

IRAN'S REVOLUTIONARY GUARD AND THE RISING CULT OF MAHDISM: MISSILES AND MILITIAS FOR THE APOCALYPSE

SAEID GOLKAR & KASRA AARABI

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Saeid Golkar is a Senior Fellow at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Service at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Kasra Aarabi is a senior analyst at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change who specializes in Iran and Shi'a Islamist extremism. He is also a non-resident scholar with MEI's Iran Program.

Cover photo: A member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) stands guard next to two Iranian Kheibar Shekan ballistic missiles in downtown Tehran as demonstrators wave Iranian and Syrian flags during a rally commemorating the International Quds Day on April 29, 2022. [Photo by Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto via Getty Images.](#)



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- As the U.S. administration seriously considers whether to remove the IRGC as an FTO, understanding its nature, development, and ideology could not be more important to making an informed decision. There is much about it that differentiates it from a conventional armed force.
- Indoctrination has become an increasing focal point in the Guard. Khamenei and his hardline circle have sought to nurture a more radical IRGC generation by dedicating more time to ideological indoctrination of its members.
- Mahdism has been given increasing priority within the IRGC's ideology, as a main prism through which the IRGC and affiliated hardline clerics understand the world around them and the IRGC's actions.
- There has also been a greater emphasis on viewing the IRGC as the military vehicle to prepare the foundations for the reappearance of the 12th Imam, with policy objectives such as hostility toward the U.S. and the eradication of Israel being understood through this prism.
- The IRGC's younger generations are becoming more radical and extreme, in line with efforts by Khamenei and the Guard's Ideological-Political Organization to nurture greater radicalism.

Introduction

As negotiations between world powers and the Islamic Republic of Iran continue over the revival of the 2015 nuclear agreement, the last barrier to a deal is Tehran's demand for the U.S. to remove its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from the foreign terrorist organization (FTO) list. Naturally, this demand has triggered a heated debate in Washington between proponents and opponents. Proponents of such a move — including [Khamal Kharrazi](#), former Iranian foreign minister — claim the IRGC does not belong on the FTO list as it is a “national army” that is no different from “[Saudi Arabia's National Guard](#).” By contrast, opponents argue that removing the IRGC from the FTO list would “[legitimize](#)” an entity that has the characteristics of a terrorist organization and engages in “[widespread acts of terrorism](#).”

As the U.S. administration seriously considers whether to remove the IRGC as an FTO, understanding its nature, development, and ideology could not be more important to making an informed decision. Much is to be understood about the IRGC's system of beliefs to differentiate it from a conventional armed force. However, one fundamental aspect of its ideology that until now has been overlooked is the doctrine of Mahdism. There are signs today that the preparations for the return of the 12th divinely ordained Shi'a imam are becoming of pivotal importance to the IRGC's lens on the world. The rise of a militaristic Mahdist cult among the senior ranks of the IRGC is now not inconceivable and the repercussions far-reaching.

The Development of the IRGC: From Militia to Parallel State

The [development](#) of the IRGC is fundamental to understanding its DNA. It began as an umbrella of Islamist militias that acted as the clergy's bodyguards and helped them consolidate power in post-revolutionary Iran. Since its inception the IRGC has also been the main organ for advancing the clergy's objective of exporting the Islamic Revolution abroad. This is confirmed by Iran's 1979 constitution, which establishes the IRGC as an “ideological army” and mandates it with “an ideological mission of jihad in God's way; that is extending sovereignty of God's law throughout the world.” Unlike the regular Iranian army (the *Artesh*), whose primary objective is to protect Iran's borders,

the IRGC's principal mission is to protect the Shi'a clergy and advance the Islamic Revolution at home and abroad.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) resulted in the IRGC expanding its remit and professionalizing as a military organization, moving toward becoming an institutionalized militia. In 1985 it expanded into three main branches: a ground force, an air force, and a navy. The end of the eight-year conflict with Saddam Hussain in 1988 and the death of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989 would accelerate the IRGC's growth. Upon assuming the mantle of supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei added a new extraterritorial branch, the Quds (Jerusalem) Force, to double down on exporting the Islamic Revolution and promoted the volunteer civil militia, the *Basij*, as a separate branch under the IRGC's purview.

