PRESS

The United States' Soft War with Iran

By Seth G. Jones and Danika Newlee

THE ISSUE

Iran is engaged in a soft war, or jang-e narm, with the United States. Iran uses formal and informal means to influence populations across the globe and has expanded its information campaign utilizing the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, cultural centers, universities, and charitable foundations. But Iran's authoritarian political system and attempts to control access to information make it vulnerable to a U.S. and Western information campaign. Iran's weaknesses suggest that a major component of U.S. competition with Tehran should be ideological.

While there has been considerable focus in the United States on Iran's military capabilities and activities, there has been far less attention devoted to Iran's "soft power" and its efforts to expand influence. This brief focuses on Iranian soft power and asks: How do Iranian leaders view soft power? How does Iran attempt to export soft power? And what are Iran's weaknesses? To answer these questions, this report compiles quantitative and qualitative information—some of which is new—on elements of Iran's soft power.

The report makes three main arguments. First, Iran is explicitly engaged in a "soft war," or *jang-e narm*, with the West—especially the United States.[1] As former Iranian intelligence chief Heidar Moslehi remarked, "We do not have a physical war with the enemy, but we are engaged in heavy information warfare with the enemy."[2] Second, Iran uses both formal and informal instruments to wage *jang-e narm*. Examples range from official television broadcasting through organizations like the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting to informal cultural centers. Third, Iran has weaknesses and vulnerabilities that stem, in part, from its authoritarian system and self-perception as the vanguard

of Shia Islam, which have undermined the legitimacy of its message and created inefficiency and corruption. The United States' greatest strengths—its support of democratic principles, open markets, and free press—are Iran's most significant weaknesses. Iran's authoritarian political system and attempt to control access to information make it vulnerable to a U.S. and Western information campaign. But U.S. efforts to ideologically compete with Iran have been ad hoc and poorly funded. The United States and other Western governments need to step up efforts to compete with Iran through soft power, not just focus on military, financial, and diplomatic means.

The United States' greatest strengths—its support of democratic principles, open markets, and free press—are Iran's most significant weaknesses.

The rest of this brief is divided into six sections. The first provides an overview of Iranian soft power and *jang-e*

narm. The second section focuses on the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, particularly its international efforts. The third examines the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, including Iranian cultural centers. The fourth section analyzes Iranian universities, especially Al-Mustafa International University. The fifth assesses Iran's charitable foundations, or *bonyads*. The sixth section discusses Iranian vulnerabilities and U.S. and Western opportunities.

SOFT POWER AND SOFT WAR

The concept of "soft power" refers to the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants through *attraction*—not through coercion or economic inducements, which can be characterized as hard power.[3] Power is the ability to impact the decisions and actions of others to obtain the outcome a country, group, or individual wants.[4] Soft power, then, is about shaping the preferences of others by co-opting rather than coercing them. But the Iranian regime takes this concept a step further. Iranian leaders have not been willing simply to persuade others through attraction, but have also sought to influence populations and governments through manipulation and even disinformation.

Iranian soft power is inextricably linked to the country's revolutionary ideology and imperial legacy as a Persian power. It is deeply shaped by Ayatollah Khomeini's interpretation of political rule within Twelver Shia Islam, the dominant sect in Iran, which he believed was the most effective way to create an ideal Islamic government. Khomeini's concept of the Islamic revolution was not confined to Iran but included exporting the ideology abroad.[5] Khomeini's maxim "neither East nor West but Islamic Republic" highlighted the juxtaposition of Iran's culture with those of the East and West. Soft power in Iran is top-down and concentrated in the hands of the supreme leader and other government officials. Iranian officials have attempted to control the spread of Iranian cultural and political values throughout the Middle East and other regions, including Persian-speaking populations in Central Asia, Shia minorities in the Middle East and South Asia, and Shia and non-Shia populations in Africa, Latin America, Asia, Europe, and North America.[6]

Iran's soft power can also be understood by what it is opposed to: Western (including U.S.) culture, political values, and foreign policy.[7] Iranian leaders have expressed concern about U.S. hegemonic ambitions in the region, and point to its role in overthrowing the government in Iraq to its west and Afghanistan to its east. It is also anti-Zionist and frequently anti-Sunni. Iran's hierarchical approach contrasts with Western countries like the United States, where soft power is decentralized and partially in the hands of the entertainment industry, non-governmental organizations, and multinational corporations—which often clash with the government.[8] The United States and its allies possess significant hard power advantages, making it unlikely that Iran could defeat the West through military or economic means. Iran's use of soft power is an acknowledgment of this reality and a strategic effort to compete more effectively, via the lower-cost, more accessible realm of culture.

