar antagonistic stance vis-à-vis the Islamic left.³⁰ Like the MIR emblem, the IRGC emblem (see figure 7.1) depicts the Arabic negative article “*la*” in the center of the design, out of which extends a clenched fist holding a rifle.³¹ The “*la*” stands for the Muslim (p.129) proclamation of faith “*la ilaha ilallah ...*” (“There is no God but God ...”) and the clenched fist holding the rifle stands for armed resistance. Above the rifle sits a verse from the Quran—“Prepare against them whatever arms and cavalry you can muster ...”—which is used as a rallying cry for righteous militancy.³² To the right of the “*la*” is the representation of a book, symbolizing the Quran, and to the right of that is the organization’s name in Persian (i.e., Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps). Out of the Quran extends a branch with leaves, suggesting both the desire for peace and the garden of heavenly paradise (*ferdows* or *jannat*). This is superimposed on a representation of the globe, expressing the organization’s commitment to internationalism while downplaying its national focus. At the bottom of the image rests the Persian year of the organization’s establishment (1357, or 1979).

Like the literary *emblemata* of early modern Europe, the emblems of modern political organizations are products of their time. Concerning the former, John Manning argues, “Grounded in a historical moment, emblems can be misunderstood, or be totally incomprehensible, unless there is an awareness of the immediate temporal context. Chronology, the moment of utterance, is a clue to meaning.”³³ Although the designs created by Iranian revolutionary organizations are not as obtuse as the subject matter Manning is referring to, they are nonetheless steeped in the political and cultural moment from which they emerge. Their visual components are designed to be overt political statements. Yet, while emblems are static, the groups they represent are dynamic. As time passes, an organization may be forced, or simply choose, to alter its initial ideological platform to adapt to larger changes occurring within the sociopolitical context. Even though the political platform of an organization can be altered, emblems often remain unchanged. So, while an emblem reflects specific historical aspects of an organization, it is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the organization.

Such is true for the Revolutionary Guards. The IRGC's emblem was designed shortly after the establishment of the organization in 1979. Its designer, Mohsen Kolahduz, an original member of the IRGC's Command Council, also designed MIR's emblem.³⁴ The two emblems are not only products of the same historical moment, they stem from the aesthetics and abilities of a single individual. Further, both emblems were designed contemporaneously with the establishment of their respective organizations in early 1979. For the IRGC, this means that the chief fixture of its corporate identity was created before the organization had a clear function or place in post-revolutionary society. The emblem was designed to represent a militant, Islamic, and anti-leftist revolutionary organization, which is why it more closely resembles the standard of a resistance movement (out of which the IRGC in fact emerged) than a national military (which is what the organization ultimately became). A sense of revolutionism and resistance is also expressed (p.130) in the political message of the emblem; themes increasingly at odds with the organization's growing political conservatism during this period.

Thus, as the IRGC became an official organ of the Islamic Republic and transformed into its leading military force during the war, it retained the guise of a resistance movement outside the system of state power. The emblem, in this manner, evokes the organization's political reality. That is, unlike other resistance organizations, the IRGC was not established to oppose a system; rather (as its name suggests) it was formed to oppose *opposition* to a system. Its resistance, then, can be seen as a perpetual state of being; an inseparable

component of establishing or maintaining an idealistic Islamic society. Pro-regime militancy, in this scheme, is therefore an expression of the Guards' resistance: resistance to actual, perceived, and existential threats to the Islamic Republic and its revolutionary system (*nezam*).

Iconology of the Self

As explained in the preceding chapters, the IRGC's roots extend deep into the revolutionary movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, most of the IRGC's early leadership had been participants in that movement. It is not surprising then that, before the Guards developed a visual identity specific to the organization, its imagery retained some of the aesthetics of the Islamic anti-Shah guerrilla movement. Its emblem is one example of this; however, many portrayals of guardsmen in IRGC publications highlight this practice as well. I have chosen two related images that illustrate this point. These images, shown in figures 7.2 and 7.3, were found in *Payam-e Enqelab* throughout the 1980s. Although they appear in different versions (two of which I show as examples),



Figure 7.1 Official emblem of the IRGC

they were consistently used as signifiers for the IRGC or the individual guardsman. They embody aspects of both IRGC identity and self-conception.