The early 1990s would propel the IRGC into economic activities. Its newly established Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, an engineering and building conglomerate, would lead Iran's post-war reconstruction efforts and over time carve out an economic empire. In parallel, the IRGC also became involved in the provision of social services for its own members after it became closely affiliated with several ideological-charitable organizations (*bonyads*). Later on, these *bonyads* would become deeply entrenched in the Iranian economy, from the stock market to the oil and gas industry. The late 1990s and early 2000s gave rise to the IRGC's involvement in politics and “elected” roles in the regime. It served as the hardline clergy's vanguard against the liberalization of Iranian society and the so-called reformist President Mohammad Khatami, with the IRGC even threatening to remove Khatami from power over his soft response to anti-regime student protests. An election boycott by many Iranians in response to the failure of “reformists” to support the people's aspirations would see a surge in IRGC members being elected across city councils in 2003 and the Iranian parliament in 2004. The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 — a *Basij* member — as president further entrenched the Guard across the Iranian government, including in ministerial positions.

The anti-regime Green Movement unrest, which emerged after Iran's fraudulent elections in 2009, would see the IRGC further expand its remit in the intelligence field. In October 2009, upon Khamenei's orders, its Intelligence Directorate was upgraded to the Intelligence Organization of the IRGC, directly challenging the authority of the Ministry of Intelligence

and Security. The election of so-called “moderate” Hassan Rouhani as president in 2013 would not impede the IRGC’s rising trajectory. This period would see it streamline its focus on monopolizing culture in the Islamic Republic, investing heavily in social and cultural programs, especially in rural areas. The IRGC’s increasing representation within the clerical regime (*IRGC-ization*) also resulted in a significant influx of Guard members seizing seats in the February 2021 parliamentary elections, which were boycotted en masse by the Iranian people. Today, the IRGC is the foundation of the Raisi administration, with its members occupying key ministerial roles and many of the 874 political appointee positions.

All of these developments have contributed to the IRGC’s growing prominence within the Islamic Republic over the past four decades. What began as an armed Islamist militia in 1979 with fewer than 500 members transformed itself into a state within a state with its own economic, political, intelligence, and cultural arms. Tracking the development of the IRGC reveals that it is anything but a conventional state armed force and any discussion about it should start by acknowledging this.

Ideology & Indoctrination: Manufacturing a More Radical Generation

Another unconventional feature of the IRGC that is consistent with its Islamist militia DNA is the emphasis it places on ideological indoctrination. Since its inception, the Guard has had a formal program of “ideological-political” training that seeks to radicalize its members, recruits, and their families. Over time the scope of this training has significantly increased and today it accounts for more than half of the required training for both incoming recruits and existing members.

Indoctrination in the IRGC became a key focal point for Khamenei following the 1997 Iranian presidential election after [reports](#) emerged that 73% of IRGC members had voted for the so-called “reformist” Khatami, despite the supreme leader endorsing hardline Islamist Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri. Khamenei interpreted this as a sign that the Guard’s second generation (1990-2000) was less loyal to his authority and less ideologically committed. In response, in 2002, indoctrination for all Guardsmen and their families was

[rapidly increased](#) to 20% of overall training in the IRGC. This figure would increase to 30% by 2007-08 and would account for around 50% after the 2009 anti-regime protests. It is worth noting that ideological assessments are at the core of the IRGC’s promotion system, with preference being given to ideological commitment (*tahhod*) rather than technical expertise (*takhasos*).

This investment in increasing indoctrination has paid dividends for Khamenei and his hardline followers as the third (2000-10) and fourth generations (2010-20) of IRGC members are among the most ideologically radical in the Guard. This extreme zeal has been demonstrated both outside and inside of Iran. The majority of Iranian volunteers who fought in the Syrian civil war to uphold the Assad regime, for example, were third- and fourth-generation IRGC members. The fact that the number of volunteers surged after Khamenei transformed Iranian intervention into a Shi’a jihad to “Defend the Holy Shi’a Shrines” is a strong indication of the ideological commitment of this younger IRGC cohort. Similarly, the unprecedented use of violence against protestors in Iran by the IRGC and Basij in the November 2019 anti-regime protests, which resulted in the killings of as many as [1,500 civilians](#) over several days, compared to the Green Movement protests in 2009, when only [100](#) were killed over a month, also indicates that the IRGC is becoming more extreme.

