

CAPITALISM, COMMUNICATIONS, AND THE CORPS: IRAN'S REVOLUTIONARY GUARD AND THE COMMUNICATIONS ECONOMY

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Abstract

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have consolidated an economic empire, acting as a corporation similar to AT&T or Vodafone. Yet, despite the prominence of the IRGC in the Iranian economy, few studies have engaged directly with the topic, and fewer still have examined the forces motivating its involvement.

This article considers the extent to which the IRGC relied on the Iranian communications economy under former President Ahmadinejad to justify and promote its strategic narrative. Defining 'communications economy' as the system of ownership and distribution relating to communications infrastructure, the article investigates the alignment between strategic narratives and military ownership of communications infrastructure. The article argues that the IRGC relied on the communications economy as an ideological channel, a coercive tool of power projection, and a persuasive tool of defence; but also, beyond ideological concerns, the IRGC as an opportunistic institution became reliant on the communications economy as a source of capital gain.

Keywords—*strategic communication, strategic communications, IRGC, strategic narrative, communications economy, infrastructure, military ownership*

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Introduction

In Iran, it is not private corporations such as AT&T, Verizon, or Vodafone that dominate the economy. Rather, it is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is an organ of the Iranian state, and an intriguing one. Regarded as Iran's 'premier military branch',¹ the Revolutionary Guard is at once a 'security service, an intelligence organisation, [and] a social and cultural force'.² Established by order of Ayatollah Khomeini at the time of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the IRGC acts as a Praetorian Guard to the Supreme Leader and to the political system of the Islamic Republic. Yet, the activities of the Guard have expanded beyond their initial mandate. They have emerged as an economic oligarchy, forming a military-business elite that dominates approximately one-third of Iran's economy.³ One could posit that the ideological army are in fact 'creating [their] own versions of GE, Bechtel, AT&T and Goldman Sachs'.⁴

Our understanding of Iran has been dominated by the nuclear issue. In viewing Iran through a nuclear paradigm, we neglect to consider equally concerning aspects of the Iranian polity, such as the IRGC's dominant position within the economy. Despite the prominence of the IRGC in post-revolutionary Iran, few studies have engaged directly with the topic. Rather, the IRGC is treated as tangential in broader discussions exploring Iran's foreign policy, the sanctions regime or the nuclear research and weapons programme.⁵ Those who have dealt explicitly with the IRGC have tended to focus on its military capabilities from

1 Ariel I. Ahran, *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias*, (Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 96.

2 Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 5.

3 Frederic Wehrey, et al., *The Rise of Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*, (RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 71.

4 Narimon Safavi, 'In the Aftermath of Iran's Latest Revolution', in *What's Next?: Unconventional Wisdom on the Future of the World Economy*, ed. David Hale & Lyric Hughes Hale, (Yale University Press, 2011), p. 213.

5 Udit Banerjee, 'Revolutionary Intelligence: The Expanding Intelligence Role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps', *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, No. 3 (2015): p. 94

a strategic studies perspective.⁶ Where scholarship has sought to investigate the IRGC's economic ascendancy, it has dwelled on the *degree* of economic activity as opposed to the *justification* for such involvement.⁷ This prompts us to consider two issues: How can we better understand the IRGC as an institution tied to the clerical regime's decision-making system? And how can we understand IRGC interaction with the economy from a strategic communications perspective?

The concept of strategic communications is notoriously difficult to define, but at its heart lies the aim to influence behaviour in pursuit of an objective.⁸ As a field of inquiry, strategic communications sits within a social constructivist framework; it is occupied with the assignment of meaning and the construction of conversations to achieve an end. Hence, the interplay between persuasion and coercion is considered integral to strategic communicators.⁹

This article aims to demonstrate the alignment between strategic narratives and military ownership of communications infrastructure in Iran. It investigates the extent to which the IRGC's strategic narrative relied on the Iranian communications economy under President Ahmadinejad. The concept of 'communications economy' is central to the question and is defined here as the system of ownership and distribution relating to communications infrastructure. Fundamental to the communications economy are economic processes of monopolisation, privatisation, or acquisition. The term 'communications economy' is not interchangeable with concepts of information economy, media-space, or information-space. Rather, it is an economic subsystem within the ownership economy and is distinct in its emphasis on infrastructure. In effect, the communications economy is about the political economy of communications infrastructure, such as media or telecommunications infrastructure. The concept sits within the Marxian tradition that sees economic organisation as a driver of social organisation and builds on Manuel Castells' argument that communication technology is not neutral but rather, is a site of power and counter-power.¹⁰

6 See for example, Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*, and Daniel Byman, et al., *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era*, (RAND Corporation, 2001).

7 See for example, Kevan Harris, 'Of Eggs and Stones: Foreign Sanctions and Domestic Political Economy in the Islamic Republic of Iran' in *Economic Shocks and Authoritarian Stability: Duration, Financial Control, and Institutions*, ed. Victor C. Shih, (University of Michigan Press, 2020); Michael Axworthy, *Iran: What Everyone Needs to Know*, (Oxford University Press, 2017).

8 James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication*, (Georgetown University Press, 2012), p. xvi.

9 Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* 6 (2019), p. 3.

10 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans., Tim Delaney (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1859); Manuel Castells, *Communication Power*, (Oxford University Press, 2009): p. xxiv.

The communications economy is ultimately a power and influence resource.

We begin with a review of the literature, first addressing strategic narratives and power projection, then moving on to capitalism and communications, and finally considering the existing debates concerning the IRGC's post-revolutionary role. In the next section we analyse the three main storylines comprising the strategic narrative of the IRGC—Revolution, Holy Defence, and Enemies and Opposition—and continue with an assessment of potential sources of legitimacy for the IRGC strategic narrative. In the third section we investigate the scope of IRGC ownership within the communications economy, and in the final section we examine the extent to which the IRGC's strategic narrative was reliant on this communications economy.

This article will show that the IRGC strategic narrative was reliant on the communications economy as an ideological channel, a coercive tool of power projection, and a persuasive tool of defence in the soft war against the West. Yet, it is in the IRGC's relationship with the communications economy that we can identify the tension between ideology and opportunism. The IRGC relied on the communications economy not only to project its strategic narrative, but also as a source of capital gain for the opportunistic institution.

Literature Review

Strategic Narratives and Power Projection

Strategic communicators aim to influence the attitudes and shape the behaviour of a target audience in support of certain values, interests, or objectives.¹¹ Broadly speaking, they seek to convince a target audience of a specific way of thinking and behaving.¹² Acknowledging the 'startling power of story' to effect change,¹³ the strategic narrative has been celebrated as a valuable tool for strategic communicators in pursuit of influence.¹⁴ Some theorists see strategic narratives as meta-storylines that connect a sequence of events, including a setting, actors,

11 Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011).

12 Miranda Holmstrom, 'The Narrative and Social Media', *Defence Strategic Communications* 1 (2015), p. 119.

13 Kendall Haven, *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*, (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007).

