

## **Examining the “Spirit of Revolution” in the Contemporary Iran’s Security Policies**

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### **Abstract:**

Since the Arab Spring of 2011, the Middle Eastern situation surrounding Iran has been chaotic. After the collapse of the Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003, Iran was faced with two big challenges: how to negotiate the “nuclear development suspicion issue” that had begun in 2002, and defense for its neighbor, Iraq. Iran’s politics and diplomacy have generally been explained as a conflict between conservatives and reformists. Regarding the “Spirit of the Islamic Revolution” that goes beyond such factions, I will analyze the values that exist at the core of Iran’s security policies, primarily from 2011 to today, and explore how those values have been emerged and modified. The “Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,” whose powers have expanded politically, economically, and socially under the Ahmadinejad administration, is an organization that embodies the “Spirit of Revolution” that began during the revolution. This paper considers the role that this organization played in the Iran nuclear issue and in Iran’s policy toward Iraq in the previous and the current administration is crucial in the way the Spirit of Revolution has manifested today. Furthermore, regarding defense in Iraq, which is home to two major Shia holy sites, Iran has carried out so-called “soft power” approach. Despite the fact that the “Spirit of Revolution” that has continued since the revolution preserved the essence of the revolution, there has been a transformation in its embodiment. With regard to how Iran works out foreign policy in confrontations with Saudi Arabia and the U.S., the “Spirit of Revolution” framework inevitably continues as long as its structure is maintained. On the other hand, the kind of flexibility that Iran has demonstrated within that framework is a key not only for Iranian security policies but for politics in the Middle East at large.

### **Keywords:**

Iran, security, Shia Islam, soft power, Iranian Revolution

## **Introduction: Locating the Issues**

The “Arab Spring” that began in the spring of 2011 has still impacted the Middle East region till today. The antigovernment protests that happened in Syria of that year later grew into a civil war which also continues to this day. The “Islamic State” that seized Mosul in Iraq in June 2014 has expanded its territory into Syria. Even though its power is weakened, it still maintains some areas of control in parts of Syria and Iraq as of August 2017.

While both Iraq and Syria are in a state of chaos, Iran has been a major actor that influences the stabilization of both countries. The Gulf states, with the exception of Qatar and the U.S. all assert that the expansion of Iranian influence in both countries was the cause of destabilization in Iraq and Syria.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Iran is concentrating its efforts on driving out the “Islamic State” in both Iraq and Syria. Iran has shared some interests with America, but differences in their interests have been revealing more visibly.

In July 2015, Iran agreed to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) among six nuclear-negotiation countries. This agreement signaled to the international community that a breakthrough was realized and that the “nuclear development distrust” that had spanned ten years was at least dissolved. It is commonly observed that this agreement was made because of the inauguration of the Rouhani government in September 2013.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the achievement of the agreement was generally attributed to a “moderate” foreign policy of the current government. On the other hand, Iran’s missile development and launching tests have continued even after the JCPOA. As a matter of fact, Iran’s missile policy that has been interpreted as distrustful by the nuclear negotiation team was the legacy from the period of the previous Ahmadinejad administration (2005–2013).

Furthermore, the deterioration of public order in Iraq has continued until today due to the instability developed after the Saddam Hussein’s regime collapsed. Under these circumstances, Iran is sending its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) into Iraq and Syria.<sup>3</sup> A special unit called the Qods Force is a part of the IRGC that has been established by Supreme Leader Khomeini after the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. Defense of Iraq and actual intervention in Syria has constituted a core of security policy for Iran.

Iran, which espoused a moderate and flexible policy in the nuclear agreement, is adopting this kind of militant policy in Iraq and Syria. It has been also pointed out that the

missile development issue is becoming an obstacle to improving relations with the U.S.

Thus, Iran is advancing two different but parallel lines of diplomacy. How can this be explained? In general, it is commonplace to distinguish between the previous administration, in which the conservatives were predominant, and the current one, which is backed by moderates. The two mutually contradictory Iranian diplomacies appear to make sense, if the two different administrations have developed two different policies. This leads to a general explanation that the two streams of conservatism and reform are in simultaneous and parallel conflict, and that the differences between the moderate and the hard lines are manifested depending on which one has superior influence at a time.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, there are aspects of Iranian diplomacy that cannot be explained in such a spectrum of conservative and reformist orientation. While President Rouhani criticizes the missile launch tests that were carried out by the IRGC,<sup>5</sup> he acknowledges the tests as an effective tool of and the core of Iranian national defense, and does not criticize the IRGC when it comes to its involvement in Iraq.

In this case, what are the central factors stipulating Iran's concept of security, and its security policy? Mahmood Sariolghalam, a well-known researcher of modern Iranian politics, explains that there are two approaches to Iranian security policy: a "revolutionary paradigm" approach and an "adaptable" or "flexible" approach.<sup>6</sup> He perceives the former as creating the foundation of Iranian foreign policy, and claims that this has been consistently and firmly protected after the revolution. In this paper, the author uses the term "Spirit of Revolution" to coin what Sariolghalam claims as "revolutionary paradigm," and analyzes how that is reflected in Iranian security policy in this article.

The latter approach, namely adaptable approach, is generally referred to as the realistic line or the policy that former president Rafsanjani employed during the national reconstruction period following the Iran-Iraq War. Because the Rouhani administration also has been backed by Rafsanjani, he has been considered to have emulated the previous policies. It is pointed out that the JCPOA of July 2015 was arranged because of the "realistic" line of President Rouhani, who took office in the administration with support from Rafsanjani.<sup>7</sup> However, it is not deniable that the former approach has been neglected in the discussion of the security policy of the Rouhani government due to an image that Rouhani is distinctively different in his diplomatic approach from the past administration

that often upheld “the Spirit of Revolution” that emerged immediately after the Iranian Revolution.

A question here is how much the Spirit of Revolution has changed over time. This article will examine this concept seen through Iran’s diplomacy. This article, focused on the period from 2011 when instability in Iraq and Syria got deepened with the start of the Arab Spring, to the present.