In these images, which seem to be based on a photograph, we see the same bearded individual holding a Kalashnikov rifle. He wears a nondescript military-style uniform, but lacks the insignia, accoutrements, and stance of a government soldier. The man holds a Kalashnikov rifle at his hip, appearing to be either discharging or ready to discharge the weapon. By aiming or firing the rifle in such a manner, the individual demonstrates a lack of proper martial training, and thus assumes the posture of a guerrilla militant. This does not discredit the individual. On the contrary, the man (like his Kalashnikov) evokes a revolutionary spirit. He is, in a sense, a prototypical Muslim resistance fighter. (p.131)

(p.132) Yet this individual is not used to denote the general militant or even the Muslim revolutionary; he is employed as a specific and direct marker for the Revolutionary Guards. This is suggested by his uniform (which closely resembles that worn by members of the IRGC) and is made clear from the contexts in which these images appear. For instance, in one of the earliest printings of this image in *Payam-e Enqelab* it is placed directly next to a poem entitled “Guard” (*pasdar*).³⁵ The poem, an ode to the guardsman by the prominent revolutionary poet Hosayn Esrafil, in part reads:

O who is proud to sacrifice himself
A scion of the *Sarbadaran*
Within the clamor of machinegun fire,
You are found

Through extolling the virtues of the guardsmen, this poem highlights the same notions of militancy, Shiite identity, and resistance captured in the image. The author connects the war fighting of the guardsmen (“found in the clamor of machinegun fire”) with the notion of an Iranian-Shiite tradition of resistance (“scion of the *Sarbadaran*”)—a reference to an uprising of mostly Persian Shiites against Turko-Mongol rule in 14th Century northeastern Iran.³⁶ The image stands for a visualization of the poem’s subject (the guardsman) if not an illustration. This is made obvious by the image’s placement within the same text box as the poem and its blatant title. The editors make the connection for the reader unequivocal: the image in the box is a guardsman.

Just as this version of the image is meant to signify a guardsman, when multiplied, the image stands for the entire organization. The second example above illustrates this point. Here, *Payam's* graphic designers inversed and triplicated the original image to make it appear to represent a broader force or even an armed brotherhood. In the example provided, the triplicated image—which is the more common of the two—is included in a section on poetry by rank-and-file guardsmen submitted to the journal for publication. If the meaning of the image was not plain enough to the reader, the editors include a text box below it stating: “Gifted to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.” Thus, the editors indicate that the image signifies the IRGC.³⁷



Figure 7.2 Guard icon (1981)



Figure 7.3 Guardians icon (1985)

So what can these two images, which are akin to clip art, tell us about the organization? These images, after all, played a minor role in the pages of *Payam-e Enqelab*. They were not widely used in other materials and certainly did not gain the type of public attention that photographs of guardsmen did during the war. Nevertheless, I have chosen to discuss these particular images because they embody a certain Islamic-revolutionary aesthetic that lies at the heart of IRGC identity. They resemble the politically driven Muslim activists that founded the organization in the midst of revolution, but do not overly (p.133) express the sacred or the righteous. These guards are not the same type of religious warriors the guardsmen became synonymous

with in the war; rather they resemble the politically driven Muslim activists that founded the organization in the midst of revolution. In other words, these images emphasize the political and revolutionary roots of the guardsman and the organization. That these images were printed multiple times over several years indicates they continued to hold meaning for the editors and designers who employed them. They continued to signify the guards *to* the organization, even as the latter began to favor more overt religious motifs and symbols to describe its soldiers.