14 Beatrice De Graaf, George Dimitriu, & Jens Ringsmose (eds), *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015); Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, & Laura Roselle, 'Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power', *Media, War, and Conflict* 7, No 1. (2014): 70–84; Lawrence Freedman, 'The Transformation of Strategic Affairs', *Adelphi Papers*, No 379 (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2006).

and plot; the past, present, and future; and a situation, problem, and resolution.¹⁵ Exceeding stories by scale, strategic narratives can be understood as reiterated systems of storylines that serve a particular objective.¹⁶ Holmstrom emphasises our ‘human need’ for narratives as explanatory frameworks through which we understand the world as it has been and as it will be.¹⁷ In this view, strategic narratives are forward-looking conceptual frameworks.¹⁸ They are ‘sense-making devices’ that ‘tie together otherwise disjointed events and trends’.¹⁹ As a persuasive frame of reference, the strategic narrative is intended to resonate with the needs and values of its target audience and so to influence behaviour.

If a strategic narrative is understood as a persuasive frame of reference, then it is useful to note that such framing is based on a particular interpretation of reality. Norris, Kern, and Just use the concept of news frames in mass media coverage to demonstrate how framing can ‘define the social meaning of events’.²⁰ The process of selecting, emphasising, and excluding messages encourages a specific perception of reality through which strategic narratives can become ‘embedded in the social construction of reality’.²¹ The strategically designed narrative is a necessary ‘tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate’.²² Their value is in their ability to create what Gramsci defines as ‘common sense’—a form of ‘everyday thinking’ that offers us ‘frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world’.²³ Common sense draws on past ideas and evolves to give meaning to new developments and solve new problems.²⁴ By creating links to the past, strategic actors are able to ground their present activity in history and logic. Reframed and reiterated, narrative links to the past become irrefutable and a natural part of the hegemonic understanding of reality.

15 Freedman, ‘The Transformation of Strategic Affairs’, p. 22; Thomas Colley, ‘Britain’s Public War Stories: Punching Above its Weight or Vanishing Force’, *Defence Strategic Communications* 2 (2017): p. 164–65; Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, & Laura Roselle, (eds), *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, (University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 7.

16 Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

17 Holmstrom, ‘The Narrative and Social Media’, p. 132.

18 Monroe E. Price, ‘Narratives of Legitimacy’, *Tripodos*, No 30 (2012), p. 12.

19 De Graaf, et al., *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War*, p. 8.

20 Pippa Norris, Montague Kern, & Marion R. Just, (eds), *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government and the Public*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), p. 4.

21 Norris, et al., *Framing Terrorism*, p. 5; Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, (University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 5.

22 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, & Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

23 Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, & Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

24 Ibid.

Gramscian common sense is well aligned with the idea of the strategic narrative; both impose a dominant framing of reality. Indeed, the idea that strategic narratives are ‘interlaced with power’²⁵ is a dominant theme within the literature.²⁶ For Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, the alignment of communication and power is an important function of strategic narratives.²⁷ They are power resources that amidst a ‘global battle of ideas’, must be ‘heard and supported to the maximum degree while other [narratives] get side-lined’.²⁸

Capitalism and Communications

If strategic narratives are in competition with one another, then ownership of communications infrastructure is logically linked to the formation and projection of a dominant strategic narrative and to the side-lining of its competitors.

Scholarship in the mid-1980s and late 1990s makes a strong case for the relationship between communications and the economy.²⁹ Munson and Warren support the proposition that the market is a regulative mechanism for social relations, ‘subordinating politics, religion, culture, family and community life to its rule’.³⁰ For Horkheimer and Adorno, this is an adequate representation of the ‘culture industry’, wherein media organisations are akin to factories producing standardised, undifferentiated, mass cultural goods, with the aim of manipulating society into passivity.³¹ Herman and Chomsky elaborate, arguing that mass communication media infrastructures are ‘effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function’, through which state-desired cultural ‘norms’ are projected.³² By relying on market forces in which ‘realities’ are constructed and ‘sold’ to the masses, communications infrastructure can be used as a tool to encourage audiences to internalise assumptions, thereby manufacturing power and consent without overt coercion.³³

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25 Price, ‘Narratives of Legitimacy’, p. 12.

26 Miskimmon, et al., ‘Strategic Narrative’, p. 70–84; Entman, *Projections of Power*, p. 5.

27 Miskimmon, et al., *Forging the World*, p. 1.

28 Miskimmon, et al., *Strategic Narratives*, p. 69, 148.

29 Donald N. McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Eve S. Munson, & Catherine A. Warren, *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

30 Munson & Warren, *James Carey*, p. 70–71.

31 M. Horkheimer, & Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1944), p. 107.

32 Noam Chomsky, & Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988); Stefaan Walgrave & Peter Van Aelst, ‘The Contingency of the Mass Media’s Political Agenda Setting Power’, *Journal of Communication* 56 (2006).

33 Chomsky & Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*; Scott Lash, *Critique of Information*, (London: Sage Publications, 2002), p. vii; McChesney, Robert W., *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008).

Extending the debate, Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle propose that ‘whose narrative “wins” is also a matter of institution-building, technology transfer, and political economy’.³⁴ The key tenet of their argument is that the material organisation of communication through infrastructure impacts how strategic narratives are formed, projected, and received. They maintain that strategic communicators compete to shape infrastructure in order to best support the propagation of their messages.³⁵ Communications infrastructure allows regimes to ‘exercise power at a distance, to govern, monitor, and administer territory and populations, and to cultivate loyalty and consent’.³⁶ This argument supports the notion that the economy is an inherently communicative tool, which can be used coercively as a means to the end of controlling a target audience. Hence, in state- or military-controlled economies, communications infrastructure has become politicised. It serves as a conduit through which strategic narratives are broadcast in pursuit of instilling values, interests, or objectives.

The IRGC

Scholars have suggested that in addition to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s election in 2005, the new conservatives and the IRGC came to power.³⁷ Testament to this close relationship, by 2010, twelve of Ahmadinejad’s twenty-one cabinet ministers were IRGC members or veterans.³⁸ As Alfoneh notes, this was a clear break from previous administrations in the Islamic Republic, which represented numerous ‘powerful elite groups’: the traditional bazaar class, technocratic and business elites, and various factions amongst the clergy.³⁹ The entrenchment of the IRGC in Ahmadinejad’s government constituted the emergence and consolidation of a deep-power nexus.⁴⁰ Aside from the IRGC’s fortified political presence, observers are cognizant of the IRGC’s expanding remit under Ahmadinejad.

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34 Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*, p. 150.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

37 Frederic Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, (RAND Corporation, 2009): p. 24; Anoushiravan Ehteshami, & Mahjoob Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran’s Silent Revolution*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007): p. 49; Jack Straw, *The English Job: Understanding Iran and Why It Distrusts Britain*, (Biteback Publishing, 2019): p. 288

38 Ali Alfoneh, ‘All the Guard’s Men: Iran’s Silent Revolution’, *World Affairs* 173, No. 3 (2010): p. 74.

39 *Ibid.*

40 Abedin, Mahan, *Iran Resurgent: The Rise and Rise of the Shia State*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2019), p. 2.

In particular, several studies note IRGC strategic involvement in the energy and construction sectors, with many documenting IRGC financial activities from the 1980s to date.⁴¹

When attempting to explain the IRGC's involvement in the post-revolutionary political economy, Harris suggests that it can be considered either as an 'ideologically driven praetorian monolith' that uses economic means to consolidate political power, or a 'state bourgeoisie' that is driven by greed.⁴² Regarding the latter, the IRGC could be considered part of Siddiq's concept of an emerging 'Military Inc.'⁴³ Military Inc. engages in accumulating capital, sourced through business interests, for the purpose of benefitting the military fraternity.⁴⁴ This suggests that militaries such as the IRGC use communications economies in support of their stated values, but also to support their inherent capital interests.