Reaching the Iran nuclear agreement took more than six years, substantially from 2011 to today. It also brought about what could be called a seismic, major transformation in regional politics. On the other hand, the political environment surrounding Iran also underwent an upheaval. The ten years between Iran’s nuclear talks starting in 2005, to 2015, were a period in which public order in Iraq generally worsened. It was also within those ten years that economic and financial sanctions on Iran were intensified, starting from 2012.<sup>8</sup> and Iran began to face the signs of an agreement on nuclear negotiations during and after 2012.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the process of moving from a provisional agreement in 2013 to the JCPOA of 2015 overlapped with the period of Syria’s conflict descending into civil war following the 2011 “Arab Spring,” the Islamic State’s territorial expansion from Iraq to Syria in June 2014, and the intensification of combat in response to that. Under these circumstances, Iran’s two major security issues were how to negotiate the issue of distrust over nuclear development, and the issue of Iraq’s defense.

In this case, what role does this “Spirit of the Islamic Revolution” play in Iran’s domestic governance to begin with? In the first section I will examine changes in the domestic role of the “IRGC” that were established after the Iranian Revolution. In the second section, I will discuss the “Spirit of Revolution” in the relationship with Iran’s basic principles, manifested both inside and outside the country in the nuclear negotiation process. Thus, in the third section, I will examine how the “Spirit of Revolution” has developed in Iran’s policy toward Iraq.

## **1. Implementing Iran’s “Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps”: Expansion of the IRGC’s Organizational Power**

The issue of who determines Iran’s security policy is a question that has been analyzed by various researchers in both Iran and the West. Until now, studies discussing Iran’s system of government had been common, but there are diverse actors in Iran’s

policymaking process, and its structure is multilayered. For that reason, it has been clear even in typical research trends that this issue could not be a easily explained.<sup>10</sup> Within the post-revolutionary system of the “Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist”, it goes without saying that Supreme Leader Khamenei is the nucleus of state authority. Nevertheless, there are some aspects that indicate that the Supreme Leader does not really decide all domestic and foreign policy on his own despite the regime’s authoritarian nature.

At the time of the presidential election in June 2009, there was an antigovernment movement called the Green Movement, calling for a ballot recount. Yet, President Ahmadinejad was re-elected without responding to the citizens’ demand. It has been pointed out that this decision of neglecting the demand of the citizens brought about a political atmosphere that damaged the legitimacy of the Supreme Leader’s rule.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in July 2009, the president and the Supreme Leader were at odds over the issue of nominating the first vice president, and the relationship between the two subsequently deteriorated. To put it another way, before the relationship deteriorated, self-discretionary power was granted to the president.

During the Ahmadinejad administration, a policy of economic privatization was adopted. However, this policy strongly benefited only the president’s bodyguard-like associates in reality. Moreover, the majority of cases that had been passed off as subcontractors of state-run businesses were merely IRGC-related companies<sup>12</sup> (to be discussed further below). This type of state-led corruption became a source of the contested relationship between the Supreme Leader and the president, as the Supreme Leader started to recognize this practice of the president as a shameful act and unaccountable to the people.

How corruptive Ahmadinejad was became clear after Rouhani came to power, when it was revealed that most of the oil revenue under the second Ahmadinejad administration went to the personal accounts of 63 people.<sup>13</sup> One person connected to all 63 was Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, whom the president had nominated as first vice president. The Supreme Leader’s opposition to the president’s nomination of Mashaei in July 2009 was a message saying, “I will not turn a blind eye to such rampant corruption; I will put an end to it if the president crosses the line.”

Owing to a lack of space, this article will not touch on the details of Iran’s policymaking process. Instead, the focus is made on the way the IRGC was established as a revolutionary organization after the Revolution, and has persisted to be an important actor both in domestic affairs and diplomacy since the Revolution.<sup>14</sup> The IRGC was

originally established as a quasi-military organization by Khomeini who aimed for restraining Iran's regular army because of the fact that the regular army emulated the Pahlavi system even after the Iranian Revolution. Thus, the IRGC started to have its own army, air force, navy, special forces, and intelligence which have functioned separately from the regular army. The IRGC played a significant role as a military force to fight on the front lines together with the regular army during the Iran-Iraq War. It is said to have expanded to 350,000 people.<sup>15</sup> True to its name "Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps," IRGC's mission is to protect Iran's Islamic Republic System from both internal and external threats: it pledges allegiance to its founder, Supreme Leader Khomeini who provides direct supervision. Defense of the Revolution has been defined as "support of the Islamic jurists in implementing the Sharia and Islamic morality."<sup>16</sup>

IRGC saw its importance in domestic affairs arising under the first Khatami administration (1997–2001). In response to the student protest that occurred at a Tehran University student dormitory on July 12, 1999, Basij, the domestic security organization under the command of IRGC, raided the dormitory and casualties ensued. This incident was a symbol of the rising power of the IRGC.<sup>17</sup> Tehran University students started a protest movement in response to the prohibition of the reformist newspaper *Salam*. This occurred in the context of speech and publication under the Khatami administration.

As for that administration, President Khatami made the establishment of civil society as his domestic slogan, and promoted a policy of exercising citizen sovereignty and facilitating political participation. He also aimed to free Iran from its international isolation through a foreign policy of "dialogues between civilizations."<sup>18</sup> The concept of constructing a "civil society in Iran," which caused much excitement among university students and reformists at that time, was due to its inclusion of criticism of the "Islamic government (Hukūmat-i Islāmī)" that Iran's Islamic system had constructed after the revolution. *Salam* was the newspaper that had published that slogan. In it were aspects that conflicted with the conservative ideology of "guarding the Iranian Revolution," which IRGC took as the doctrine for its activities. Taking advantage of this incident, IRGC and Basij raised their level of contribution to maintaining public order within the country. Because Ahmadinejad, who was inaugurated in 2005, was once a central figure in the Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran (E'telāf-i Ābādgarān-i Īrān-i Islām), he was a person of influence known as a conservative hardliner.

