

The Next Battlefield for Iran's Generals is the Movies

How Iran's Revolutionary Guards is changing the landscape of Iranian cinema

Kaveh Abbasian

In February 2021, Mahmoud Alavi, Iran's minister of intelligence, and Ehsan Mohammad-Hassani, the chair of the Owj Arts and Media Organization, which is backed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), went on national television on two separate occasions. In their interviews, they boasted about their recent filmmaking endeavors, and by doing so, they confirmed an open secret of Iranian cinema: A large number of films and television series made in Iran are ordered and funded by the security forces.

In these somewhat surprising television appearances, first Mohammad-Hassani proudly declared how the IRGC and figures such as Gen. Qassem Soleimani led the production of their films. Soon after that, Alavi went on air to name every film and television series that the Ministry of Intelligence had recently produced. Names of many influential filmmakers were mentioned, creating a storm on Iran's social media. The secret that was for years denied and ridiculed by officials and their associated filmmakers had suddenly become public knowledge. For that, the public had the rivalry between President Hassan Rouhani's "moderate" government and the IRGC to thank.

In Iran's power structure, the IRGC holds a unique and constantly evolving place, and its rivalry with other centers of power is nothing new. Commanded by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, it was initially founded in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Revolution by the order of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Starting as an ideologically driven militia, the IRGC quickly established itself as a military force parallel to Iran's conventional army but with extraterritorial branches operating across the region. After the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988, it gradually stretched its arms deep into the country's political, cultural, and economic structures. Certain activities, such as taking control of large parts of the economy, setting up an elaborate intelligence organization, and developing the missile program, came naturally to the IRGC, while others, like establishing their rule over the country's cultural production, required maneuvering in relatively unfamiliar territory. However, with careful planning and mobilization, the IRGC eventually managed to create a cultural stronghold through which it not only produces and disseminates propaganda but also filters out dissident filmmakers whom it can interrogate in jail.

To create this cultural stronghold, the IRGC first needed a front and then the helping hand of ideologically dedicated filmmakers who had proved their loyalty. In 2011, the IRGC founded the Owj Arts and Media Organization. The events surrounding the 2009 Iranian presidential election, known as the Green Movement, were crucial in the IRGC's efforts to create this organization, which provides a means through which it defends the "barricade

of the revolution” against “foreign cultural raids.” With money pouring in from the country’s most prosperous conglomerate, namely the IRGC, the Owj Organization established itself as a determined and forceful movement of cultural production in service of the IRGC and Khomeini’s domestic, regional, and even international ambitions. While the Owj Organization’s activities include plays, street banners, murals, and music videos, it has mostly come to be known for ideologically motivated films and television programs. This attempt to shape the landscape of Iran’s film industry is not without precedent. In fact, several filmmakers who are now making films with the Owj Organization come from a generation of Iranian filmmakers who started their careers during a similar cultural campaign amid the idealistic days after the 1979 Revolution.

The 1979 Revolution and the subsequent rule of the Islamic Republic brought about a campaign of Islamization of all aspects of life in Iran. “In an Islamic country, everything must be Islamic,” said Khomeini. This meant that apart from laws, foreign policy, the education system, and other such civic domains, Iranians’ artistic and cultural experiences were also to be subjected to significant changes. Khomeini’s followers, who considered cinema to be a symbol of Western decadence and sin, showed their long-standing anger toward this modern medium by attacking cinema venues and setting them on fire. This mob attack was complemented by hostile actions of revolutionary officials. The impact of this joint onslaught was significant, and during the months leading up to and immediately following the 1979 Revolution, 180 out of 451 cinema venues across the whole country were burned, demolished, or shut down. However, while Khomeini had declared Iranian cinema to be a “center of vice,” he quickly added that, “We are not opposed to cinema; we are opposed to vice. ... Cinema is one of the symbols of modernity that should be in the service of the people, in the service of the education of the people.”