However, whilst many have noted the IRGC's expanding mandate, one feature of their economic predation has remained under-researched: the justification for such involvement from the perspective of strategic communications. In particular, the alignment between IRGC ownership within the communications economy and strategic narrative formation and projection is rarely examined. The IRGC is deserving of additional research. Beyond treating economic involvement as tangential to its role as a military or intelligence organisation,⁴⁵ this article considers the IRGC as critical to the decision-making system of post-revolutionary Iran.

The Strategic Narrative of the IRGC

Revolution

The Islamic Revolution is the historico-ideological foundation upon which the Revolutionary Guard was established and is the driving force behind their strategic narrative. The IRGC was born out of the 'heat of the revolution'

41 Ali Alföneh, *The Revolutionary Guards' Looting of Iran's Economy*, (American Enterprise Institute, 2010); Wehrey, et al., *The Rise of Pasdaran*; M. Mahtab Alam Rizvi, 'Evaluating the Political and Economic Role of the IRGC', *Strategic Analysis* 36, No. 4 (2012).

42 Kevan Harris, 'All the Sepah's Men: Iran's Revolutionary Guards in Theory and Practice' in *Businessmen in Arms: How the Military and Other Armed Groups Profit in the MENA Region*, ed. Zainab Abul-Magd & Elke Grawert, (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016): p. 99.

43 Ayesha Siddiq, *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*, (Pluto Press, 2007).

44 Ayesha Siddiq, 'Military's Economic Role and Beyond', *RUSI Journal* 152, No. 6 (2007): p. 64.

45 Banerjee, 'Revolutionary Intelligence'.

to safeguard Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini from counterrevolutionaries.⁴⁶ Acting as a vanguard for the Supreme Leader, the IRGC emerged as ‘one of the main security pillars of the Islamic Republic’, carving a niche for itself as both ‘defender of the revolutionary order’ and ‘guardian of the Islamic state’s borders and territory’.⁴⁷ As opposed to the regular Artesh national army, which was viewed as loyal to Reza Shah Pahlavi, the IRGC promoted itself as an ‘organic military force’ and the revolutionary ‘brotherhood’ that built the Islamic Republic.⁴⁸ For the IRGC, the revolution represented the Islamisation of Iranian political society, after which the regime would define itself predominantly in a cultural sense, framing society within the context of revolutionary Shi’ite Islamic culture.⁴⁹ In this respect, the IRGC recognised two roles afforded to it by the revolution: safeguarding the Supreme Leader and related clerical establishment, and safeguarding the revolution from internal and external threats.

The revolution is not a distinct event that began and ended with the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. It is not a static moment in history. Rather, there is an ongoing revolution that the IRGC must continue to defend. Testament to this, IRGC leaders have stated that enemies of the revolution would feel the ‘reverberating impact of the hammer of the Islamic Revolution on their skulls’.⁵⁰ By promoting a ‘common sense’ understanding that enemies of the revolution are enemies of Iran, the IRGC justifies their continuing revolutionary fervour and aggression. Take, for example, the re-election of President Ahmadinejad in 2009. Protesters gathered to express discontent with the ‘implausibly fast ballot counting’ and ‘high levels of electoral support’ credited to Ahmadinejad.⁵¹ Though peaceful in nature, the violent response to the post-election protests demonstrate that for the IRGC, the revolution continues. By sustaining a narrative link to the 1979 revolution, the IRGC reiterate and reinforce a hegemonic understanding of the revolution as a state of being for Iran.

46 Ali Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will Be Mercantiled’, *The National Interest*, 11 February 2010.

47 Byman, et al., *Iran’s Security Policy*, p. 33–34.

48 Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will Be Mercantiled’.

49 Edward Wastnidge, ‘The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War’, *Politics* 35, № 3–4 (2014), p. 367.

50 Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, *Iran Report* 3, № 17 (2000).

51 Philip N. Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 3.

Holy Defence

Asserting and safeguarding revolutionary values remains central to the IRGC's strategic narrative. An example of this is the 1980 Iran-Iraq War. Referred to in Iran as the Imposed War or the Holy Defence, this event forms the second storyline contributing to the IRGC's strategic narrative.

Eighteen months following the revolution, Iraq invaded Iran, threatening the territorial foundation of the revolutionary state. For the IRGC, Iraq's invasion was confirmation of external threats facing the revolution and the system of clerical rule. It was a test of the Guards' revolutionary loyalty. The IRGC developed from a 'disorganised militia' into a 'complex and powerful organisation'.⁵² However, as neither side emerged as the decisive victor, the Iran-Iraq War has a complex legacy, leaving a 'strong imprint on Iranian defence thinking'.⁵³ It serves as a reminder that the revolutionary fervour of the IRGC did not achieve a clear victory for Iran, but instead cost between 350–400,000 Iranian lives.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, the IRGC have remained committed to presenting a war-like disposition in the public domain. They have succeeded in keeping its 'reality, dramas and combatants readily accessible' to Iranian citizens through numerous channels such as murals, broadcasts, and academic works.⁵⁵ For example, IRGC-affiliated academic institutions such as the Imam Husayn University have been publishing literature about the war since 1981, offering an IRGC-guided narration of the war. Moreover, such Persian-language journals as the Specialised Quarterly Journal for the Holy Defence are tasked with examining the 'eight-year regime war of Iraq's Ba'ath against the Islamic Republic'.⁵⁶ Regardless of the result, the Holy Defence is celebrated as a source of Iranian power and a reaffirmation of the revolutionary cause. Determined to transform the war from an 'unfortunate consequence of the Islamic Revolution into its most impressive achievement',⁵⁷ the IRGC have mythologised the war, using it as ammunition to promote their ideological position. The story of the war is framed and articulated so as to represent the IRGC as the undisputed victors, successfully upholding Iran's ideological and territorial integrity.

52 Ibid., p. 41; Annie Tracy Samuel, *Perceptions and Narratives of Security: The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Iran-Iraq War*, (Harvard Kennedy School: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs—Discussion Paper, 2012), p. 4.

53 Byman, et al., *Iran's Security Policy*, p. 35.

54 Ibid., p. 36.

55 Abedin, *Iran Resurgent*, p. 87.

56 Translated from 'About the Journal' section on website.

57 Samuel, *Perceptions and Narratives of Security*, p. 6–7.

Enemies and Opposition

Iran's war with Iraq is a powerful shaper of the IRGC's strategic narrative. Yet beyond that, the IRGC have continued to mythologise war as emblematic of the continuing need to defend the state against ideological enemies of the revolution. This perception of enemies and opposition comprises the final storyline of the IRGC's strategic narrative.

The aphorism that 'war made the state and the state made war' applies to the IRGC; war made the Guard and the Guard made war;⁵⁸ in particular, soft war. In Iran, soft war is presented as a 'concentrated, directed and strategic series of information-related actions [...] by the United States and the West', who coordinate to form a 'cultural NATO'.⁵⁹ For Ayatollah Khamene'i, soft war involves 'creating doubt in people's hearts and minds'.⁶⁰ For several senior IRGC commanders, it is an attempt by the West to drive a wedge between the people and the regime, to ensure that the revolutionary Islamic Republic ceases to be a model for the Islamic world.⁶¹ Soft war intentionally inverts the Western concept of soft power to reflect the cultural, information-based attacks against Iran by its enemies, who seek to influence the attitudes and behaviours of Iranian citizens.⁶² It encompasses 'all aspects of the system of understanding' deemed to be part of the informational 'battlefield'—including the arts, the media, and the educational system.⁶³ During Ahmadinejad's hard-line presidency, the concept commanded such extensive attention that the Iranian Majlis ratified a bill designating \$100 million to countering the soft war.⁶⁴

Constant reiteration of the idea that the Islamic Republic must not be victim to the enemies that seek its demise is linked to the 'soft war' storyline.