IRGC Ideological Worldview

So what are the core tenets of the IRGC’s ideology and indoctrination program? The Shi’a Islamist concept of [velayat-e faqih](#) (clerical rule) and clerical superiority underpins the IRGC’s worldview. Tied to this is the key ideological pillar of [exporting the Islamic Revolution](#) to neighboring Muslim nations (*ummah*) through what is described as “jihad in the path of God.” The IRGC [rejects](#) the concept of the nation-state as a Western construct and instead divides territories between the *dar al-Islam* (land of Muslims) and *dar al-Kufr* (land of infidels). The ummah must be under the authority of the Imam or in his absence, his deputy: the supreme leader, thus legitimizing efforts to export the Islamic Revolution. A quick examination of the IRGC’s ideological-political textbooks also [reveals](#) the way in which it views the U.S.: as an evil regime hellbent on world domination. This worldview sees the U.S. as the

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representation of all that is evil (*jebeh-e batel*) and puts the Islamic Republic of Iran on the side of everything good (*jebeh-e hagh*). Linked to this notion is the IRGC’s other key ideological pillar of eradicating the State of Israel and Zionism. Like other Islamist ideologies, the IRGC’s Shi’a Islamist worldview regards Israel as an illegitimate, oppressive, and usurping entity created in the heartland of the Muslim world to enable the West to achieve its supposed colonial goals. The “liberation” of Palestine through the destruction of Israel remains one of the IRGC’s main objectives, and antisemitism pervades every aspect of its ideology. The IRGC itself has been explicit about its identity and what its members represent. A March 2022 [publication](#) entitled “what is identity of the Revolutionary Guard” outlined three characteristics in order of preference: 1) “Guardians of Islam”; 2) “Soldiers of the Velayat (supreme leader)”; and 3) “Sacrifices for the Revolutionary People.” On the latter, the IRGC is clear that it serves the revolutionary people — namely, pro-regime supporters — and not ordinary Iranians.

It is important to note that the IRGC’s Islamist ideology has also practically shaped its military tradition, doctrines, and strategy. More specifically, the [Alavi and Ashurai pillars](#) of the clerical regime’s Islamist ideology have served as the foundation of the IRGC’s overarching military strategy since its inception. Alavi refers to Ali, the first divinely ordained Shi’a imam, whose forces lost the Battle of Siffin in 657 CE against Muawiyah, the first caliph of the Umayyad empire. The Shi’a critique suggests that Ali was defeated because his army did not display loyalty to his orders. This is manifested in the IRGC’s military doctrine as a demand for total obedience to the supreme leader and his orders (*velayat-e madari*). The Ashurai pillar is derived from the date on which Imam Hussein, the third Shi’a imam, led his small band of fighters against the massive army of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. Although Hussein knew defeat was preordained, he sacrificed himself and his men to defend true Islam by taking on the Umayyads. The IRGC adopted this logic — that oppressors must be challenged, whatever

the result — into Iran’s militia doctrine through a belief in acting on a religious commandment regardless of potential outcomes (*taklifgarai*). These ideological doctrines have been incorporated into the IRGC’s overarching military strategy, in part to make up for its lack of advanced military technology and its reliance on human capital.

While all of these pillars of the IRGC’s belief system have been assessed to varying degrees, one fundamental value of its ideology that makes up a significant aspect of its indoctrination has yet to be explored: the concept of *Mahdism*. Mahdism in the IRGC remains a complete blind spot for Western policymakers and experts, and yet its implications could have major consequences.

What is Mahdism?

As a Shi’a Islamist force the IRGC’s worldview hinges on Mahdism: the return of the 12th divinely ordained Shi’a imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi (or the Hidden Imam), whom Shi’a Muslims believe was withdrawn into a miraculous state of occultation (hiddenness) by God in 874 CE. The concept of Mahdism is rooted in the belief that Imam Mahdi will one day return to rid the world of evil and injustice. His coming will bring about “one final apocalyptic battle” between two armies, in which Shi’as believe that Mahdi and his forces will prevail over evil.

The concept of Mahdism and the occultation of the 12th Imam emerged during the rule the Abbasid Caliphate (Al-Muṭtamid ʾAlā ʾllāh) from the Shi’a *ulema* (clergy) primarily based in modern-day Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon. Muhammad al-Mahdi would assume the mantle of imam over the Shi’a ummah after his father, the 11th imam, Hasan al-Askar, was killed by the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate in 873 CE. Imam Mahdi was withdrawn into a state of occultation to protect him from suffering the same fate as his father. During this period (874-941) — known as the Minor Occultation (*gheybat-e soghra*) — Mahdi would appoint four special deputies (*navab-e khas*),

who would act as his representatives and through which he would communicate and rule. In 941 CE, however, the fourth deputy would announce that after his death there would be no more specific deputies — a message he claimed to have received from Imam Mahdi. The death of the fourth deputy in 941 CE would trigger the Major Occultation (*gheybat-e kobra*), whereby Mahdi would no longer have a specific deputy but all Shi'a clerics would become his representatives (*nayeb-e aam*).