Under his administration, IRGC's political intervention and economic gains expanded remarkably. He implemented a policy of privatizing state-run businesses. But

in reality, this was favoritism toward IRGC-affiliated companies, as explained previously. These types of policies were implemented one after another between 2006 and 2011. “Khātām al-Anbiā,” established in 1989, is a construction company controlled by IRGC. Competitively, it was a monopoly that received orders from the government for oil and natural gas mining projects and construction of related pipelines, as well as infrastructure improvement projects, including harbor maintenance, road and subway construction, urban development, and dam construction. Data show that the company received funds of over \$11.7 billion in the five-year period between 2006 and 2011.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, under the Ahmadinejad administration, the “oil stabilization fund,” which had been established in 2000 by Khatami as a policy to stabilize the oil-dependent economy, was drawn on to pay for the above infrastructure improvement projects: \$1.5 billion from this fund was circulated as public-works spending between 2006 and 2011.<sup>20</sup> Because the \$11.7 billion figure above comes from different data concerning this \$1.5 billion, the numbers do not match. But it is easy to surmise that the amount withdrawn from sources other than the fund were a part of opaque economic management. In that sense, even if we split the difference, one cannot deny that a great deal of capital flowed to IRGC-affiliated companies. At that time, in 2009, the president of the Anbiya Company was Rostam Ghasemi, who President Ahmadinejad nominated as oil minister in 2011.

Additions to nuclear-related facilities, missile development projects were also placed under the organizational control of IRGC.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, IRGC members came to monopolize membership of the parliament’s internal security committee,<sup>22</sup> and contributed to policymaking for strengthening political intervention into Iraq, whose security situation was deteriorating.<sup>23</sup> This overlapped the period in which Iraq’s security was deteriorating from sectarian opposition following the Iraq War and the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003.

## **2. Iran’s Nuclear Development Question and “Resistance”**

### **2.1 The concept of “Resistance” in the Nuclear Negotiation Process**

The main ideologies of the Iranian Revolution were independence, resistance, and anti-Zionism. Independence meant Iran choosing the path of Islam that Khomeini called “neither West nor East,” the concept touted as a political opposition to Western colonialism.<sup>24</sup> The spirit of this independence was closely related to the values of the other spirit of revolution, that of resistance. Resistance is the opposition to Western

hegemony, and toward Western values as well as toward cultural invasion. It is also connected to the other revolutionary value of “anti-Zionism”: opposition to Zionism. In this sense, independence, resistance, and anti-Zionism are three inseparable values and standards, and they are still repeated in the Supreme Leader’s remarks to this day, as the principles that form the core of the Spirit of Revolution.

Because Iran’s nuclear development issue began in 2002, these three concepts formed the central logic of Iran’s government as a response to Western suspicions about Iran’s nuclear weapon development.<sup>25</sup> Iran asserted that as a signatory of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), member nations were guaranteed the right to carry out uranium enrichment. Furthermore, it asserted that “Western countries harbor suspicions about Iran’s potential to develop nuclear weapons, and are interfering at the level of uranium enrichment. Thus, Iran insisted that Iran’s opposition to such intervention was natural and actually the *resistance* which originated from the Spirit of Revolution. By so doing, as Iran claimed, Iran has preserved its ‘independence’ from foreign influence.”

President Ahmadinejad repeatedly made anti-Israel remarks as suspicions arose over Iran’s development of nuclear weapons. His insistence that the Holocaust never happened especially incited Israel’s hostile feelings toward Iran. Until the time of the Joint Plan of Action, the provisional agreement of November, 2013, Israel repeatedly declared that Israel would appeal to its military strikes unless Iran gave up its uranium enrichment. As a response to such threats, both President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Khamenei continued to declare that Iran would not yield to them.<sup>26</sup>

On November 25, 2014, the Supreme Leader said that “regarding the nuclear issue, America and European colonialist nations gathered and tried with all their might to make Iran surrender, but their efforts were in vain,” and maintained that they would not succeed in the future, either.”<sup>27</sup> These statements were made one year after the provisional agreement of November 2013 when it had been proven that Iran was compelled to drastically reduce its uranium enrichment activities. In practice, Iran’s right to enrich uranium was successfully preserved and secured throughout the provisional agreement, the framework agreement, and JCPOA, namely the final agreement.

It is to be noted that in 2011, two years before the provisional agreement, Iran successfully enriched uranium to 20% at the Fordow facility. This activity led to international criticism. Yet, right up until the provisional agreement of 2013, Iran adhered



to this number in the negotiation hoping that this level of enrichment could be internationally approved.<sup>28</sup> If we take into account that Iran had no choice but to accept a far lower concentration after the provisional agreement, we need to raise a question: whether it can be said that that right had been ensured as expected. However, to Iran, publicizing that “we succeeded in negotiating the preservation of that right,” which should have been guaranteed under the NPT, was important since Iran was able to preserve its national pride.

On the other hand, Iran’s claims about “the right to enrich uranium,” and its continued implementation of missile development, were not undertaken merely in defiance of Israel. It was true that the more Iran succeeded in techniques to raise the density of enriched uranium, the more the international community raised the idea of threats toward Iran. However, to Iran, technological innovation also had another important aspect that was equal to nuclear deterrence. For Iran, the idea that “the development of science and technology itself will enhance Iran’s independence from foreign influence” was closely linked with the ideology of independence that has been preserved since the time of the revolution. Iran has thought that it would preserve its political autonomy and therefore would be able to continue as “a self-supporting nation.”