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58 Ibid.

59 Monroe E. Price, 'Iran and the Soft War', *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012), p. 2398.

60 Emily Blout, 'Iran's Soft War with the West: History, Myth, and Nationalism in the New Communications Age', *S.A.I.S. Review of International Affairs* 35, № 2 (2015), p. 44.

61 This sentiment is expressed in similar forms by Hojjatol Islam Saedi—former representative of the Supreme Leader in IRGC, referenced in Saeid Golkar, 'Iran's Revolutionary Guard: Its Views of the United States', *Middle East Policy* 21, № 2 (2014), p. 54, and Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi—former head of the IRGC, referenced in Wastnidge, 'The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power', p. 373.

62 Nima Adelpkhan, 'Iran Integrates the Concept of the 'Soft War' Into its Strategic Planning', *The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* 8, № 23 (2010).

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

Grounded in the Holy Defence storyline, IRGC leaders retain a firm belief that Western powers encouraged Saddam Hussein to invade Iran,⁶⁵ contributing to the ‘suspicion’ and ‘paranoia’ about foreign interference in Iran.⁶⁶

Additionally, there is a strong feeling of shared Shi’a victimhood driving the IRGC worldview. Ayatollah Khomeini in particular, held the view that the world was hostile to the ‘true Shi’a faith and to the intertwined interests of his nation’.⁶⁷ This sense of being surrounded by enemies of Iran and therefore, enemies of Shi’ism pervades the strategic narrative of both the neoconservative clerical establishment and the IRGC. Paradoxically, the IRGC’s strategic narrative is well served by maintaining enemies and continually reinforcing the notion that the Islamic Republic is under attack. It allows the IRGC to define Iran in diametric opposition to the enemies of the revolution and to profess that it is leading an ongoing resistance. In this view, the IRGC strategic narrative is a narrative of resistance, expressing defiance against threats to the revolution, externally imposed hard and soft war, and the enemies of the Iranian state.

Potential Sources of Legitimacy

To achieve a common understanding of the framing and articulation of reality, a strategic narrative must have persuasive value and therefore, both the message and the messenger must be considered legitimate.

First, the IRGC have been afforded institutional legitimacy. Following the revolution, Khomeini sought to convert the ‘institutions of revolutionary insurrection’ into ‘institutes of rule’.⁶⁸ The constitution requires that the IRGC be responsible not only for defending the borders, but also for the ‘ideological mission of holy war in the way of God and fighting to expand the rule of God’s law in the world’.⁶⁹ Moreover, it states that the IRGC will ‘remain active in order to continue [their] role in guarding the revolution and its offshoots’.⁷⁰ They are constitutionally mandated to safeguard the revolution and the system of clerical rule. This constitutional mandate has justified the IRGC’s development as an institution in itself. Militarily, the Guard maintain their own specialised armed

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65 Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, referenced in Samuel, *Perceptions and Narratives of Security*, p. 8.

66 This suspicion of foreign interference precedes the establishment of the Islamic Republic, referring also to the 1906 Constitutional Revolution and the coup against Mohammad Mossadegh – Straw, *The English Job*, p. 158.

67 Ibid., p. 221.

68 Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*, p. 107.

69 Samuel, *Perceptions and Narratives of Security*, p. 2.

70 Ibid.

unit with resources to manufacture weaponry; they dominate ballistic missile production in Iran and play a central role in the state nuclear program. The institutional breadth of the IRGC is vast; they are viewed as both an institutional extension of the state and the mouthpiece of the revolutionary Republic.

Second, the IRGC's strategic narrative has derived legitimacy from its recognition as the state's premiere hard power institution. As the war has been mythologised, so too has the role of the IRGC in fighting external threats. The initial 'image of resistance' and battle has been transformed into a 'mythology of the Revolutionary Guard' affording credibility to their projection of a resistance narrative.⁷¹ This image is reflected in the IRGC's emblem, showing a clenched fist holding a rifle, above which stands a verse from the Qur'an: 'prepare against them whatever arms and cavalry you can muster'.⁷² The emblem symbolises a 'rallying cry for righteous militancy',⁷³ and is a reminder of the Guard's militant origins in liberating the Islamic Republic from Shah Pahlavi and Western influence. As soldiers of the ongoing revolution, the Guardsmen act in an official capacity, using force as directed by the Supreme Leader. In their exercise of force during the 2009 post-election protests, the Revolutionary Guard claimed that their use of violence was legitimate and carried out in defence of the Islamic Republic. As a political entity, the IRGC enjoys the right to deploy violence just as Weber argues a legitimised state does.⁷⁴ In this 'devolution of state control over violence' to the Revolutionary Guard,⁷⁵ legitimacy is derived in part from their role as the state's military.

A final source of legitimacy is the identity of the group itself. The Guard position themselves as concomitant with the birth of the Islamic Republic, affording their own strategic narrative legitimacy. During the war, Khomeini attributed a sense of divine authorisation to the IRGC, declaring the war to be a contest between the forces of God and forces of an apostate.⁷⁶ This has contributed greatly to the way in which the Guard see themselves. In projecting themselves as a credible ideological cadre, the IRGC have justified their own institutional legitimacy to such an extent that they view themselves as superior to the Artesh in Iran's dual military structure.

71 Ansari, 'The Revolution Will Be Mercantized'.

72 Afshon Ostovar, 'Guardians of the Islamic Revolution: Ideology, Politics, and the Development of Military Power in Iran (1979–2009)', (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2009), p. 112.

73 Ibid.

74 Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Talcott Parson, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1964).

75 Ahrām, *Proxy Warriors*, p. 1.

76 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, p. 62–63.

The IRGC are uniformed, armed, and trained like the Artesh, but rather than being subservient to the military establishment, the Guard report directly to the Supreme Leader.⁷⁷ In viewing themselves as a vanguard, the IRGC associate themselves with the Supreme Leader's divine authority and his clerical establishment. They are a self-professed extension of the religious state.

The IRGC's Economy

Open for Business

When he began his tenure as Iran's fourth president in 1989, Abkar Hashemi Rafsanjani inherited a post-revolution, post-war economy. He adopted a two-pronged approach to reforming this economy, both involving the IRGC. First, the Guard were tasked with rebuilding infrastructure that had been damaged during the war. Second, Rafsanjani encouraged entrepreneurship amongst state organisations. In particular, the IRGC were provided with a cut of oil income as seed money to invest in various strategic sectors of the economy.⁷⁸ One such investment was in the defence industry. Under Shah Pahlavi, Iran had been reliant on the West for its defence technology. Following the revolution and the assertion of anti-Western sentiment, the new regime focused on the development of a native defence industry 'almost entirely controlled by the Revolutionary Guard'.⁷⁹ This extended the mandate of the IRGC from safeguarding the revolution in an exclusively military capacity to include the economic arena.