Quietist Shi'a Political Doctrine: From the Safavids to the Pahlavis

Shi'a Islam was formally recognized as Iran's official state religion during the Safavid Dynasty in 1501. Determined to attain religious legitimacy for their rule, the Safavids invited Shi'a clerics from Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon to consolidate Shiism in Iran and bless their leadership. However, even after the Safavids made Shi'a Islam the official state religion, the Shi'a political doctrine followed by the majority of the clergy ruled that any form of government during the Major Occultation was illegitimate. According to this notion, the only form of legitimate government was an *Imamate* (Shi'a Islamic state) and this could only exist under the leadership of the divinely ordained infallible imams. The consensus among the clergy was that the 12th Imam (or Lord of the Age) would appear upon his own accord, when injustice and evil captures the world. He would be accompanied by 313 special fighters, who would defeat evil in an apocalyptic battle, and act as the Shi'a ummah's savior against the non-believers. During the occultation, however, the clergy's role would be to uphold Shi'a Islam's interests only in the spiritual and religious realm, refraining from any political activism. This quietist political Shi'a doctrine, which began during the Safavid period, would last up until the fall of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's rule in 1979.

Iran's Islamic Revolution: Preparing for Mahdi's Return

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran led by Ayatollah Khomeini would fundamentally change the Shi'a political doctrine and Mahdism.

In the years leading up to Iran's revolution, then exiled cleric Khomeini developed a theory of Islamic government that would transfer all political power to the Shi'a clergy. Khomeini outlined his plans for the creation of an Islamic state by reconceptualizing the doctrine of velayat-e faqih to legitimize clerical guardianship of the state. The ayatollah claimed that God had made Islam for it to be implemented as shown by the creation of divine law (sharia). Given that no one knew Islam better than the clergy (Islamic jurists), Khomeini argued, it was natural that they should rule as guardians of the state until the return of the 12th Imam. In the absence of the 12th Imam, velayat-e faqih would transfer all political and religious authority to a supreme clerical leader (*mujtahid*), who would have custody over the Shi'a ummah as the imam's deputy (*nayeb-e Imam*) and God's representative on Earth.

Khomeini's theory also reconceptualized Mahdism, reversing centuries of clerical quietism during the Major Occultation. Rather than silently waiting for the 12th Imam's return, Khomeini argued, the 12th Imam was waiting for Shi'a Muslims to prepare the ground for his arrival. Shi'a Muslims, in turn, had to be politically active and form an Islamic government to prepare for Mahdi's global revolution. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, velayat-e faqih would be enshrined into Iran's constitution and would underpin the Iranian state, with Iran's supreme leader ruling as the 12th Imam's deputy. Under this interpretation, the Islamic Revolution in Iran marked the first stage before the return of the 12th Imam.

Khamenei and the Mahdism Doctrine

Preparations for the return of Mahdi became more serious after Ayatollah Khamenei assumed the mantle of supreme leader in 1989. This appetite was initially shaped by the influence of Ayatollah Mohammed-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, a hardline Islamist cleric who was one of the main proponents and theorists of Khomeini's reinterpretation of Mahdism. This influence began to manifest itself in the late 1990s where Khamenei developed a doctrine around Mahdism. To prepare for the 12th Imam's return, the ayatollah claimed it was necessary to create an ideal Islamic society based on Mahdism (*jaameh-e mahdavi*). Khamenei further developed this thesis a few years later. To lay the ground for the 12th Imam's return, the supreme leader [outlined](#) five necessary revolutionary stages: an Islamic Revolution, an Islamic



Photo above: IRGC Quds Force Commander Esmail Qaani gives a speech on April 14, 2022, the one-year anniversary of the death of IRGC Quds Force Deputy Commander Mohammad Hejazi. Photo by Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto via Getty Images.

regime, an Islamic government, an Islamic society, and an Islamic civilization. According to Khamenei and his allies, Iran had only achieved the first two stages and was stuck on completing an Islamic government.

Ahmadinejad: The “Government of Mahdi”

The election of the hardliner Ahmadinejad as president in 2005 turbocharged Mahdism across the Islamic Republic. Ahmadinejad — a member of the Basij — was obsessed with the doctrine of Mahdism and finding ways to [speed up](#) the return of the 12th Imam. This is perhaps unsurprising given the fact that his spiritual leader was none other than Mesbah-Yazdi. As the new president declared, “We have a mission — to turn Iran into the country of the Hidden Imam.”