Interpreting these as guidelines, the new revolutionary rulers did not aim for an outright annihilation of cinema but rather its “cleansing” and “purification” from what they considered non-Islamic. Many film professionals were prosecuted, banned, imprisoned, and even executed. Many others fled the country along with a vast number of other Iranians who chose a life in exile. Filmmakers who survived the initial purge had to adapt themselves to the newly emerged concept of “Islamic cinema.” Many young Islamic revolutionaries who had no prior experience in filmmaking joined this campaign and started to make their own “Islamic films.” Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who later changed course and became a favorite of Western film festivals, was among such early “Islamic filmmakers.” According to his own account, he hadn’t set foot in a cinema until after the revolution.

While at first this “Islamic cinema” didn’t seem to be a successful campaign — it was theoretically confused and aesthetically primitive — the idea for a new type of politically and ideologically motivated film found a foothold during the Iran-Iraq War, or as it is officially referred to inside Iran, the “sacred defense.” Accordingly, the official title given to the state-funded filmmaking movement associated with the war was Sacred Defense Cinema. Many filmmakers, such as Ebrahim Hatamikia and Rasoul Mollagholipour, who later became influential figures in Iranian cinema, started their careers during this period.

In their depiction of the “sacred defense,” this new generation of filmmakers presented Iranian fighters as heralds of a new world in which Islamic ideals form the basis of human

society. They advocated the war more as jihad for Islam and less as a national effort to protect or extend the country's borders. As a result, in both their logistics and storytelling, filmmakers mainly relied on the IRGC as an ideological military force fighting at the fronts. The only major film from this era that focused on the efforts of the country's conventional army — which was known to be more secular than ideological — was "Eagles," released in 1984 and made by Samuel Khachikian, a pre-revolution filmmaker of Armenian descent who had survived the purge.

With the end of the war, those ideologically motivated Sacred Defense filmmakers continued to make films about the war and its aftermath. However, starting from the 1990s and through the first decade of the 2000s, the government's attitude toward this filmmaking movement gradually changed. The postwar government of President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani branded itself as the rebuilders of the country and aimed to present a relatively peaceful image of the regime. After him, the reformists came to power. President Mohammad Khatami brought his idea of "dialogue among civilizations," and Iran tried to reposition itself among the international community. In this new political climate, while the regime as a whole relied on the memory of the war and the "martyrs," the governments of Rafsanjani and Khatami showed little desire to keep the wartime sentiments and slogans alive. The war was gradually becoming a distant memory, and the nation, too, was showing increasingly less interest in Sacred Defense films with their flawless characters who longed for "martyrdom."

On a few occasions, the national television broadcaster, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting or IRIB, refused to air or censored certain war documentaries that, in their opinion, didn't align with efforts to move on from the experience of the war. The broadcaster's treatment of Nader Talebzadeh's 1992 documentary series "Dagger and Poppy" about the Bosnian War was particularly noteworthy. The IRIB not only censored most of the documentary but also removed Morteza Avini's narration. Since Avini had written and narrated many popular television war documentaries during the Iran-Iraq War, the IRIB officials deemed his ideological writing and familiar voice to be too reminiscent of wartime sentiments. It is also possible that the documentary and especially Avini's narration contradicted the regime's claim that they were not involved in the Bosnian War. So, although the documentary was not at all critical of the state, the IRIB censored it because it did not correspond with the image the state was trying to project of itself and Iranian society.

On the other hand, this is the period during which Iranian cinema received international attention due to a number of arthouse films that came to be known as the Second Wave of the Iranian New Wave. While Sacred Defense films were made mainly for a domestic audience, the Second Wave filmmakers gave broader consideration to the international reception of their films. Abbas Kiarostami, the most recognizable filmmaker of the Second Wave, eventually won Cannes' Palme d'Or for his 1997 film "Taste of Cherry" about a man's search for someone to bury him after he commits suicide.

This general mood, however, changed again during the turbulent years of the 2010s. Iran's involvement in regional wars, especially in Iraq and Syria, resulted in a domestic media campaign to influence the nation's attitude toward such conflicts and to justify the regime's

presence in wars far beyond national borders. The military organization in charge of these operations was the IRGC, more specifically its extraterritorial branch known as the Quds Force commanded by Soleimani until he was killed by U.S. forces in January 2020. With money coming in from the state budget as well as its numerous lucrative businesses, the IRGC managed to finance its own brand of propaganda through the newly established Owj Organization. Its first film, "Bodyguard," released in 2016, was about a war veteran who becomes skeptical of the way the country was being governed — an apparent criticism of Rouhani's "moderate" administration. The protagonist eventually manages to find himself when confronted with memories of his comrade who was "martyred" during the Iran-Iraq War and is tasked with the protection of his son, who is now a nuclear scientist in danger of assassination.