Rafsanjani built on what Ayatollah Khomeini and Iran's post-revolution constitution had done to consolidate the post-war economic role of the IRGC. Article 147 of the constitution states that 'in times of peace, the government must utilise the personal and technical equipment of the Army in relief operations, for educational and productive ends, and [for] the Reconstruction Campaign'.⁸⁰ Moreover, Article 150 assigns to the IRGC the role of 'protecting the Revolution and its achievements'.⁸¹ These constitutional phrases entrenched the IRGC's role in the economy. Intentionally broad, they enabled IRGC

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⁷⁷ Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard: The Threat That Grows While America Sleeps*, (Potomac Books, 2012), p. xii.

⁷⁸ Wehrey, et al., *The Rise of Pasdaran*, p. 110.

⁷⁹ Safavi, 'In the Aftermath of Iran's Latest Revolution', p. 212.

⁸⁰ Islamic Republic of Iran, *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, (Tehran: Islamic Propagation Organisation, 1979), p. 32.

⁸¹ Ibid.

commanders to interpret ‘productive ends’ as encompassing ‘economic, societal, and cultural developmental programs’.⁸² Consolidating this economic role, Ayatollah Khomeini stated that ‘should [the] Islamic revolution be endangered economically, we will see how the Guards will be engaged in the economy’.⁸³ The post-revolution constitution signalled that the IRGC was effectively open for business and set to become a key player in the Iranian economy.

Ahmadinejad & IRGC Inc.

Rafsanjani may have introduced the IRGC to economic activity, but their rise as an ‘unmeritocratic economic elite’ was consolidated under President Ahmadinejad.⁸⁴ IRGC economic empowerment underwent a ‘noticeable acceleration during Ahmadinejad’s presidency’.⁸⁵ In part, this was due to a ‘symbiosis’ between the leader and the Guard.⁸⁶ A former IRGC commander, Ahmadinejad was linked to the ‘close-knit network of [IRGC] factions’ and shared their strong sense of ‘entitlement to power as true sons of the revolution’.⁸⁷ Based on this ideological affinity, Ahmadinejad afforded the Guard preferential economic treatment. No-bid contracts were awarded to IRGC-affiliated firms, former IRGC members were elected to key government positions, and the regime increased control of state banks to finance the IRGC’s economic activities.⁸⁸ Effectively, Ahmadinejad ‘let them off the leash’.⁸⁹

Ahmadinejad allowed the IRGC to manage Iran’s largest infrastructure projects. The IRGC’s infrastructure project management can be categorised into two economic arms—the IRGC-Cooperation Fund (IRGC-CF) and the Khatam al-Anbia Construction Base (KCB). The IRGC-CF is comprised of a complex network of Orbit 1 companies and Orbit 2 companies. In Orbit 1 companies, the IRGC-CF is directly represented on the board of directors, whilst in Orbit 2 companies, there appears to be no direct representation and therefore, seemingly no links to the IRGC-CF. Whilst Orbit 2 companies appear independent of the IRGC, they maintain ties to the directly affiliated companies, and therefore

82 Brigadier Gen. Hossein Yasini, quoted in Ali Alfoneh, *How Intertwined Are the Revolutionary Guards in Iran’s Economy*, (American Enterprise Institute, 2007), p. 2.

83 Ali Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guard is Transforming Iran from Theocracy into Military Dictatorship*, (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 2013), p. 179.

84 Abedin, *Iran Resurgent*, p. 11.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

86 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, p. 12.

87 Ehteshami, & Zweisei, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives*, p. 75.

88 Nader Habibi, ‘The Economic Legacy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’, *Middle East Brief* № 74 (2013): p. 5-6.

89 Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will be Mercantilized’.

remain under indirect IRGC influence.⁹⁰ Baharahn Gostar Kish for example, is an information technology and communications company that has no formal links to the IRGC-CF, with no IRGC members on the board of directors.⁹¹ However, two board members represent Baharahn and Mowj Nasr Gostar, which are both Orbit 1 companies, meaning that the company still effectively falls under the IRGC economy.

KCB runs its business relationships through four construction bases, each of which operates multiple companies.⁹² KCB qualifies as Iran's largest infrastructure and project management contractor.⁹³ Shortly after Ahmadinejad asked KCB to enter the oil and gas industry to 'satisfy the domestic needs of the country', the Oil Ministry awarded KCB an \$850 million pipeline project and later a project worth \$7 billion.⁹⁴ Ahmadinejad justified such extensive IRGC involvement in strategic economic sectors by suggesting that the IRGC were less vulnerable to 'corruption and inefficiency' than an alternative economic elite.⁹⁵ In broadening their remit to involvement in strategic economic sectors, Ahmadinejad encouraged the IRGC to develop as an infrastructure investment arm of the regime through IRGC-CF and KCB.

Iran's Communications Economy

The rapid emergence of the communications economy in Iran as one of the 'fastest growing economic sectors'⁹⁶ coincided with Ahmadinejad's presidency. In 2008, Iran had 23 million Internet users, amongst a population of 72 million.⁹⁷ By the end of Ahmadinejad's first term in office in 2009, this number had risen to 27.9 million users, accounting for approximately 34% of the population.⁹⁸ In the same year, Iran had 30.2 million mobile phone users,⁹⁹ all participating in the communications economy.

90 BBC Monitoring, 'Explainer: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and the economy—a complex web', *BBC Monitoring Insight*, 27 September 2018.

91 *Ibid.*

92 BBC Monitoring, 'Explainer: Revolution Guards' construction base, Iran's economic behemoth', *BBC Monitoring Insight*, 14 November 2018.

93 Abedin, *Iran Recurgent*, p. 248.

94 Alfoneh, *The Revolutionary Guards' Looting of Iran's Economy*, p.1.

95 Abedin, *Iran Recurgent*, p. 248.

96 Annabelle Sreberny, & Gholam Khiabany, *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran*, (I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2010), p. 2.

97 Sara B. Elson, et al., *Using Social Media to Gauge Iranian Public Opinion and Mood After the 2009 Election*, (RAND Corporation, 2012), p. 11.

98 *Ibid.*

99 Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media*, (Freedom House, Washington, DC, 2009).

As the system of ownership and distribution relating to dynamic communications infrastructure, the communications economy can be understood as a sum of the institutions and infrastructure that form it. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, media and telecommunications infrastructure sat at the heart of the Iranian communications economy. Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) held a monopoly over media infrastructure, dominating radio and television services. Subordinate to the Supreme Leader, IRIB acted in an official capacity as the state broadcaster.¹⁰⁰ It maintained five international news channels, complemented by numerous comprehensive news websites available in Persian and the languages of the target audiences. According to Article 175 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 'freedom of expression and dissemination of ideas must be granted through the mass media of the Islamic Republic of Iran'.¹⁰¹ Consequently, IRIB held a legal monopoly over broadcasting, and was tasked with the 'audio-visual policy' of the Islamic Republic.¹⁰²

In addition to media infrastructure, telecommunications infrastructure was vital to the communications economy under President Ahmadinejad. The Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI) maintained a monopoly over the telecommunications industry and in 2010, was the largest listed company by market capitalisation in Iran.¹⁰³ The extent of TCI control over communications infrastructure during Ahmadinejad's presidency should not be underestimated. TCI managed approximately thirty provincial subsidiaries and two brand companies.¹⁰⁴ Through these subsidiaries and companies, TCI provided internet access, mobile phone services, landline telephone services, wireless services, and data services. Under the TCI banner, the Data Communication Company of Iran (DCI) held a monopoly over internet connectivity, with all internet traffic being directed through DCI and, therefore, TCI infrastructure.¹⁰⁵ TCI also managed the Mobile Telecommunication Company of Iran (MCI), which provided the infrastructure for mobile telephony services.¹⁰⁶ Essentially, any mobile or fixed-line phone user in Iran was interacting with TCI infrastructure.