Ahmadinejad would give special importance to the Jamkaran Mosque, which hosts the Well of Jamkaran, where some Shi’a Muslims believe the 12th Imam will return. Ahmadinejad’s administration would [allocate](#) \$17 million in state funds to Jamkaran Mosque as well as expand its facilities, transforming it from a small mosque to a multimillion-dollar shrine. His administration would also spend around [\\$8 million](#) on refreshments for pilgrims visiting the Jamkaran Mosque for the celebration of Mahdi’s birthday. Ahmadinejad would go as far as constructing the Jamkaran Highway to connect Jamkaran Mosque directly to Imam Khomeini Airport in Tehran. In a [meeting](#) with the supreme leader, the president [reportedly](#) insisted on its construction so that “in case Imam Mahdi reappears he could travel directly from Jamkaran to Tehran’s airport without getting stuck in traffic.”

“The doctrine of Mahdism would become one of the main prisms through which the IRGC ... would understand the world around them and the IRGC’s actions, as well as communicate those understandings. “

While Ahmadinejad’s assertions were perhaps comical for audiences beyond Iran’s Islamist support base, the number of pilgrims to Jamkaran would reach in the [millions](#) during his presidency. The Ahmadinejad period would also result in the significant growth of grassroots *heyats* (Islamist institutions) and ideological preachers (*maddahs* or eulogists) across Iranian society. Maddahs are usually not clerics and have no religious education; rather, they are individuals who perform Shi’a mourning processions — such as self-flagellation ceremonies — and are known for their ability to evoke religious emotion. After the Islamic Revolution, maddahs became a central component of the ideological radicalization of IRGC and Basij members, and were instrumental in preparing Iranian soldiers — often volunteers — to launch “martyrdom-seeking,” human-wave attacks during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). Whereas the traditional Shi’a clerical establishment devotes more attention to Imam Ali and Imam Hussain, the maddah culture and class are fixated on Mahdism and praise for the Hidden Imam. The apocalyptic and revolutionary environment is fundamental to heyati and maddah culture. After the 2009 unrest period, the IRGC began to organize, mobilize, and promote maddahs by establishing the Basij Maddahs Organization, with the goal of monopolizing the heyat network across Iran.

The combination of increasing poverty and desperation would provide fertile ground for the emergence of a new form of state-backed radicalism among Iran’s hardline Islamist constituency, not least the youth. This new form of radicalism can be described as a “Cult of Mahdism.” This would go as far as proclaiming that Ahmadinejad was Shu’ayb bin Salih and Khamenei was Seyed Khorasani — two individuals, who, according to historic Shi’a Islamic narrations, appear before Imam Mahdi’s return.

The Emergence of the Cult of Mahdi

The aftermath of Iran’s 2009 anti-regime protests, triggered by the rigging of that year’s presidential elections, would

result in the Islamic Republic doubling down on its hardline Islamist ideology. To mitigate against future waves of protests, it was believed that the regime needed to nurture a more ideologically zealous generation of youth. This would provide fertile ground for radical proponents of Mahdism to fill. The rise of Ali Akbar Raefipour, the anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist and staunch advocate of Mahdism, would be a direct consequence of this. Raefipour’s extreme interpretation of Mahdism would gain huge traction among Iran’s Islamist youth (*javanan-e hezbollahi*) — the core constituency from which the IRGC recruits. The rise of Raefipour was the direct result of support from the Ahmadinejad government and the IRGC. Today, his organization, the Masaf Institute, which states it has a goal of “acquainting Muslims with Mahdist topics and teachings,” is the direct recipient of IRGC financial support.

Perhaps more importantly, the post-2009 landscape also injected a new dose of radicalism about Mahdism into Khamenei’s close circle. This inner elite of hardline clerics began to view, understand, and communicate all contemporary world events in the context of Mahdism and its apocalyptic “end of the times” worldview (*akhar al-zaman*). Hojatoleslam Alireza Panahian, a hardline cleric in the Office of the Supreme Leader, close confidant of Khamenei’s son Mojtaba, and an ideological trainer for the IRGC, would be instrumental in this regard. Like a younger version of Mesbah-Yazdi, Panahian would become one of the regime’s key propagandists about Mahdism, placing particular emphasis on the warning signs of the nearing of the end of the occultation. For example, in 2020, he [claimed](#) the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic was the “preamble to the reappearance of Mahdi,” drawing parallels between COVID-19 and the “all encompassing plague” that Islamic scripture describes as a sign of the nearing of the end times. Such predictions were by no means restricted to Panahian though. In fact, in March 2022, Ayatollah Golpayegani, the head of the Office of the Supreme Leader, [asserted](#) support for Putin’s invasion of Ukraine and described it as a “prelude to the reappearance of the Lord of the Age (Imam Mahdi).”

The IRGC and Mahdism

The clerical regime's increasing emphasis on Mahdism from the Ahmadinejad period onwards — not least post-2009 — was absorbed by the IRGC, which began to more vocally embrace its role in preparing for Mahdi's return.