Khamenei stated on March 14, 2005 that “it is difficult for global arrogance [in reference to America, Israel, and Western countries] to accept that a talented Iran is making rapid progress in science and technology fields, especially in the field of nuclear development. They want Iran to remain dependent on oil.” In this, we can see the pride with which Iran could boast to the world not only of its oil, but also its accomplishments in the fields of science and technological innovation. At the same time, one can observe the idea that Iran was considering that Iran’s becoming a major technological country was a means of overcoming its oil-dependent economy. This notion is, as a matter of fact, connected to statements about “resistance economics,” which will be mentioned later.<sup>29</sup>

Iran’s pride in its progress in science and technology was also acknowledged by the nuclear negotiation team members during the final stages of the nuclear negotiations. Two months before the framework agreement of 2015, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Abbas Araghchi made the following remarks to the author:

Iran now has the technology to enrich uranium to a concentration of over 20%. The international community should know that Iran has no intention of producing uranium at concentrations lower than this in the future. The more that the world

recognizes that Iran's science and technology have reached this height, and the more that the world understands that in spite of this Iran has no plans to enrich high-grade uranium, the easier it will be to understand that Iran's nuclear technology has peaceful aims.---

## **2. 2 Construction of the “Resistance Economy”**

As mentioned above, the concept of “resistance,” a major pillar of the Spirit of Revolution, has been manifested during the nuclear negotiations. On the other hand, as nuclear development suspicions intensified, this concept of resistance was also developed as a statement of the “Resistance Economy,” a statement to construct an independent economy under the harsh economic sanctions that had been imposed on Iran.

The term “resistance” has sometimes appeared in the Supreme Leader's speeches over the last fifteen years in the context of an ideal situation for Iran's economy. However, emphasis began to be placed on the single term “resistance economy” in 2013. On February 9, a few days before the Iranian Islamic Republic Day of that year, Khamenei proclaimed that Iran would aim for a “Resistance Economy” (*iqtisād-i muwaomat*).<sup>30</sup> The “Resistance Economy” is “the construction of an Iranian economic pattern based on social values and standards, national resources, and high-quality manpower, to reduce the vulnerability of Iran's economy in the face of international economic sanctions.”<sup>31</sup>

This proclamation took place about six months before the provisional agreement that would become the breakthrough for nuclear negotiations. The Iranian economy had been struck with repeated economic sanctions, but the ones that had affected it most severely were the financial sanctions and the Iranian oil embargo of 2012. Because of these measures, Iran's currency, the rial, crashed by nearly 20% relative to the dollar from 2011 to 2013. Furthermore, according to data from Iran's Central Bank, the inflation rate over the previous ten years rose sharply starting in 2010, and had risen to nearly 25% in the spring of 2013.<sup>32</sup> The Supreme Leader emphatically propagated the “Resistance Economy” as a political and economic slogan just as the rising cost of living was casting a dark shadow over the lives of Iranian citizens.

In other words, the idea of resistance, one of the pillars of the Spirit of Revolution from the time of Revolution, was developed into Iran's adherence of the advancement of nuclear technology and related science and technology while the nuclear negotiation processes continued. This evolvment was actually coincided with the time in which IRGC expanded its authority in domestic politics and economy Furthermore, it is to be noted that

the resistance economy was emphasized by the Supreme Leader as the time was getting closer to reaching an agreement. It was partially because Iran foresaw the possibility of the rapid advancement of the foreign investment that would obstruct resistance economy. Thus, this emphasis was made guarding against such a new economy to come.

How was resistance, the Spirit of the Revolution, represented in foreign policy? In the next section, I will examine how the concept of resistance developed within the security policy toward the neighboring country of Iraq.

### **3. Policy Toward Iraq: Iran's Shia "Soft Power"**

#### **3. 1 The Regime's Relationship to the Ulama in Najaf (the Shia Holy City)**

The security of Iraq is the most important issue for Iran, historically, politically, economically, and militarily. From historical and religious perspectives, Iraq is home to the two major holy cities of Shia Islam, Karbala and Najaf. Due to this significance of Iraq, Iranians have visited these holy cities for more than one thousand years. Pilgrimages to these holy cities have continued till today including the period of the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>33</sup> Several tens of thousands and, at times, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have lived and studied theology in Qom, a base of Iranian Shia theology.

After the fall of the Hussein's regime in 2003, Iran tried to establish hegemony over Iraq. After the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, it was important for Iran to support Iraq's central government in order for Iraq to maintain at least its national integrity, particularly after the Ba'ath Party lost its power which led to the power vacuum.<sup>34</sup> Based on this policy, Iran directly supported the establishment of the Shia administrations of al-Maliki, and then of al-Abadi. These moves were understood as an expansion of Iran's influence in the Middle East. America also hoped for political stability in Iraq, and on that point America and Iran had shared interests. It is conceivable that both administrations were established because of the coordination of both parties.<sup>35</sup>