100 Wastnidge, 'The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power', p. 372–73.

101 Islamic Republic of Iran, *The Constitution*, p. 36.

102 Pierre Pahlavi, 'Understanding Iran's Media Diplomacy', *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 6, No 2 (2012), p. 22.

103 Turquoise Partners, *Iran Investment Monthly* 4, No 50 (2010), p. 3.

104 Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, p. 6.

105 Sreberny & Khiabany, *Blogistan*, p. 2.

106 Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled*, p. 165.

Article 44 of the Constitution sets forth a key principle that is central to ownership of communications infrastructure, specifying that the state will operate a planned economy, maintaining ownership of strategic industries such as foreign trade, banking, energy sources, and, most notably for our topic, radio, television, telegraph, and telephone services.¹⁰⁷ It institutionalises state control of the communications economy. However, in 2004, (just prior to Ahmadinejad's election in 2005), Ayatollah Khamene'i issued a decree reversing Article 44, ordering 25% of state-owned assets to be privatised within 5 years.¹⁰⁸ \$120 billion worth of government assets were sold as part of Khamene'i's decree. Yet, the largest purchaser of privatised government assets was the IRGC, which received favourable terms from the Ahmadinejad regime.¹⁰⁹ Under the guise of de jure privatisation, state-owned assets were de facto militarised.

A small number of other actors were involved in Ahmadinejad's communications economy. Some private companies did exist in the non-governmental sector; however, they were still accountable to the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology of Iran and the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance,¹¹⁰ and so cannot be understood as independent of the state. Baharahn Gostar Kish—an Orbit 2 company involved in IT and telecommunications—is a good example of this fictional separation between public and private in Iran's communications economy. Several foreign companies did maintain business relationships with the Iranian government during Ahmadinejad's presidency. For example, TCI was a long-standing client of the Nokia Siemens Network, one of the world's largest telecommunications infrastructure companies.¹¹¹ Such companies must be considered part of the Iranian communications economy.

The IRGC's Investment Portfolio

Regardless of non-governmental sector and foreign corporation involvement, the communications economy remained the domain of the state and its affiliates.¹¹² The most extensive ownership claim to the communications

107 Islamic Republic of Iran, *The Constitution*, p. 13.

108 Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled*, p. 167; O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, p. 127.

109 Ibid.

110 Howard, *The Digital Origins*, p. 121–22.

111 Judith Schrempf, 'Nokia Siemens Networks: Just Doing Business—or Supporting an Oppressive Regime?', *Journal of Business Ethics* 103, № 1 (2011), p. 9

112 Niki Akhavan, *Electronic Iran: The Cultural Politics of an Online Evolution*, (Rutgers University Press, 2013).

economy lay with the increasingly commercialised IRGC. Their place in the Iranian communications economy can be understood through several activities involving the ownership and distribution of communications infrastructure.

First, under Ahmadinejad, the IRGC expanded their media operations, frequently engaging with media infrastructure. In 2007, they launched Press TV as a 24-hour English-language news network.¹¹³ Press TV aimed to provide a ‘new type of state media’ competing globally with Sunni-Arab channels such as Al-Arabiyah and with Western channels such as CNN and BBC World News.¹¹⁴ The channel was affiliated with IRIB and maintained a close relationship with Ahmadinejad’s conservative political faction. Furthermore, in 2009, the IRGC launched the Atlas press agency, modelled on international agencies such as Al-Jazeera.¹¹⁵ The IRGC also maintained several weekly magazines and websites to highlight its positive contributions to bettering the Iranian nation, including Sobh-e Sadegh, Basij News, and Sepah News.¹¹⁶ The vast number of media organisations, all associated with the IRIB conglomerate and sponsored by the Supreme Leader, afforded the IRGC a significant role in the wider media infrastructure.

Second, the IRGC asserted their role in the communications economy through two significant developments in telecommunications infrastructure involving MTN Irancell and TCI. MTN Irancell was launched in 2005, at the start of Ahmadinejad’s presidency, as a telecommunications company that provided 2G and 3G connections and fixed wireless internet services. MTN Irancell was a joint venture between the South Africa-based MTN Group and the Iran Electronic Development Company (IEDC). A subsidiary company of the Iranian Ministry of Defence, IEDC maintained close ties with the Revolutionary Guard. Following the IRGC’s opposition to foreign involvement in Iran’s strategic telecommunications sector, IEDC negotiated 51% ownership of the MTN Irancell joint venture,¹¹⁷ ensuring that the military had a majority stake in the newly formed telecommunications infrastructure.

In addition to rejecting foreign majority ownership in Iranian telecommunications infrastructure, IRGC telecommunications activity was driven largely

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113 Price, ‘Iran and the Soft War’, p. 2407.

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.

116 Wehrey, et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, p. 49.

117 Ibid., p. 59.

by 'lucrative no-bid contracts awarded by the Iranian government'.¹¹⁸ Testament to this, in September 2009, shortly after the violent protests following Ahmadinejad's re-election, the government announced plans to privatise TCI. Amongst the investors were numerous IRGC-backed institutions, including the IRGC-CF, the Mostazafan Foundation, and the Execution of the Imam's Order company.¹¹⁹ Minutes after TCI was privatised, the IRGC acquired 51% of the company in a \$5 billion deal¹²⁰—the 'largest trade in the history of the Tehran Stock Exchange'.¹²¹ This represented 'yet another calculated step' in the IRGC's campaign to dominate Iran's communications economy.¹²² Rather than using IEDC as a front, as they had done in 2005, the IRGC had overtly purchased a majority stake in TCI's monopoly over Iranian telecommunications.

Reliance of the IRGC's Strategic Narrative on the Communications Economy

We have shown that the IRGC's strategic narrative is based on three main storylines—Revolution, Holy Defence, and Enemies and Opposition—and have demonstrated how the strategic narrative is legitimised and therefore has persuasive value. We have also established that the role of IRGC in the communications economy expanded under President Ahmadinejad, whose policies allowed the Guard to capitalise on their ownership of media and telecommunications infrastructure and to assert their negotiating power as a business conglomerate. Now, we will turn to analysing the extent to which the strategic narrative of the IRGC relied on the state's communications economy.

The 'Construction Jihad'

Propagating revolutionary ideology is central to the IRGC's strategic narrative. Recognising that the economy is a communicative tool, and that communications infrastructure can be politicised to advance the interests of political actors,¹²³ the IRGC used the communications economy to promote their ideological messages. The use of the communications economy as an ideological tool is best exemplified by IRGC ownership of Iran's media

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118 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, p. 6.