In 2012 Hojatoleslam Ali Saeedi, the supreme leader's representative to the IRGC, delivered a major intervention in this regard. Saeedi, who was also in charge of indoctrination in the Guard, asserted:

“The IRGC is one of the tools for paving the way for the emergence of the Imam of the Age (Mahdi) in the field of a regional and international awakening, and the IRGC Quds Force plays the primary role in this regard.”

Saeedi's intervention is of particular significance as it explicitly overlaid a military dimension to Mahdism during the occultation — a proactive responsibility designated to the IRGC and specifically its extraterritorial Quds Force. In the same speech, Saeedi stated that the presence of the U.S in Iraq is a barrier to the reappearance of Imam Mahdi and that the “Middle East must change.” The clerical regime's appetite for changing the international order also began to surface in the context of Mahdism, with Saeedi contending that an “awakening of the kind that took place in the Middle East [is required] in the international arena in Europe and among the American people.” The military responsibility for achieving all of these factors as steps toward the reappearance of Mahdi laid specifically with the Quds Force.

While the doctrine of Mahdism has always been a part of the IRGC's [system of beliefs](#) and indoctrination, it began to flourish under Ahmadinejad, in particular from the post-2009 unrest period onwards. Indeed, the opposition of some of Iran's clerical establishment toward the superstitious nature of the radical form of Mahdism that emerged during the Ahmadinejad period had restricted the mainstreaming of this doctrine in the Guard. However, the post-2009 unrest period would result in Khamenei's regime “purifying” the ranks of Iran's clerical establishment, silencing dissident clerics, and elevating the most ideologically extreme voices. Coupled with the ramping up of indoctrination in the Guard, the doctrine of Mahdism would become one of the main prisms through which the IRGC and the hardline clerics affiliated with it would understand

the world around them and the IRGC's actions, as well as communicate those understandings.

The Syrian uprising in 2011 and the rise of ISIS, for example, were understood and communicated in the context of Mahdism. According to historic Shi'a hadiths, as a prelude to the nearing of Mahdi's return and the apocalyptic wars (*jang-e akhar al-zaman*), a “sedition” will take place in Syria, and this will give rise to the emergence of Sufiyani — an evil tyrant and descendent of the Sunni Umayyad caliphs — in Syria and Iraq. Iran's hardline clergy affiliated with the IRGC viewed the rise of ISIS through this lens. For example, Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Mousavi Jazayeri, the supreme leader's representative to Khuzestan Province, [declared](#) that “the presence of ISIS and the followers of the Umayyads in Iraq as well as the creation of chaos and sedition in this country are signs of the emergence of Sufiyani.” The involvement of the IRGC Quds Force in fighting in Syria was also seen as a way of preparing for the reappearance of the 12th Imam. As the supreme leader's representative to the IRGC, Saeedi, [asserted](#), “The role that the IRGC is playing in Syria today is to lay the international and regional ground for the emergence of the Imam of the Age.” In fact, this became one of the main rallying calls for IRGC and Basij volunteers to pick up arms to fight in Syria and Iraq as “Defenders of the Holy Shi'a Shrines” — something that resulted in an influx of younger IRGC generations traveling to Syria and Iraq.

Similarly, the IRGC's role in supporting the Houthis in Yemen has also been contextualized in light of historic Shi'a scriptures that claim the [development](#) of a “reform movement in Yemen” is “one of the definite signs of the emergence of Imam Mahdi.” These historic Shi'a narrations claim that “Yemeni and Iranian forces will take action to confront Sufiyani” and that after the fight against Sufiyani the “rule of Yemen, the Hejaz, and the Persian Gulf states must be in the hands of the Yemeni forces and followers of Imam Mahdi.”

Mahdism and the Eradication of Israel

Mahdism has also become an increasing focus in IRGC indoctrination and has come to underpin other pillars of its ideology. It is being used to explain the Guard's system of beliefs, in which the world is seen as divided between good (*jebeh-e hagh*) and evil (*jebeh-e batel*). As Saeedi has [asserted](#), the current era represents the final period of history ahead



Photo above: Hojatolislam Alireza Panahian, a hardline cleric in the Office of the Supreme Leader, is one of the regime’s key propagandists about Mahdism. Image courtesy of Mostafameraji, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

of the reappearance of the 12th Imam, with the world being divided between the “will of the essence of transcendence” and “the arrogant powers.” The former — according to Saeedi — is led by “the people and the leadership of Iran” and the latter include “Zionism, Wahhabi Zionism, and Christian Zionism.”