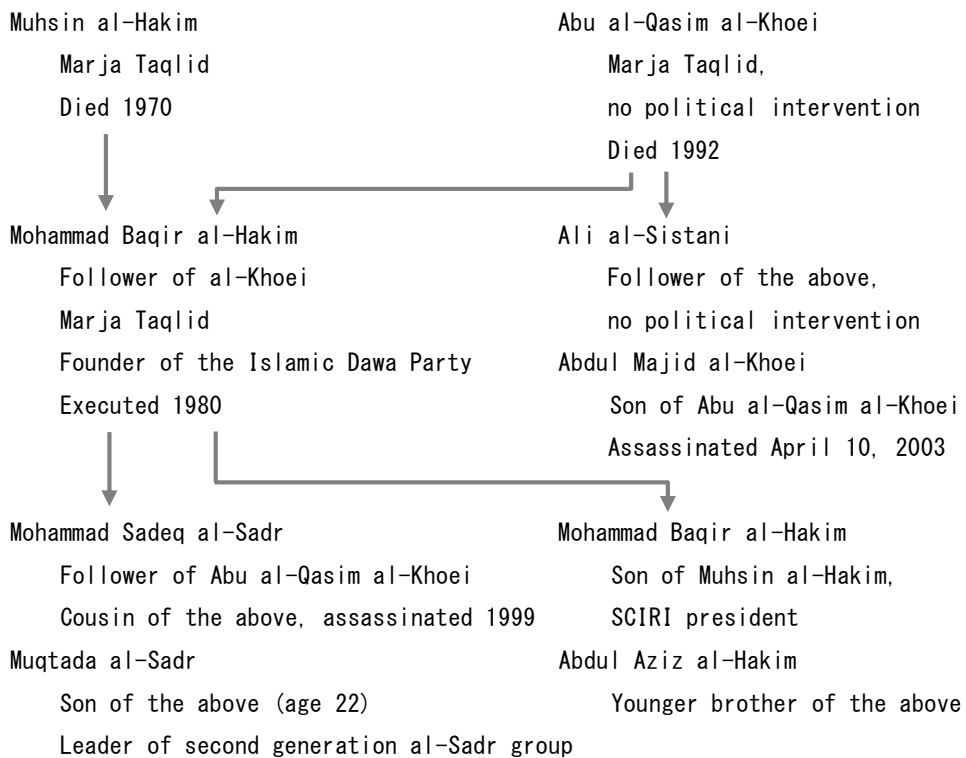
On the other hand, Iran considered that the long-term stationing of foreign troops (in practice, the American military) in Iraq would be a security threat in order to achieve the expansion of its own influence, for that reason, Iran wanted the American military to withdraw from Iraq. The American military withdrew in 2011, but there were still 5,000 troops remaining as of March 2016.<sup>36</sup> Under these circumstances, Iran tried to expand its influence in Iraq on the grassroots level, sometimes cooperating with Shia forces and

sometimes creating conflicts of interest with them. Under these situations, what kind of approach did Iran take?

Iraq's Shias were not a monolith under the Saddam Hussein's regime, and this is the case until today. During Saddam's regime, Shia influences were often assassinated and persecuted as they were understood as anti-establishment forces. As Figure 1 shows, during the Saddam's regime, if we classify them generally, there were two marja taqlid, Muhsin al-Hakim and Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, who died in 1970 and 1992, respectively. After that, there were two followers of al-Khoei, Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr and Ali al-Sistani, but the people who have been important politically for their relationships with Iran are Ali al-Sistani, Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, and Muqtada al-Sadr.

Figure 1. Iraq's Ulama Lineages in the Final Years of the Saddam Hussein Regime

**Chief Shia Ulama Lineages and Anti-Establishment Organizations**



[Source: Hiroshi Matsumoto “The Iraq War: Information and Analysis,” Japan Institute of International Affairs website, [http://www.jiia.or.jp/report/us\\_iraq/ulama.html](http://www.jiia.or.jp/report/us_iraq/ulama.html) (accessed June 30th, 2017)]

Ali al-Sistani went into exile in Iran during the Saddam’s regime, and founded “Iraq Islam Revolutionary Council” in 1982 together with the Twelver Shia Ulama leader Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, who was also in exile in Iran at the time.<sup>37</sup> It is said that Iran established both a charitable enterprise division and a military affairs division within this organization, but according to Matsunaga it is unclear whether the Badr Corps formation period was close to the time of the Revolutionary Council’s establishment.<sup>38</sup> The Badr Corps is a militia that was set up by a combination of IRGC and exiles from Iraq for training the local militias during the Iran-Iraq War.

Muqtada al-Sadr has preserved anti-Americanism from the anti-Saddam war period to the present, and contributed to the restoration of security in Iraq until about 2010, in the struggle between al-Qaeda and the old regime. However, available information does not clarify to what extent American weapons were provided, and to what extent Iran’s military support made difference.

Basically, by positioning Prime Minister al-Maliki and al-Abadi in the central government in 2016, Iran stuck to its fundamental policy of maintaining Iraq’s territorial integrity. For this strategy of Iran’s, Iran’s historical connection with the holy cities was helpful. In Najaf, located in southern Iraq, has about as many theological schools as Qom in Iran. Those Ulama who have controlled the Hawza (seminaries) have been exercising their influence. Yet, the degree of Iran’s power over Najaf’s Ulama requires future studies.

Upon returning to Iraq, al-Sistani moved his base to Najaf, and harbored worries that Iran’s influence would become more powerful in Iraq. For that reason, he gradually distanced himself from Iran. Conversely, it was said that there were as many as ten thousand of al-Sistani’s followers in Qom, and their *zakat* payments created a firm foundation for his financial affairs. In that sense, it was not necessarily the case that the relationship between al-Sistani and Iran was especially close after he moved to Najaf.

A dramatic change that surrounded Iran has occurred in June, 2014 when Mosul fell to the control of the Islamic State (IS). The Iraq’s Shia groups all shared their interests to combat against the Islamic State. Iran-backed Prime Minister al-Abadi surpassed Prime Minister al-Maliki in balancing out conflictual Sunni and Shia groups. It is to be noted

that Iran's sending IRGC Quds Force into Iraq started after al-Maliki came to power in Iraq, and conducted military trainings for Iraq military soldiers as well as provided logistical support for them.

However, what eventually contributed to driving out the Islamic State was the public mobilization squads of the Shia militia. The Quds Force conducted military drills for these public mobilization squads, and Iran proudly stated that this was what led to the liberation of Mosul. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the extent of Iran's participation in combat against the Islamic State in Iraq was at a level that could not be called "sending troops." The Quds Force continued activities that were limited to support for military command, namely logistical in nature, such as supplying weapons and ammunition, and providing secret operations by a small number of army commanders.<sup>39</sup> In a report by the American Enterprise Institute, an American think tank with a strongly hawkish bent, Iran was presented as constantly conducting armed interventions in Iraq. Be that as it may, Iran insisted that it was only exercising "soft power," and the Supreme Leader has repeatedly stated that this is more effective than military power.<sup>40</sup>

It is said that in driving the Islamic State out of Mosul, not only Iran's IRGC, but many other troops were involved, such as the American military, Iraq's regular army, and the Turkish military. The problem now is that it is likely that a revival of sectarian or factional confrontation may re-emerge in Iraq. This is because different groups had fundamentally different interests despite the fact that they cooperated temporarily in the fight against their common enemy, the "Islamic State." In that sense, although the IRGC Quds Force was greatly successful in sweeping out the Islamic State, the degree to which that will strengthen Iran's influence in Iraq will depend on future trends.<sup>41</sup>

### **3. 2 Mobilization of Pilgrimages to the Shia Holy Site Karbala (Arba'een)**

I have already mentioned Iran's assertions about the importance of "soft power" for its security policy. Over the last several years, Iran has employed the notion of the term "soft." The meaning of soft includes the Quds Force's logistical, not directly military, engagement support through military drills and arms reinforcements. However, these "soft" activities seem to be along with the other dimension: Iran attempts to increase its presence in Iraq by using the cultural and religious components of Shia Islam.