119 Sreberny & Khiabany, *Blogistan*, p. 5.

120 Ibid.

121 Alfoneh, 'The Revolutionary Guards' Looting of Iran's Economy', p. 5.

122 Alfoneh, 'All the Guard's Men', p. 77.

123 McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics*; Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*, p. 151.

infrastructure. Acting in a ‘system-supportive propaganda function’, the media infrastructure shapes perceptions and consolidates ‘norms’, critically reinforcing what Gramsci referred to as ‘common sense’ with regard to the people’s understanding of the Iranian political landscape.¹²⁴

Of significance to the IRGC was the notion that the communications economy of media infrastructure could be conditioned through ownership and distribution to carry with it a specific ideology. The ideology of the Islamic Republic and Ahmadinejad’s hardline regime was reinforced through media infrastructure; cultural norms could be established and reiterated until irrefutable. Functioning as a vanguard to Khamene’i and Ahmadinejad, the Revolutionary Guard assigned a distinctly ‘ideological tenor’ to their activities,¹²⁵ including their involvement in the communications economy. Media infrastructure was used as an additional ideological conduit, through which the government could ‘control news and political commentary’ in support of the regime’s ideology and thus, sustain a revolutionary identity.¹²⁶ Through the aforementioned outlets Sepah News, Sobh-e Sadegh, and others, the communications economy enabled the Guard to control and centralise cultural production, placing its strategic narrative at the centre, whilst rejecting or side-lining any narratives that challenged its ideological frame.

For the IRGC, ownership and control of the media was a vital aspect of the ‘Construction Jihad’. Article 147 of the Constitution discusses the post-war Reconstruction Campaign and mandates the economic involvement of the IRGC.¹²⁷ Following the initial efforts to reconstruct the economy, owning and distributing media and telecommunications infrastructure was viewed as necessary for the ongoing Construction Jihad; the construction of infrastructure in the name of defending the Islamic Republic. That there is no limit to ‘protecting the revolution and its achievements’¹²⁸ means that the Construction Jihad—with infrastructure development led by the IRGC—must be sustained. Consequently, the Guard became reliant on the communications economy both to supply a purpose for its activities, and to provide an effective and constitutionally recognised channel for transmitting its strategic narrative.

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124 Chomsky & Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, p. 306; Howard, *The Digital Origins*, p. 80–81; Roxane Farmanfarman, *Iran’s Rhetoric Aggression: Instrumentalizing Foreign Policy Power through the Media*, (Centre for the Study of the International Relations of the Middle East and North Africa, 2017), p. 6.

125 Abedin, *Iran Resurgent*, p. 3.

126 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, p. 7; Wehrey et al., *The Rise of Pasdaran*, p. 49.

127 Islamic Republic of Iran, *The Constitution*, p. 32.

128 Ibid.

Thus, the construction of infrastructure came to be seen as necessary for the ideological defence—or jihad—of the Islamic Republic.

The Invisible Hand of the IRGC

However, the reliance of the IRGC's strategic narrative on the communications economy concerns more than explicitly ideological motivations; a distinctly coercive element can also be identified. Beyond their devotion to the Construction Jihad, the Guard relied on the communications economy as a tool of power projection, expanding their coercive hand in Iranian political society.

Communications infrastructure, particularly media and telecommunications licenses, are a source of state revenue. As discussed in the previous section, the communications economy is lucrative for those involved. Ahmadinejad's regime faced a dichotomy between reaping the 'business benefits of a modern information infrastructure', whilst simultaneously preventing the communication of political criticism of the regime or of the broader Islamic revolutionary system.¹²⁹ Therefore, communications infrastructure was treated as a political asset. Whilst the regime *de jure* separated telecommunications providers and regulators from the direct control of the Iranian state, *de facto* control was 'rarely surrendered by privatisation'.¹³⁰ Khamene'i's Article 44 decree shows that the legal separation between state and assets allowed leaders to remain influential in the communications economy by appointing politically like-minded affiliates. By militarising, rather than privatising the economy, the regime transferred ownership from 'relatively transparent parts of the public sector to other parts of the public sector shielded from public scrutiny', such as the Revolutionary Guard.¹³¹

It is in this fictional separation between the public and private sector in Iran that the invisible hand of the IRGC can be assessed. Power projection and realpolitik remained central to the Guard's strategic thinking to the same extent as their ideological devotion.¹³² The Revolutionary Guard's penetration of strategic sectors of the Iranian polity provided 'power to the corps in national-level decision-making'.¹³³ In asserting its role within the communications economy, the Guard acted as an extension of the state—the economic arm

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129 Howard, *The Digital Origins*, p. 80-81.

130 Ibid.

131 Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled*, p. 167.

132 Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, p. xiv.

133 Ibid., p. 46; Sarah Alaoui, *Tired Narratives, Weary Publics*, (Center for American Progress, October 2018), p. 1.

of Ahmadinejad's regime and the related clerical establishment—and in return received greater influence as a political actor.

Developing nationalised communications infrastructure improved the 'management capacity of the state', allowing the IRGC to manage social risks more effectively.¹³⁴ In order to counter activism online and offline, particularly during the 2009 protests, the IRGC authorised a number of media and telecommunications infrastructure restrictions, including censorship, filtering, surveillance, and access speed constraints.¹³⁵ The communications economy acted as a social management tool; the IRGC manipulated communications infrastructure to suppress protests and justify the exercise of their strategic narrative. Regulation of the communications economy became a 'necessary element' of control and coercion, forcing society into a state of conformity by 'exercis[ing] power at a distance'.¹³⁶ The IRGC monitored dissent online, observing protesters and their networks and tracking the organisation of protests, then enforced punishment offline through arrest or detention. The Revolutionary Guard's control of the communications economy ensured that the protests did not result in institutional change. In effect, it facilitated the manipulation of mass society into passivity.¹³⁷ Consequently, both the projection of the strategic narrative storyline of an ongoing attack that required defence of the revolution by the Guard, and their violently putting the narrative into effect, depended on the Guard's control of the communications economy.

A Military-Commercial Complex

Whilst the IRGC's strategic narrative relied on the communications economy as a tool through which to broadcast revolutionary ideology and project power over society, it also relied on communications infrastructure as a tool of its articulated defence against enemies and opposition. The ownership and distribution of communications infrastructure supported the IRGC's strategic message of the threat of soft war and of the persistence of enemies of the revolution.

The notion that the West was 'softly preparing [its] target society [Iran] to become a

134 Howard, *The Digital Origins*, p. 57; Joshua Teitelbaum, 'Dueling for "Da'Wa": State vs. Society on the Saudi Internet', *Middle East Journal* 56, No 2 (2002).

135 Akamai Report, 'The State of the Internet: 2nd Quarter, 2009', *State of the Internet Connectivity Reports* 2, No 2 (2009), p. 11, 38; Sreberny & Khiabany, *Blogistan*, p. 24.

136 Laleh D. Ebrahimi, 'Socio-Economic Development in Iran through Information and Communications Technology', *Middle East Journal* 57, No 1 (2003), p. 98; Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*, p. 150.

137 Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 107.

more intense demander of democratic change' necessitated an integrated defence, activating all aspects of the Iranian political, cultural, and economic system.¹³⁸

Based on their extensive reach in the communications economy, the IRGC orchestrated a 'comprehensive messaging strategy' using radio and television broadcasts, newspapers, websites, and social media accounts to amplify the message that the Islamic Republic was under attack from the West.¹³⁹ Using media infrastructure to promote state ideology and telecommunications infrastructure to censor online conversations and 'neutralise' rhetoric targeting Iran,¹⁴⁰ the IRGC actively engaged the communications economy in defending the Islamic Republic against the soft war tactics of the West.