As the visual examples have shown, the IRGC partly defined itself with a political and revolutionary aesthetic. However, with the onset of the Iraq conflict, guardsmen increasingly took on more of a sacred guise. Photographs of ragtag Iranian soldiers with headbands displaying religious slogans were ubiquitous in Iranian and international media during this period. Such photographs and similar artwork were used extensively in IRGC publications to capture the multitude of experiences and emotions related to fighting (living, praying, and dying) on the frontlines. Graphic designers also frequently altered photographs, transforming them into compositions that could more directly communicate the values of the organization and spirit of the war effort. An expressive, and overlooked, body of imagery adorns the pages of *Payam-e Enqelab*. These visuals are important in that they, perhaps more so than any other medium, epitomize how the IRGC conceived of itself and the war during this period.

Following the rhetoric of Ayatollah Khomeini and Iran's clerical leadership, IRGC productions framed the Iraq conflict as a war between Islam and its chief antagonists (i.e., America, Western imperialism, and Zionism).³⁸ Though many Islamic metaphors were used to describe the conflict, the most salient and powerful metaphor used was that of Imam Husayn and his final stand against the Umayyads at Karbala. This metaphor allowed for the war to be re-imagined as a modern Karbala, wherein Iran's forces were both reliving and redressing the Imam Husayn's heroic struggle against oppressive forces. As Hojjat al-Islam Fazlollah Mehdizadeh Mahallati, Khomeini's representative to the IRGC, explained:

Our revolution emanates from Husayn's Karbala . . . and our dear Imam is the Husayn of our time . . . [When] we gaze upon our war fronts and upon the areas that the Corps controls, [we see that] these are [manifestations of] love for the Imam Husayn and that our path is the same path as the Imam Husayn.³⁹

(p.134) Entwined with the calls for the liberation of Jerusalem, the Karbala metaphor infused even more religious symbolism into the discourse fueling the Iraq conflict. In this scheme, Saddam Hussein's secular Baathist regime became seen as an obstacle in Iran's Islamic quest for emancipating Palestine from Zionist control. Karbala was more than a metaphor for the engagement with Iraq; its liberation was also something the IRGC believed could be achieved.⁴⁰ As the popular wartime slogan "the path to Jerusalem runs through Karbala" expressed: Karbala was considered both a destination and a way station in the Islamic revolution's drive against imperialism and Zionism.

Visual imagery played an important role in conveying these themes to rank-and-file guardsmen. For example, the cover of a December 1981 issue of *Payam-e Enqelab* depicts the quest for Jerusalem and the slogan "the path to Jerusalem runs through Karbala" (see figure 7.4).⁴¹ The image shows a political map of the Middle East with Iran on the right side, Iraq in the middle, and Israel on the left.⁴² Within Iran is a small photograph of a convoy of Toyota pickups transporting groups of guardsmen. Emanating from the guardsmen is a bold, rainbow-colored arrow that stretches through Karbala (a point on the arrow difficult to discern in the copy) and across Iraq and Jordan to Israel. The point terminates at a Star of David, within which sits a picture of Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock. Beneath the point in the arrow designating Karbala, and upon Iraq, is the phrase "the path of Jerusalem" (*tariq al-quds*) in Arabic.

The simple mechanics of this image allow for a clear communication of the slogan it visualizes. With the country of Jordan obfuscated and nearly consumed by the Star of David and the arrow, Iraq (or Karbala) is seen as the literal and figurative obstacle standing between the Muslim warriors of Iran (represented by the truckloads of guardsmen) and the liberation of Jerusalem (represented by the Dome of the Rock). The rainbow coloring of the arrow also suggests that the ultimate objective in this effort is peace and justice in the region.



Figure 7.4 "Path of Jerusalem ..."

A similar photograph from *Payam-e Enqelab* (see figure 7.5) approaches this idea from another perspective. In this image we see a familiar scene: a Toyota pick-up transporting a group of guardsmen seemingly to the warfront. Most of the guardsmen point their Kalashnikov rifles in the air in a confident, almost victorious manner. The guardsmen appear to range in age; some have full beards while others lack facial hair. True to the supply and equipment shortages that plagued the IRGC, each of the guardsmen wears a slightly different uniform. Some are wearing wool hats, some steel helmets, while some lack headgear altogether. Most of the men look in the direction from which they came, while another, who appears to be the youngest soldier, seems to gaze directly at the photographer or viewer. The driver of the pickup, who is leaning out of his window and gesticulating with his left hand, appears to be looking at or past a road sign.