One of them is Ashura, the biggest commemoration day in Shia Islam, originated in the "Battle of Karbala," a tragic incident that took place in Karbala where Ali's army combatted Yazid's army of the Umayyads and Ali's son Husayn was martyred in 680.

Every year, Ashura is commemorated by Shia Muslims on the tenth day of the month of Muharram of the Islamic calendar.

Shia Islam also has the other memorial service called Arba'een. This is an event held on the fortieth day after Ashura, and is a walking tour that covers the 80km from Najaf to Karbala. It originates in the same year as the battle of Karbala. It has been said that on the twentieth day of the month of Safar, those who had been prisoners of war in the "tragedy of Karbala" stopped in Karbala to visit the grave of Ali's son Husayn on their way to al-Sham in Syria.

During the Saddam Hussein's period in Iraq, Arba'een memorial services were prohibited. But, they were revived in 2003, immediately after the fall of Saddam's regime. It is said that even now the number of Iranians who participate in these services is in the range of hundreds of thousands to one million people per year. However, Iran's government promotion of this Shia event is a trend of the last two years, and took the shape of national mobilization.

Iran's Supreme Leader started the mobilization calling for Iranian citizens to participate in Arba'een memorial services through public broadcasting around 2015. On November 16, 2015, Supreme Leader Khamenei said "Love and faith, reason and affection, are uniquely Muslim traits. The participation in Arba'een by people from all over the world, on an unprecedented scale, is surely the guidance of God."<sup>42</sup> According to the Tasnim News Agency, the number of Iranian participants in the 2016 Arba'een (November 26) was up by 22%, from 1.6 million in 2015 to 2 million in 2016.<sup>43</sup>

The Arba'een memorial services became more than just a religious and cultural event because of changes in the political environment surrounding Iraq and Iran. The 2014 fall of Mosul with the occupation of the Islamic State, under an anti-Shia banner, was one of those changes. In 2015 and 2016, al-Sistani of Najaf (Iraq) and Khamenei of Iran called for the citizens of both countries to participate in Arba'een. Thus, Iraq and Iran have been presented as a unified community of Shia believers beyond national borders. It is to be noted that people participating in these memorials carried portraits of these two men when they paraded in groups from Najaf to Karbala.

One week before Arba'een, Iran's public broadcasters reported scenes of Iranian participants boarding buses and heading for the border with Iraq for the November 2016 Arba'een. They also reported the participants walking all the way from the border to Karbala. Iran's strengthening national mobilization to the 2016 Arba'een should be understood in the context of a diplomatic crisis that took place in January 2016, when Iran had severed diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. Iran's intentions were observed as

trying to turn the Karbala pilgrimage into an event that would surpass the pilgrimage to Mecca. At the very least, Iranians who viewed Iran's public broadcast reports, and those who participated by walking to Karbala, recognized the Iranian government's intention to stir up Arba'een in opposition to the Mecca pilgrimage.<sup>44</sup> Saudi Arabia is also starting to show some wariness about the reality of this Shia event happening on a large scale every year.

Here, one can observe how political contexts have impacted the way both commemorating events have been practiced and more importantly politicized. Ashura, originally being a religious and cultural ceremony has had specific political meanings within the contexts of the time. During the Iran-Iraq War, the bereaved families and relatives of soldiers who died in battles in Iraq used to parade through the towns holding portraits or photographs of the soldiers who were presented as martyrs. The essence of Ashura is protest against the "injustice" of the Yazid army's killing of Husayn. Yet, Husayn's memorial overlaps the memorial rites for Iranian martyrs in Iraq. In the same way, the Arba'een memorial services have also taken on a political sense of protest against the injustice of the Islamic State which had expanded its influence in Iraq and murdered people particularly since 2014.

## **Conclusion**

Iran's domestic affairs and diplomacy are often depicted as a confrontation between conservatives and reformists. The term "moderate," positioned as the middle ground between the two, is also formulated by this binary framework. Yet, this relativistic depiction does not necessarily represent what each political wing actually employs for its policy and/or strategy. Moderates have at times also been called realists. The question is which term is more reflective of real politics. President Rohani has been called both moderate and realist.

The first Rouhani administration, which was established in September 2013, implemented the nuclear JCPOA in July 2015. The Rouhani administration, which is said to have made a realistic choice in the nuclear negotiation process, completed its first four-year term, and was re-elected in May of this year. However, the economic sanctions have still not been lifted in accordance with JCPOA, and Iran's relationship with America is, if anything, worse now than it had been two years ago. That is caused in part by the Trump administration steering diplomacy close to Saudi Arabia and Israel, but it is not the only reason.



The reason is that even in the so-called moderate Rouhani administration, some policies taken over from the previous administration still remain strong. The ideology of the so-called “Spirit of Revolution” that began with the Iranian Revolution still exists to this day, and has paved the foundation of Iran’s security policy. Of the three values of the Spirit of Revolution (independence, resistance, and anti-Zionism), anti-Zionism is in the process of disappearing in comparison with the previous administration. However, both independence and resistance distinctively surfaced in the nuclear negotiation process. When it comes to Iran’s policy toward Iraq too, the revolutionary organization IRGC, which expanded its authority both politically and economically under the previous administration, has been seen participating through advisory capabilities in the restoration of security in Iraq and in the battle against the Islamic State.