From a business perspective, the IRGC capitalised on Ahmadinejad's conceptualisation of the soft war, creating a military-commercial complex in which the Guard benefitted from the construction of a perceived and persistent threat. Communications infrastructure was both at risk from the soft war, but also a necessary point of control for defence. Whilst publicly promoting rhetoric about national security and the defence of Shi'ite Islamic culture,¹⁴¹ the IRGC was sustaining a military-commercial complex that benefitted them financially. The IRGC and the Iranian communications economy maintained a close partnership, with both taking advantage of the articulation of a soft war. Consequently, the IRGC strategic narrative was reliant on the communications economy as a tool of persuasion in their ideological soft war and simultaneously, the communications economy benefitted from IRGC investment.

Safeguarding the Revolution, But Also Our Own Interests...

It is here, in the IRGC's relationship with the communications economy that the tension between ideology and opportunism can be identified. The emerging military-commercial complex—a union between the IRGC and the communications economy of media and telecommunications infrastructure—provided opportunity for an increasingly profit-driven and self-interested Revolutionary Guard. It must be considered that the IRGC's dealings with the communications economy were driven not only by their ideological convictions, but also by the opportunistic organisation of career-driven members of the Guard.

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138 Price, 'Iran and the Soft War', p. 2398.

139 Alaoui, *Tired Narratives, Weary Publics*, p. 5.

140 Ibid.

141 Howard, *The Digital Origins*, p. 82.

The IRGC is motivated by ideological and non-ideological stimuli.¹⁴² IRGC involvement in the laser eye surgery or luxury goods industry in Iran for example, is not driven by ideological concerns based on the Construction Jihad or the soft war defence. Rather, there is a notably profit-driven motive to the Guard's economic involvement. Just as soft war rhetoric allowed the Guard to control communications infrastructure as part of their defence, ideology was used to 'mask a preference for opportunism and realpolitik'.¹⁴³ Indeed, this notable development in the ethos of the Guard requires a comment on demography. By the time Ahmadinejad ascended to the presidency in 2005, younger IRGC recruits were too young to recall the revolution or to have experienced the war.¹⁴⁴ Although they were trained to maintain a 'hunger' for opportunities to win glory and recognition to the same degree that officers during the revolution and the Holy Defence had,¹⁴⁵ this new generation of officers was driven more by opportunism. As such, the involvement of the IRGC in the communications economy under Ahmadinejad was reflective of an ideological, but also increasingly opportunistic Revolutionary Guard.

Indeed, the development of the IRGC as an organisation is marked by the increasing importance of individuals and personal networks. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, the IRGC developed as a 'network' and a 'brotherhood'.¹⁴⁶ The Guard were no longer simply a 'violent group of young men'; their leaders were making careers of their service to the Guard rather than returning to civilian life.¹⁴⁷ The IRGC acts as a business fraternity within which members of the Guard can progress along a prescribed career path. Following active service, IRGC members are offered senior positions in state-affiliated media organisations and telecommunications networks such as IRIB, TCI, and MTN Irancell. Accordingly, 'no one ever leaves the IRGC'; its senior officers are viewed as an Iranian 'freemasonry' and 'Ivy League network',¹⁴⁸ signalling that the IRGC exceeds ideological devotion.

142 Byman et al., *Iran's Security Policy*, p. 1.

143 Wehrey et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, p. xiii–xiv.

144 Ansari, 'The Revolution Will be Mercantitized'; Golkar, 'Iran's Revolutionary Guard', p. 59–60.

145 Alfonch, 'All the Guard's Men', p. 78; Rizvi, 'Evaluating the Political and Economic Role of the IRGC', p. 584–96.

146 Ansari, 'The Revolution Will be Mercantitized'; Byman et al., *Iran's Security Policy*, p. 4.

147 O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, p. xiv.

148 Anonymous British diplomat, quoted in Straw, *The English Job*, p. 339.

Military capital raised by the Guard was used for the ‘personal benefit of the military fraternity’ and particularly, the officer cadre, constituting what Siddiqā terms an ‘officer economy’.¹⁴⁹ When ‘privatising’ the national media and telecommunications infrastructure, the Ahmadinejad regime sold its majority stake to the IRGC, blending its mission of national security with ‘investor profits’.¹⁵⁰ In holding senior economic positions in communications infrastructure companies and accruing profits, the IRGC became a ‘moneymaking machine that imp[ed] on the growth of the private sector’ for the purpose of personal gain.¹⁵¹ The IRGC’s opportunistic and exploitative involvement in the communications economy facilitated a system of military crony capitalism within Ahmadinejad’s Iran. The Guard reinvested their profits from the communications economy in IRGC-CF and KCB infrastructure projects, funding the elite officer cadre. The IRGC grew to depend on the communications economy to support the personal and financial endeavours of the Guard, who valued safeguarding their own self-interest to the same extent as they valued safeguarding the revolution.

Conclusion

This article has questioned the extent to which the strategic narrative of the IRGC was reliant on the Iranian communications economy under President Ahmadinejad. I argued that the IRGC’s strategic narrative was reliant on the communications economy to the extent that it acted as an ideological channel, a coercive tool of power projection, and a persuasive tool of defence. I also proposed that in addition to the strategic narrative, the IRGC as an institution was reliant on the communications economy as a source of capital gain.

More broadly, this article identified tensions between public and private, coercion and persuasion, and ideological projection and capital gain; such tensions characterised the Guard’s involvement in the communications economy under Ahmadinejad. Primarily emboldened by Khamene’i’s Article 44 decree, the IRGC used the fictional separation between the public and private sectors in Iran to facilitate its rise as an economic conglomerate. Whilst the IRGC relied on the communications economy as a tool of coercion and social management during the 2009 protests, they also required its use as a tool of persuasion in the soft war defence against the soft war. Most significantly, the analysis presented

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¹⁴⁹ Siddiqā, *Military Inc.*, p. 1.

¹⁵⁰ Howard, *The Digital Origins*, p. 60.

¹⁵¹ Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled*, p. 165.

here confirms that whilst the Guard relied on the communications economy to propagate their ideology, they also acquired and monopolised communications infrastructure as a source of capital gain. The Guard's involvement with the communications economy moved beyond the projection of revolutionary ideology, becoming equally a matter of realpolitik and of accruing military capital. The communications economy allowed the IRGC both to project the state ideology as part of its initial mandate and to satisfy self-interest.

This study offers two contributions. First, it has examined Iran from a perspective that moves beyond its characterisation as a nuclear state. In focusing on the IRGC exclusively, the analysis has demonstrated that Iran cannot be viewed as a monolithic, unidimensional polity and the IRGC cannot simply be understood as a coercive institution. Second, this study contributes to the limited literature on the relationship between strategic communications and the economy. It offers a new perspective on how strategic narratives are projected through economies, and particularly through communications economies. Whilst strategic narratives construct the truth, communications economies enable control over communicative processes; both reinforce one another to create a hegemonic understanding of reality that supports a political actor's values, interests, or objectives.

The strategic communications of the IRGC is complex and multifaceted, but this study has demonstrated that the communications economy is one tool that it uses to influence the target society and to cultivate consent. The communications economy ultimately reinforces a hegemonic understanding in which the IRGC remain central to Iranian defence and resistance. By controlling the material organisation of communication, the IRGC control part of the process of influence in Iran, ensuring that their strategic narrative and perception of reality remain dominant to the point of irrefutability. The Guard, perhaps, are on their way to creating their own ideologically imbued versions of AT&T, Verizon, and Vodafone.

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