(p.135)

(p.136)

As Susan Sontag suggests, photographs “are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still.” But they can also “enlarge a reality that is felt to be ... perishable, remote.”⁴³ By itself, there is little

remarkable about this photograph. It is similar to countless other wartime photographs that depict guardsmen on their way to the front, posing for cameras, exuding a sense of confidence and certainty in their mission. What makes this image more interesting is how the designers chose to “enlarge” the reality it captures by inscribing a deeper meaning to an otherwise familiar scenario. That is, the information on the road sign that the driver seems to be acknowledging has been altered. Although the original text on this sign is unknown, superimposed next to the IRGC emblem (an original part of the sign) is the phrase “the road to Karbala” written in red—the color most associated with martyrdom and sacrifice.⁴⁴ This simple yet evocative alteration adds a religious dimension to the image that would not otherwise be apparent. While this photograph captures these guardsmen “accurately” as soldiers in a modern war, by modifying the text on the sign the image also presents them as warriors traveling toward a destination that is as much spiritual as material. Here, Karbala is more than a metaphor for the war or a gateway to Jerusalem; rather, it is a spiritual condition, an aspiration of martyrdom, a victory in and of itself. In a sense, these soldiers can be seen as the reinforcements Imam Husayn never received, given a chance to rewrite or redress history by retaking, refighting, or simply re-experiencing Karbala through the Iraq war.



Figure 7.5 “Road to Karbala”

(p.137)

Iran’s hope of a decisive victory over Iraq faded as the war dragged on. Iranian forces had some successes, such as the 1984 capture of Iraq’s Majnun Island oil complex, but the heavy cost in blood and treasure injured Iranian morale. The breadth and severity of Iraq’s aggression, which threatened to cripple the Iranian economy and terrorized Iranian population centers, dampened expectations.⁴⁵ However with the capturing of Iraq’s strategic Faw Peninsula in

February 1986, Iran's fortunes seemed to be improving. The capture of Faw rekindled hopes for a victorious conclusion to the war, and was touted as a key step toward liberating Karbala and Jerusalem. As one popular slogan put it: "God willing, as the victory of Khorramshahr has led to the liberation of Faw, a victory in Karbala will lead to an advance on Jerusalem."⁴⁶

This renewed hope, and the melancholy that preceded it, is captured in an IRGC poster published in an April 1986 issue of *Payam-e Enqelab*.⁴⁷ This image (see figure 7.6), a photographic collage, shows a group of guardsmen seated on the ground, most of whom are gazing slightly to their right. It is unknown what seems to have captured their collective consideration, but one may assume that they are perhaps listening to a speech or being addressed by one of their commanders. The background of the image is abstracted and made to contrast with the center, which is an untouched rectangular section of the original photograph. This section, which is posited as a "clear" view into the photographed scene, invites the viewer to focus on a single soldier, a communications specialist, who rests his chin on his hand, appearing to be engaged with what lays before him. Below this soldier is a Persian phrase that reads: "Karbala is waiting ..."

Outwardly, this poster uses a photographic composition to evoke the sentiment and expectations spelled out in the phrase "Karbala is waiting ...". That is, the object of the guardsmen's collective gaze and imagination, the image tells us, is Karbala. The guardsmen seem to be aware that Karbala is in their future; it is, as the ellipses suggest, waiting ... for them. If we look at this image in another way, and consider what Roland Barthes calls the "obtuse" meaning of images, it begins to suggest other possibilities.⁴⁸ The text tells us that "Karbala is waiting." Waiting, we assume, for guardsmen to liberate that consecrated land from Baathist control. However, if you look at their faces, it seems obvious that the guardsmen are waiting too. They are, perhaps, waiting to take their revolution and the divine justice it embodies to Karbala, to Jerusalem, and to the rest of the Muslim world. Waiting to fulfill what has been promised them by their religious, political, and military leaders. Waiting for victory; a victory that has so far eluded them; a victory that perhaps seems no closer now than four years prior.