It is no coincidence that the director selected for this first release was Ebrahim Hatamikia, who had remained faithful to the "sacred defense" film genre. He proved his loyalty to the Islamic Republic not only by accepting the role but also by designing the protagonist's makeup after Soleimani. The message of the film was clear: The true spirit of the "Islamic Revolution" has been forgotten and betrayed by certain politicians, and the only way to save the country from this downfall is to follow the path that has been laid down by the likes of Soleimani, guided by Khamenei, and based on the ideals of the "sacred defense."

But Soleimani's role wasn't limited to just being an inspiration in one of the films; according to several sources, including Mohammad-Hassani, Soleimani played an active role in ordering and overseeing the making of some of the Owj Organization's most important films. In his television interview, Mohammad-Hassani revealed that Soleimani was the influential figure behind the making of three of his organization's top productions: "23 People" (2019), "Capital" (Season Five, 2018), and "Damascus Time" (2018). "23 People" is about teenage Iranian prisoners of war in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. With this film, the IRGC tried to nullify the accusations that it used child soldiers and show the ideological commitment of its fighters, even the younger ones, even when imprisoned by the enemy. "Capital" is a television comedy series about an ordinary Iranian family who, after a trip to Turkey, accidentally find themselves in the middle of the Syrian civil war. They end up fighting the Islamic State group (ISIS) before returning to Iran safely with the help of the Syrian army. And, finally, "Damascus Time" is about an Iranian father and son who are tasked with flying a Syrian airplane to rescue civilian victims of ISIS; their flight gets hijacked by ISIS militants, but the young Iranian pilot sacrifices his own life to rescue everyone else, including his father.

Although these films can be seen as a continuation or revival of the original Sacred Defense Cinema, it must be noted that they are different from them on at least two levels.

The first difference is the way the films look. In the 1980s, the call for an "Islamic Cinema" was accompanied by the call for a departure from Western-inspired filmmaking techniques, whereas more recently, the Owj Organization appears to have given up on that front and has embraced Hollywood's glossy aesthetics. From character development to story arc, and from frame composition to grading, it seems like the Owj Organization has accepted that the market-tested aesthetics of commercial Western cinema is the most efficient way to attract large audiences to get its message across.

Second, the new Sacred Defense films try to invoke viewers' national sentiments. In the 2.0 version of Sacred Defense films, Iranian fighters abroad are depicted not only as "holy shrine defenders" (against the desecration of Shiite shrines in Syria and Iraq) but also as defenders of Iran and the nation, and the Islamic Republic is presented as an "island of stability" in a turbulent region. By taking this approach, the regime tries to appeal to a larger portion of Iranian society, targeting not only the ardent religious supporters of the regime but also secular citizens possessing nationalist sentiment.

Bahram Tavakoli's 2018 film "The Lost Strait" exemplifies this type of messaging. Without any focus on religious sentiments, the film depicts the efforts of a small battalion of Iranian fighters during the Iran-Iraq War who sacrifice their lives to defend an area of Iran's territory against an Iraqi invasion. Their deaths are shown not necessarily as "martyrdom" for Islam but as a sacrifice in defense of Iran.

During its 10 years of activity, the Owj Organization has produced hundreds of documentaries and television programs and more than 17 feature-length films. These films have been awarded 16 Crystal Simorghs from Iran's most prestigious film festival, the Fajr. Hatamikia and Tavakoli were awarded Best Director for "Damascus Time" and "The Lost Strait," while the latter was also acknowledged as Best Film. "23 People" received Best Film from a National Perspective.

Yet another film about the Iran-Iraq War, "Standing in the Dust," released in 2016, was awarded Best Film. This film is particularly important because it was the first feature-length film by its young director Mohammad Hossein Mahdavian, who continued his career by collaborating with the Ministry of Intelligence on several propaganda films about Iran's contemporary history. In "Standing in the Dust," Mahdavian proved his loyalty to the regime by making a film about an IRGC commander, Ahmad Motevaselian, and his supposedly heroic activities during the Iran-Iraq War as well as during the Islamic Republic's invasion of Iranian Kurdistan, until his disappearance in Lebanon in 1982.