The IRGC is increasingly understanding and communicating its official policy of eradicating Israel and Zionism through the doctrine of Mahdism. While the destruction of Israel has been the IRGC’s working objective since its inception, like other Islamist groups this hostility was borne out of viewing the Jewish state an illegitimate, oppressive, and usurping entity for the West to achieve its supposed colonial goals across the Muslim world. More recently, however, the existence of Israel is being viewed and understood as the “greatest barrier” to the reappearance of the 12th Imam. According to the doctrine of Mahdism, part of preparing for the reappearance of the 12th Imam is removing all obstacles and barriers to his return.

Against this backdrop, Iran’s hardline clergy affiliated with the IRGC claim religious hadiths state that the “[Jewish state will be destroyed before Mahdi’s arrival.](#)” According to these [accounts](#), which are legitimized through religious scripture, “Sh’ia Muslims will be on the side of the war against Jews” prior to the reappearance of Mahdi. As such, the collapse of “Israeli regime and Zionist Jews” at the behest of “Iran and the Resistance Axis” will take place “prior to the emergence of Mahdi.” Such [accounts](#) even claim that the “Shi’as’ war with Israel” will take place after a world war. Against this backdrop, Ayatollah Golpayegani’s assertion that Putin’s war against the Ukraine and the West was a “prelude to the reappearance of the Lord of the Age (Imam Mahdi)” can be better understood.

Indeed, the ideological belief that the eradication of Israel is a necessary step for the reappearance of the 12th Imam is increasingly being mainstreamed in the IRGC. As senior hardline cleric Mehdi Taeb, commander of the Ammar

Headquarters and brother of Hossein Taeb, the head of the IRGC's Intelligence Organization, [asserted](#) during a speech to the IRGC's Basij members in 2015, "Observers must remove the obstacles to the emergence of the Imam of the Age, the most important of which is the existence of the usurper regime of Israel." This relatively new ideological phenomenon has incorporated the IRGC's goal of eradicating Israel as part of the necessary steps for the reappearance of Mahdi. This ideological conviction helped to convince large numbers of young IRGC and Basij volunteers, as well as transnational Shi'a fighters, to pick up arms for the Islamic Republic's intervention in the Syrian civil war. Hundreds of first-hand accounts reveal that a desire to enter a "[final battle with the Zionists](#)" was the primary motivating factor for these men to fight in Syria. In the same speech Taeb explained that the "U.S. is doing everything in its power to ensure the security of the Israeli regime" and that the Islamic Republic must therefore ensure "this security is destroyed." Seven years on, today, the IRGC's primary objective of expelling the U.S. forces from the Middle East is viewed as facilitating the isolation of Israel and removing its security guarantees. As senior IRGC commander Mohammad Reza Naghdi asserted in January this year, "Our hard revenge will be the expulsion of the U.S. from the region and the eradication of the Zionist regime."

The IRGC's "War Footing" to Prepare to Aid Mahdi's Army

A decade on from Saeedi's 2012 speech, in March 2022, Hojatolislam Haji-Sadeghi, Khamenei's new representative to the IRGC, reaffirmed the IRGC's role in facilitating the reappearance of Imam Mahdi. In a speech to IRGC members, Haji-Sadeghi declared, "The IRGC's last responsibility is to prepare the world for the emergence of Imam of the Age."

Just weeks after Haji-Sadeghi's speech, on March 2022, the IRGC released a [publication](#) on the militaristic concept of Mahdism, entitled "Waiting means that we must prepare ourselves for soldiering in the army of Imam of the Age." The IRGC has redefined waiting for the reappearance of Imam of the Age as being about proactively preparing to aid Mahdi establish the rule of justice throughout the world (*entezar-e faraj*). Based on Khamenei's statements on the "duty of those waiting," this is not about "sitting down and mourning" — a cultural custom in Shi'a Islam — but about being on a "[war footing](#)" (*amadeh*

baash). The IRGC [must](#) "prepare for the army of Imam of the Age, which wants to fight all the centers of power and international corruption." According to this [doctrine](#), however, this does not mean "because the Imam of the Age will come and fill the world with justice, we have no duty today." Rather the IRGC is [mandated](#) as having a "duty today to move in that direction and prepare for Mahdi's emergence." This is presented as fighting "oppression, injustice, discrimination, and coercion everywhere in the world."