While the success at Faw encouraged Iran's military leaders, the faces of these soldiers do not seem to exude confidence or hope. Rather they seem to express a sense of concern, melancholy, or even pessimism. Karbala, after all, is not only a destination, it is a spiritual reality; a condition that centuries of Shiite literature, (p.138) poetry, and imagery suggest is one of divine intoxication.⁴⁹ If Karbala is still waiting, it is because these guardsmen have not

reached or attained *it* yet. Such a reading might conflict with the graphic designer's original intentions, but it nonetheless speaks to the general mood and tenor of the composition—a mood more reflective of Iranian society during the final years of the war.

The feeling of pessimism, doubt, or melancholy evoked by this image was in some sense prophetic. The war, of course, ended in stalemate, leaving the economies and cities of both countries in ruin. The near-goal of liberating Karbala (p.139) was not achieved, and the far-goal of emancipating the Palestinians and the holy city of Jerusalem was as distant as ever.⁵⁰ While Iran eventually succeeded in regaining its territory, it failed to topple Saddam and ignite an Islamic revolution among its coreligionists in Iraq. Thus, the metaphors that inspired the war effort and the rhetoric that mobilized millions of soldiers fell hollow. Yet, as the war failed to live up to the expectations of those fighting it, it succeeded in developing a novel class of national and spiritual heroes. That is, by the end of the war, the IRGC soldier and the Basij militiaman had come to assume a strong and powerful identity. No longer urban militants, but not yet purely professional soldiers, guardsmen and basijis emerged from the devastation of war as a new



Figure 7.6 "Karbala is waiting ..."

brand of fighter, a new breed of citizen, a new Iranian-Islamic archetype.

Although there are numerous visualizations of guardsmen and basijis from this period, the example in figure 7.7 vividly articulates how these soldiers came to be portrayed during and after the war.⁵¹ This image, published soon after the (p.140) conflict ended, encapsulates some of the key sentiments that have defined guardsmen in postwar government-sponsored memorials, tributes, and literature. In this image, which appears to be either a painting or drawing—and may be based on a photograph—we see the profile of a guardsman. We know he is a guardsman or basiji by his uniform and headband, which bears an invocation to Imam Husayn in Arabic. The man holds his right hand over his heart in a sign of humility, devotion, and piety. These spiritual qualities are reinforced by the depiction of the shrine of Imam Husayn in Karbala, which hovers among clouds in the background.

The obvious theme of this image is the commemoration of Ashura, but the symbolism employed conjures up impressions of martyrdom and sacrifice.⁵² This is denoted by the association to Imam Husayn and his martyrdom at Karbala, and suggested by the stylized clouds encircling both the shrine and the guardsman. Although these clouds are inspired by a style popularized through the miniatures of early modern Iran—and are



Figure 7.7 Warrior of Karbala

thus a particularly Iranian marker—clouds in general are a common motif in artistic depictions of martyrs.⁵³ Similar to how the Karbala metaphor was employed in wartime rhetoric and propaganda, this image portrays the guardsman as a modern incarnation of the Karbala

hero. He represents the vast multitude of guardsmen and basijis killed during the Iraq conflict and serves as a bridge between those individuals and their spiritual ancestors. That is, just as Imam Husayn and his companions suffered martyrdom in the path of a cause deemed righteous, so too had the soldiers of Iran. Taken a step further, this parallel plays out in a perhaps unintentional irony: both the past and present Karbala narratives are essentially tragedies. Although Imam Husayn achieved a moral victory with his stand at Karbala, he lost both politically and militarily. Similarly, while Iran could claim a moral victory by at least regaining its territory and forcing Iraq to sue for peace, it failed to accomplish its broader strategic goals, and was unable to fulfill the many promises it had made to its soldiers and citizens throughout the war.