The films produced by the Owj Organization were successful at the box office, and the group has been actively promoting its films abroad. For instance, "Bodyguard" was screened during the Vienna Independent Film Festival (VIFF), winning four awards, including Best Feature Film and Best Director. "Damascus Time" was screened in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and even Japan and India. For an organization designated as terrorist by the United States, the IRGC has come a long way to spread not only its troops and ideology but also its cultural productions in the region.

By setting up the Owj Organization and producing its own propaganda films, the IRGC has managed to create a new generation of propaganda filmmakers, while at the same time disrupting the careers of those filmmakers whom it considers enemies. At times, such muscle flexing has entered the realm of outright interrogation in jail. Mohammad Rasoulof, the award-winning Iranian dissident filmmaker who recently won a Golden Bear at the 70th Berlinale for his 2020 film "There Is No Evil," revealed in an interview, after one among several of his arrests, that his interrogation team declared that they were from the Owj Organization.

While this might seem far-fetched, it becomes less so when considering Mohammad-Hassani's angry and colorful report of attending a similar interrogation, or as he calls it, a "conversation" in jail with Mohammad Nourizad, a former Sacred Defense filmmaker turned dissident. According to Mohammad-Hassani, he attended this "conversation" along with two other Sacred Defense filmmakers, Talebzadeh and Mostafa Dalai, in order to guide Nourizad onto the right path. It would be difficult to create an analogy here, but this would be like a team of directors and producers from a major film production company, such as Universal Pictures, taking part in a threatening interrogation of a jailed filmmaker who has made a critical film about certain aspects of the way the United States is run.

In this cultural endeavor, as well as producing general propaganda, the IRGC confronts any political tendency inside the regime that it deems too far from the line of the supreme leader. Its repeated criticism of Rouhani's "moderate" government and war of words with the Ministry of Intelligence follows that logic. In a recent seven-episode television documentary series, it went one step further and criticized the unspoken postwar policy of decreasing wartime sentiments. The 2021 docuseries "Mr. Morteza" is about the life of Avini, one of the most influential filmmakers and theorists of Sacred Defense Cinema, who was killed by a landmine in 1993. A considerable part of the docuseries is an account of Avini's "mistreatment" by certain government officials, including reformist and moderate figures. An entire episode is dedicated to the events surrounding the censoring of "Dagger and Poppy." This docuseries is a clear indication of the message that the IRGC wants to convey — that wartime sentiments are needed, and the IRGC is here to bring them back. In this rivalry between different camps of the regime, the IRGC rests assured that it has the support of Khamenei. He has repeatedly expressed his satisfaction with the films made by the Owj Organization and continues to support the IRGC in its entirety. It is with this backing that Mohammad-Hassani finds the confidence to repeatedly throw criticism at the government in his numerous open letters and interviews in which he refers to himself as "The Smallest Soldier in the Cultural Front of the Islamic Revolution."

The Owj Organization can be understood as the cultural facet of the IRGC's ever-tightening grip on Iranian society. Supported by the Owj Organization's continuous barrage of cultural attacks, in recent years the IRGC has leaped toward playing a more direct role in the way the country is run. With the glamorous promotion of Soleimani as a selfless child of Iran, the IRGC appeared to be testing the waters for introducing one of its top commanders as a future politician, perhaps even the president. Although Soleimani's sudden death in 2020 put a temporary stop to that ambition, the IRGC's position in Iran's power structure looks secure as the regime creates a more homogenous ruling elite.

This was evident in the recent (2021) presidential election. While the next government is set to be one of the most hard-line governments of the Islamic Republic's history — elected during one of the least-popular elections of the country's history — the IRGC strengthens its domination over every aspect of life in Iran. Considering that the alliance of the supreme leader and the IRGC already controls the parliament (Islamic Consultative Assembly), the judicial system, the Guardian Council, the Assembly of Experts, and the armed forces, capturing the presidential seat solidifies the future of their militarized theocracy. To accommodate this ambition, the IRGC summons power from all its branches, from within the economy to the military, and of course, to cultural production.