In practical terms, "not accepting and rejecting" the liberal international rule-based order — what is described as the "current situation that rules humanity based on ignorance/barbarism (*jahiliyyah*)" is presented as one of the actionable measures to pave the way for the reappearance of Mahdi. Against this backdrop, the IRGC's actions — from regional destabilization to disrupting the international system and its militia network — are being understood and communicated as part of the plan to prepare for the return of Mahdi. Likewise, the Guard's permanent conflict with America is increasingly being tied to preparing for Mahdi's emergence, with the U.S. viewed as a barbaric force the "[Imam of the Age will come to fight against](#)." Indeed, in a speech in February 2022 where Khamenei lent his support for Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the supreme leader [asserted](#) that Islam was in a permanent war with the age of barbarism/ignorance (*jahiliyyah*) and that the modern form of this was the "American mafia regime." It is important to note that Khamenei's worldview on jahiliyyah derives from Sayyid Qutb, the so-called "father of Salafi-Jihadism," with the ayatollah being the first person to translate Qutb's works into Persian.

Based on Islamic hadiths and historic Shi'a narrations, the militaristic doctrine of Mahdism also calls on Shi'a populations to take up arms in preparation for the end times. As another publication on "[IRGC and Mahdism](#)" asserts, "Since the foundation of [the Islamic Republic] is bound to the Lord of the Age (Imam Mahdi) in order to truly connect with the Lord of the Age, various tasks have been assigned to us" not least "regarding the military readiness of the Shi'as." In this light, the IRGC's involvement in the Middle East — including its weapons proliferation, ballistic missile program, and support for arming, financing, and training Shi'a militias — is consistent with Mahdist doctrine to pave the way and remove the barriers to the reappearance of Mahdi. Until now, most Western observers have viewed all of the IRGC's activities through the lens of

national-interest, but its involvement in the Middle East is more consistent with the Mahdist doctrine.

Conclusion

As the U.S. administration assesses whether to delist the IRGC as an FTO, the nature of the Guard reveals that it is not a conventional state armed force and should not be treated as such. The IRGC is an ideological organization that shares [key characteristics](#) with other designated Islamist organizations, including its quest for an expansionist Islamic state, a global Islamic order, forceful imposition of sharia law (Shi'a interpretation), militaristic concept of jihad, and anti-American and anti-Semitic ideology.

The finding of this research paper reveals three visible trends in the IRGC. The first relates to indoctrination becoming an increasing focal point in the Guard. Khamenei and his hardline circle have sought to nurture a more radical IRGC generation by dedicating more time to ideological indoctrination of its members. The promotion system within the ranks of the IRGC also favors ideological conviction over technical expertise, ensuring the most zealous members rise up within the chain of command. The second trend relates to the increasing priority given to Mahdism within the IRGC's ideology. From the post-2009 period onwards, the doctrine of Mahdism has become one of the main prisms through which the IRGC and affiliated hardline clerics would understand the world around them and the IRGC's actions, as well as communicate that understanding. In turn, there has been greater emphasis on viewing the IRGC as the military vehicle to prepare the foundations for the reappearance of the 12th Imam, with policy objectives such as hostility toward the U.S. and the eradication of Israel being understood through this prism. This is consistent with the goal of Khamenei and his hardline allies, such as Ayatollah Alamalhoda, the supreme leader's representative to Khorasan and President Ebrahim Raisi's father-in-law, to transform the concept of Mahdism from a set of feelings into an "[ideological belief](#)." The third and final trend relates to the IRGC's younger generations becoming more radical and extreme. In this regard, efforts by Khamenei and the Guard's Ideological-Political Organization to nurture a more radical generation among the IRGC has paid, and is paying, dividends.

Against this backdrop, the rise of devout followers of the militaristic doctrine of Mahdism among the senior ranks of the IRGC is not inconceivable and should not be ruled out. While there is hope that the IRGC's senior leadership will act pragmatically, internal structures within the Guard — including its indoctrination and promotion system — certainly open up the possibility that devoted Mahdists could occupy senior leadership positions. Such a scenario could have far-reaching consequences as it would bring the three pillars of the IRGC's foreign policy — militias, ballistic missiles, and the nuclear program — under their control. Even if a small number of devout Mahdists occupy senior positions in the Guard, it is possible that they may seek to facilitate and speed up the return of Mahdi. This would have major implications for some of the policies that are being understood through the prism of Mahdism, such as Israel's existence being the "greatest barrier" to the reappearance of the 12th Imam.

At present the doctrine of Mahdism in the IRGC remains a complete blind spot for Western policymakers, yet it could have major implications for the Islamic Republic's militia network, ballistic missile program, and even its nuclear program. Of course, no one knows for sure if devout adherents of the ideology will attain senior command positions in the IRGC. The objective of this paper, however, is simply to point out that it would be unwise not to prepare for this scenario given the huge implications it would have for U.S. and global security.



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