While this image may engender such a reading, particularly from a viewer far removed from the conflict and its horrors, it is at its heart a deeply spiritual composition. Released from the context of warfare, and with depictions of militancy notably absent, the guardsman takes on a spiritual guise. Although we still conceive of him as a soldier, he is lionized for his religious devotion. He represents the hope and fidelity of those who were inspired to fight in a war for reasons religious and patriotic. Like the heroes of Karbala, he is a willing martyr for whom the ultimate sacrifice is also the ultimate reward. The guardsman thus becomes a pillar of faith. No longer does homage to revolutionary militancy befit him; rather, within the reflection of his figure, the notions of spirituality, Shiite tradition, and Iranian patriotism assume primacy.

Notes:

(1.) *Payam-e Enqelab*, no. 4, March 19, 1980, p. 38.

(2.) On the general religious requirements of serving in the IRGC and Basij after the war, see *Qanun-e Moqararat-e Estekhdami-e Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami*. ([Tehran?]: Edareh-ye Koll-e Qavanin va Moqararat-e Keshvar, 1995/1996), pp. 5–8.

(3.) Rafiqdust, *Khaterat*, 184. While it could be argued that green is the default color for most militaries around the globe, Mohsen Rafiqdust stresses that the color green was specifically chosen for its Islamic symbolism.

(4.) On the use of visual propaganda during the revolution and under the Islamic Republic, see Chelkowski and Dabashi's *Staging a*

Revolution; and, Lynn Gumpert and Shiva Balaghi, eds., *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002).

(5.) *Payam-e Enqelab*, no. 4, March 19, 1980, pp. 32–34.

(6.) *Ibid.*, p. 33.

(7.) *Ibid.*

(8.) Q9:111, Al-Tawbah [Repentence]. As is customary in this style of writing, the IRGC includes only the opening statement of this verse in the article. Translation from Ahmed Ali, *Al-Quran: A Contemporary Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 174.

(9.) *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

(10.) *Ibid.*, p. 34.

(11.) Schahgaldian, *Iranian*, p. 94.

(12.) *Ibid.*, p. 69.

(13.) Katzman argues that it is in part due to the Guards' ability to assimilate "non-ideological groups" such as conscripts that demonstrates the organization's political resiliency. See Katzman, *Warriors*, pp. 8–9.

(14.) *Payam-e Enqelab* began publication in March 1980 and has continued with intermittent breaks through the present.

(15.) Preface to *Jang va Jihad dar Quran* (Tehran: Vahed-e Amuzesh: Setad-e Markazi-e Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 1981).

(16.) *Jang va Tajavoz: Jebhe-ye impirialisti 'alayh-e enqelab-e eslami* (Tehran: Daftar-e Siyasi-e Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami), 1981.

(17.) The Propaganda Staff of the newly established Supreme Defense Council of Iran issued an order soon after the invasion which required all government organs to pursue a coordinated propaganda effort. See "Directive Issued by Iranian Propaganda Office," Tehran home service, October 16, 1980, *BBCSWB*, October 18, 1980.

(18.) *A Glance at Two Years of War* ([Tehran?]: Political Office: Islamic Revolution's Guards Corps [Tarjomeh: Setad-e Tablighat-e Jang-e Sepah]), 1982.

(19.) *Payam-e Enqelab*, no. 4, March 19, 1980, p. 37.

(20.) *Jang-ha-ye Payambar* (Tehran: Vahed-e Amuzeshi-e `Aqidati-e Siyasi-e Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqilab-e Eslami, 1984), pp. 3-4.

(21.) *Payam-e Enqelab*, no. 162, May 10, 1986, p. 48.

(22.) *Payam-e Enqelab*, no. 26, February 16, 1981, p. 46.

(23.) Because of the fluctuating value of Iranian currency during this period, it is difficult to come to a precise rate of exchange with the US dollar; however, 9.75 million *rials* in 1981 was probably around 10,000 USD.

(24.) *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

(25.) *Ibid.*, p. 54.

(26.) *Payam-e Enqelab*, no. 26, pp. 48-51.