In Iran during the season of Ashura, black cloth flags with “Ya Hussain” (Oh, Hussain) written on them wave in the towns. These are called the flags of the spirit of martyrs. I have spent the last seven years visiting Iran wondering why everyone has to commemorate martyrs to this extent, knowing that Iran is today not at war. When the season of Ashura comes around, the neighborhood scenery completely changes to the point that one would imagine as if one could hear military marches. The dark image of going into mourning during Ashura has also become striking in Iran over these last ten years. The rush to construct high-class shopping malls and high-rise condominiums has continued in an economically sanctioned Iran, and people have fun shopping even while grumbling about things being expensive. These two contrasting scenes give a true account of contemporary Iran.

It goes without saying that Iran’s political system is one of “Islamic jurist rule,” and the Spirit of Revolution is preserved as an embodiment of that system. Because of the destabilization of both Iraq and Syria following the Arab Spring, Iran has had no choice but to be involved in the security issues of both countries. The defense of its neighbor Iraq especially can be called “Iranian defense.” Nevertheless, the reality is that Iran’s method of involvement with Iraq is completely different from how it was during the Iran-Iraq War. Without demonstrating direct military force, it is consistently demonstrating soft power in the form of logistical support.

By emphasizing the importance of Arba’een as a unique Shia memorial domestically and abroad, Iran is encouraging its position as a world leader of Shia followers. That reflects Iran’s Shia doctrine. The spirit of “resistance,” one pillar of the Spirit of Revolution, ostentatiously shows Iran’s manpower through mobilizing a mass of two million people. What is interesting is that the people participating are not always the most

religiously devout. Most young people who participated have been said to have gone to Iraq in a mood of going out for a picnic, catching a ride on buses provided by the government. While the “Spirit of Revolution” is clearly continuing, examples like this portray the reality of subtle changes.

The antagonism between Iran and Saudi Arabia has accelerated over the last year and a half. This is generally perceived as antagonism between Sunni and Shia, and is depicted just as if Sunni and Shia are battling in Iraq and Syria. However, the reality is that Iran is not sending in large numbers of troops for military action in those places. It has adopted a policy of acting between “military affairs” and “civilians” with a good command of what it calls “soft power,” of supporting local regular armies and militias from behind the scenes. On the other hand, Iran, which continues missile development and launch testing, is criticized by America for radical military conduct. The road to improving the relationship with America will not be smooth. However, it is conceivable that this old-yet-new-again “Spirit of Revolution” will continue for a while as a useful value with respect to declaring national defense in the present regime. What should be closely observed is to what extent “flexibility” will be demonstrated within this framework.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, Nuclear Deal Fallout: The Global Threat of Iran, May 24, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/the-global-threat-of-iran.pdf> (Accessed August 2, 2017).  
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
- <sup>2</sup> David Albright & Andrea Stricker, “Iran’s Nuclear Program,” *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, 2010, p. 7, [https://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/default/files/Nuclear\\_Albright%20and%20Stricker\\_Nuclear%20Program%202015.pdf](https://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/default/files/Nuclear_Albright%20and%20Stricker_Nuclear%20Program%202015.pdf) (Accessed July 25, 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> Paul Bucala, “Iran’s New Way of War in Syria,” Institute of the Study of War, February 2017, p. 5, [https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Iran-New-Way-of-War-in-Syria\\_Final.pdf](https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Iran-New-Way-of-War-in-Syria_Final.pdf) (Accessed July 20, 2017).
- <sup>4</sup> Mehran Kamrava, “Iranian National-security Debates: Factionalism and Lost Opportunities,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIV, No. 2 (summer 2007), pp. 84–100.
- <sup>5</sup> “Rouhani Criticizes Revolutionary Guards,” *Iran Tag*, May 27, 2017, <http://irantag.net/?p=2608> (Accessed May 20, 2017).
- <sup>6</sup> Mahmood Sariolghalam, “Iran: Accomplishments and Limitations in IR,” in Arlene B Tickner & Ole Waever (eds.), *International Relations Scholarship around the World* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 157.

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- <sup>7</sup> Observed in this point was a study by the Minister of Foreign Affairs himself, who had taken office after the inauguration of the current administration. See below. Muhammad Javad Zarif, “What Iran Really Wants: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era,” May/June 2014, p. 6, [http://buenosaires.mfa.ir/uploads/ZarifFinalProofs\\_\(1\)\\_28065.pdf](http://buenosaires.mfa.ir/uploads/ZarifFinalProofs_(1)_28065.pdf) (Accessed October 29, 2016). Mahmood Monshipouri & Manochehr Dorraj, “Iran’s Foreign Policy: A Shifting Strategic Landscape,” *Middle East Policy* Vol. XX, No. 4 (Winter 2013), pp. 133–147.
- <sup>8</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration, “Under Sanctions, Iran’s Crude Oil Exports have Nearly Halved in Three Years,” *Today in Energy*, June 24, 2015, <http://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=21792> (Accessed August 5, 2016).
- <sup>9</sup> There are many studies that followed the progress of Iran’s nuclear negotiations, but the following website updates and reports on the negotiation details that change from one moment to the next. Arms Control Association, *Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy With Iran: Fact Sheets and Briefs*, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheet/Timeline-of-Nuclear-Diplomacy-With-Iran> (Accessed April 2, 2015).
- <sup>10</sup> Eva Patricia Rakel, “The Political Elite in the Islamic republic of Iran: From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad,” *Comparative study of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2009), pp. 105–125, <http://en.kadivar.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Rakel-The-Political-Elite-in-the.pdf> (Accessed June 15, 2017).
- <sup>11</sup> Sahram Akbarzadeh & Dara Conduir, *Iran in the World: President Rouhani’s Foreign Policy*, London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 2.
- <sup>12</sup> Kevan Harris, “The Rise of the Subcontract State in Iran,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (February 2013), pp. 45–70.
- <sup>13</sup> Hesam Forozan and Afshin Shahi, “The Military and the State in Iran: The Economic Rise of the Revolutionary Guards,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter 2017), pp. 67–86.
- <sup>14</sup> Hasam Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, London & New York: Routledge, 2016.
- <sup>15</sup> Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, p. 57.
- <sup>16</sup> Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, p. 56.
- <sup>17</sup> The author was visiting Tehran when this incident occurred, and it is said that Basij, which is a unit for maintaining security domestically under the control of IRGC, stormed dormitories at Tehran University. After this incident, the free press and free speech were considerably restrained. Furthermore, people called “Student Basij” entered the university, and were said to have drawn up a list of students involved in the incident and monitored the university for the presence of students who made anti-establishment statements.
- <sup>18</sup> Hisae Nakanishi, *Isura-mu to modanitei: gendai iran no shoso* [Islam and Modernity: Aspects of Modern Iran], Fubaisha, 2002, Chapter 3.
- <sup>19</sup> See Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, Appendix 4.
- <sup>20</sup> Forozan and Shahi, 2017, p. 78.
- <sup>21</sup> Steven R. Ward, *A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), p. 317. Alireza Nader, “Revolutionary Guards,” *The Iran Primer*, (United States Institute of Peace), [published originally in 2010, and updated as of August, 2015], <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/revolutionary-guards> (Accessed October 29, 2016).