(27.) On the role of political posters and visuality more broadly during the revolution and Iraqi conflict, see Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*; Gumpert and Balaghi, eds., *Picturing Iran*; William Hanaway, "The Symbolism of the Persian Revolutionary Posters" in *Iran Since the Revolution: Internal Dynamics, Regional Conflicts, and the Superpowers*, ed. Barry Rosen (New York: Columbia University, 1985); Michael M. J. Fischer and Mehdi Adeb, *Debating Muslims* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). For a discussion on the influence of Iranian political posters on those produced by Shiite organizations in Lebanon during that country's civil war, see Zeina Maasri's *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War*, foreword by Fawwaz Traboulsi (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009). And for discussions of the political poster as a genre, see Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Revolutionary Tides: The Art of the Political Poster 1914-1989* (Milan: Skira, 2005); and Margaret Timmers, ed., *The Power of the Poster* (London: V&A Publications, 1998).

(28.) Chelkowski, "The Art of Revolution and War: The Role of the Graphic Arts in Iran," in *Picturing Iran*, pp. 128-129.

(29.) For a detailed discussion of MIR's emblem, see Saidi, *Sazman*, pp. 78-79.

(30.) This is especially true in regard to the IRGC's antagonism toward the Mojahedin-e Khalq.

(31.) Fischer and Abedi suggest that the usage of the “la” negative article in this form is influenced by Ali Shariati and his publications, which bore the negative article “on the cover of all of his books and published lectures.” See, Michael M. J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), p. 344.

(32.) Q:8:20

(33.) John Manning, *The Emblem* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), p. 10.

(34.) Rafiqdust, *Khaterat*, p. 184.

(35.) The image and poem are published in *Payam-e Enqelab*, no. 24, June 17, 1981, p. 81.

(36.) The Sarbardaran uprising was one of the many historical events re-imagined as proto-revolutionary after the Islamic revolution. On the Sarbardaran period, see John Masson Smith Jr., *The History of the Sarbadar Dynasty: 1336-1381 A.D. and Its Sources* (Paris: Mouton, 1970). Also see H.R. Roemer, “The Jalayirids, Muzaffarids, and Sarbadars,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran, Volume 6: The Timurid and Safavid Periods*, eds. Peter Jackson and Laurence Lockhart (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1986).

(37.) This image is published in *Payam-e Enqelab*, no. 139, June 22, 1985, p. 73.

(38.) On Khomeini’s wartime rhetoric and its relationship to the images produced during the war, see Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging*, pp. 272-291.

(39.) Interview with Hojjat al-Islam Mahallati, *Payam-e Enqelab*, no. 135, April 27, 1985, p. 31.

(40.) Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 177.

(41.) This slogan was a popular theme in IRGC wartime imagery. For instance, an IRGC billboard displayed at the warfront during this period shows a guardsman carrying the Islamic standard toward a depiction of Imam Husayn’s shrine in Karbala, and behind or *through* that shrine is the Dome of the rock. Above this scene is the phrase “the path to Jerusalem passes through Karbala” in Persian. A photograph of this billboard is published in Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging*, p. 286.

(42.) *Payam-e Enqelab*, no. 47, December 12, 1981, cover.

- (43.) Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador USA; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 163.
- (44.) *Payam-e Enqelab*, no. 50, January 23, 1982, inside back cover.
- (45.) Hiro, *Longest War*, pp. 129–152.
- (46.) *Payam-e Enqelab*, no.162, May 24, 1986, back cover.
- (47.) *Payam-e Enqelab*, no.159, April 12, 1986, back cover.
- (48.) Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 54–59.
- (49.) On the development of the Karbala metaphor and associated rituals in Shiite Islam, see Kamran Scott Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2004), pp. 3–14. Also see Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- (50.) By this I mean the notion of a direct military confrontation with Israel was mostly shelved by Iranian leaders after the war. However, Iran continued to support organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas, which remained engaged in direct armed conflict and terrorism against Israel.
- (51.) This image is published in *Payam-e Enqelab*, no. 220, August 27, 1988, p. 32.
- (52.) On the visuality of Muharram and Ashura, see Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging*, pp. 70–85.
- (53.) For instance, see the collection of martyrdom posters in Abulfazl A'li's *Honar-e Grafik dar Enqelab-e Eslami*, pp. 69–83.