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- <sup>22</sup> Forozan, “The National Security Commission in the Nth Majlis, 2012–2016” Appendix 7, 2016.
- <sup>23</sup> Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, pp. 189–195.
- <sup>24</sup> Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution of Iran*, Oxford University Press, 1988, p.10.
- <sup>25</sup> Homeira Moshirzadeh, “Discursive Foundations of Iran’s Nuclear Policy,” *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 18, No. 4, (December 2007), p. 522.
- <sup>26</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei, “We will destroy Tel Aviv if Israel make a wrong move,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPuHJ2tQNi4> (Accessed October 22, 2016).
- <sup>27</sup> [http://khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=901&Itemid=2](http://khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=901&Itemid=2) (Accessed July 28, 2017).
- <sup>28</sup> From author’s interview with Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Abbas Araghchi on February 27, 2013.
- <sup>29</sup> <http://english.khamenei.ir/page/search.xhtml?allty=true&allpl=true&allsr=true&q=resistance+economy&a=0&pageSize=20&alltp=true&pi=7> (Accessed June 25, 2017).
- <sup>30</sup> <http://www.leader.ir/fa/content/11480> (Accessed June 30, 2017).
- <sup>31</sup> <http://english.khamenei.ir/page/search.xhtml?allty=true&allpl=true&allsr=true&q=resistance+economy&a=0&pageSize=20&alltp=true&pi=8> (Accessed June 30, 2017).
- <sup>32</sup> <https://www.sb24.com/dotAsset/3c6a7eaf-1946-4f6f-be79-1c8bbbd9c168.pdf> (Accessed June 30, 2017).
- <sup>33</sup> Elvire Corboz, *Guardians of Shiism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks*, Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2015, pp. 25–37.
- <sup>34</sup> Barzegar Keyhan, “Iran’s Foreign Policy in post-Invasion Iraq,” *Middle East Policy* Vol. XV, No. 4 (Winter, 2008), p. 53.
- <sup>35</sup> Hisae Nakanishi, “The Construction of the Sanction Regime Against Iran: Political Dimensions of Unilateralism,” in Ali Z. Marossi & Marisa R. Bassett (eds.), *Economic Sanctions under International Law: Unilateralism, Multilateralism, Legitimacy, and Consequences*. Berlin & Heidelberg: Springer, 2015, p. 37 (pp. 23–41).
- <sup>36</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/03/21/the-u-s-military-has-a-lot-more-people-in-iraq-than-it-has-been-saying/?utm\\_term=.98f3f322aed4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/03/21/the-u-s-military-has-a-lot-more-people-in-iraq-than-it-has-been-saying/?utm_term=.98f3f322aed4) (Accessed April 28, 2017).
- <sup>37</sup> Søren Schmidt, The Role of Religion in Politics: The Case of Shia-Islamism in Iraq, *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 22-2, 2009, p. 128.
- <sup>38</sup> Yasuyuki Matsunaga, “Ano seinaru boei wo mo ichido ka? Iran isuramu kakumei boeitai no iraku no tai isura-mu koku senso shien no haikai” [“That Sacred Defense Again? The Background of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Support for Iraq’s War Against the Islamic State”], *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Middle East Institute of Japan, No. 524, 2015, p. 68.
- <sup>39</sup> From an interview at the Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs Gulf Coast Research Center on August 9, 2014.
- <sup>40</sup> William Bullock Jenkins, “Bonyads as Agents and Vehicles of the Islamic Republic’s Soft Power,” in Akbarzadeh Shahram & Dara Conduit (eds.), *Iran in the World: President Rouhani’s Foreign Policy*, London & New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2016, p. 156.
- <sup>41</sup> Taking into account the state of affairs after the liberation of Mosul, Iran appointed Iraj Masjedi, a former IRGC general, as its ambassador to Iraq on April 20, 2017. He is said to have been an active figure in commanding public mobilization units in Iraq as the right-hand man of Major General Qasem Soleimani, the commanding officer of the Quds Force, an IRGC special forces

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unit.

<sup>42</sup> <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4329/We-wish-we-were-beside-you-on-Arbaeen-Imam->  
(Accessed May 20, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> <http://theiranproject.com/blog/2016/11/25/number-iranian-pilgrims-visiting-iraq-arbaeen-22-official/> (Accessed June 30, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> From an interview in Tehran on February 25, 2017 with people who had attended Arba 'een the previous year.