Iranian leaders have regularly remarked that they are engaged in soft war, or *jang-e narm*, with the West—especially the United States.[9] Iran promotes resistance narratives which (1) build upon its hard power achievements as well as its Persian history and identity, and (2) are tailored to local conditions and audiences in order to establish affinities and points of connection. Iran's main instruments for waging *jang-e narm* are formal and informal organizations like the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, cultural centers, universities, and charitable foundations. Through these organizations, Iran has tried to create "cultural trenches" (*sangarha-ye farhangi*) to defend the country.[10]

Iranian leaders have regularly remarked that they are engaged in soft war, or jang-e narm, with the West—especially the United States.

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN BROADCASTING

Iran's state-run media organization is officially known as *Seda va Sima-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-e Iran*, which translates as "The Voice and Vision of the Republic of Iran." But it is more frequently referred to as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB).[11] IRIB was established shortly after the 1979 Islamic revolution. Its logo, highlighted in Figure 1, shows two intertwined depictions of the Arabic word "*laa*," meaning "no," which symbolize Iran saying "no" to the West (United States) and the East (Soviet Union).[12] The IRIB's charter emphasized the nascent Khomeini government's goal of self-sufficiency, with principles that reference "the majesty and supremacy of Islam," "the majesty of spirit of the Islamic revolution," and "the embodiment of the policy of 'Neither East, Nor West' in all of the fields of politics, social affairs, culture, economics, and military."[13]

Today, the state maintains a monopoly over all national television and radio broadcasting, as mandated by Article

## Figure 1: Logo of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting

صدا و سیمای جمهوری اسلامی ایران

44 of Iran's constitution.[14] As a result, IRIB is responsible for all of Iran's domestic and external programming.[15] It began international television broadcasts in 1997 with the launch of its Jaam-e-Jam service, which broadcast Persian-language programming to a largely expatriate audience.[16] IRIB then began to diversify its international reach with channels and programming in different languages. As highlighted in Figure 2, IRIB first established the multilingual Sahar TV, then later expanded to include, Al-Alam, Al-Kawthar, Press TV, HispanTV, and iFilm TV.

Because Iran sees the global media arena as a critical "battlefield" in *jang-e narm*, there are both offensive and defensive elements within IRIB's mission: promoting Iran's worldview and exporting the revolutionary ideology, as well as defending the Islamic Republic from what it sees as "hostile" Western media organizations like Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corporation.[17] The supreme leader appoints the IRIB's Director General.[18] In May 2018, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Director General Abdulali Ali-Asgari for "restricting or denying the free flow of information to or from the Iranian people."[19] IRIB's main components include:

- **Al-Alam**, or "The World," was Iran's first 24-hour language news channel, which launched in March 2003 to coincide with the U.S. invasion of Iraq.[20] Al-Alam views itself as a competitor to the Qatari-funded Al Jazeera and Saudi-backed Al Arabiya, and broadcasts terrestrially and by satellite across the Arab world.[21]

- **Al-Kawthar**, or "Fount of Abundance," is a 24-hour religious channel which split off from Sahar TV in 2006.[22] It broadcasts in Arabic with the aim of raising "human values in harmony with the Holy Quran and Sunnah" and supporting the "resistance" against "global arrogance."[23] In recent years, Al-Kawthar has expanded beyond religious and cultural programming and now includes four news bulletins per day.[24]

- **Sahar TV** is a religious channel for non-Persian speakers, which began broadcasting in 1997 and aims to both export the Iranian revolution abroad and support Islamic education.[25] In 2010, Sahar TV split into two separate satellite channels: Sahar 1, which broadcasts 20 hours per day in Azeri, French, and

Figure 2: External Branches of the IRIB

Source: CSIS Transnational Threat Project
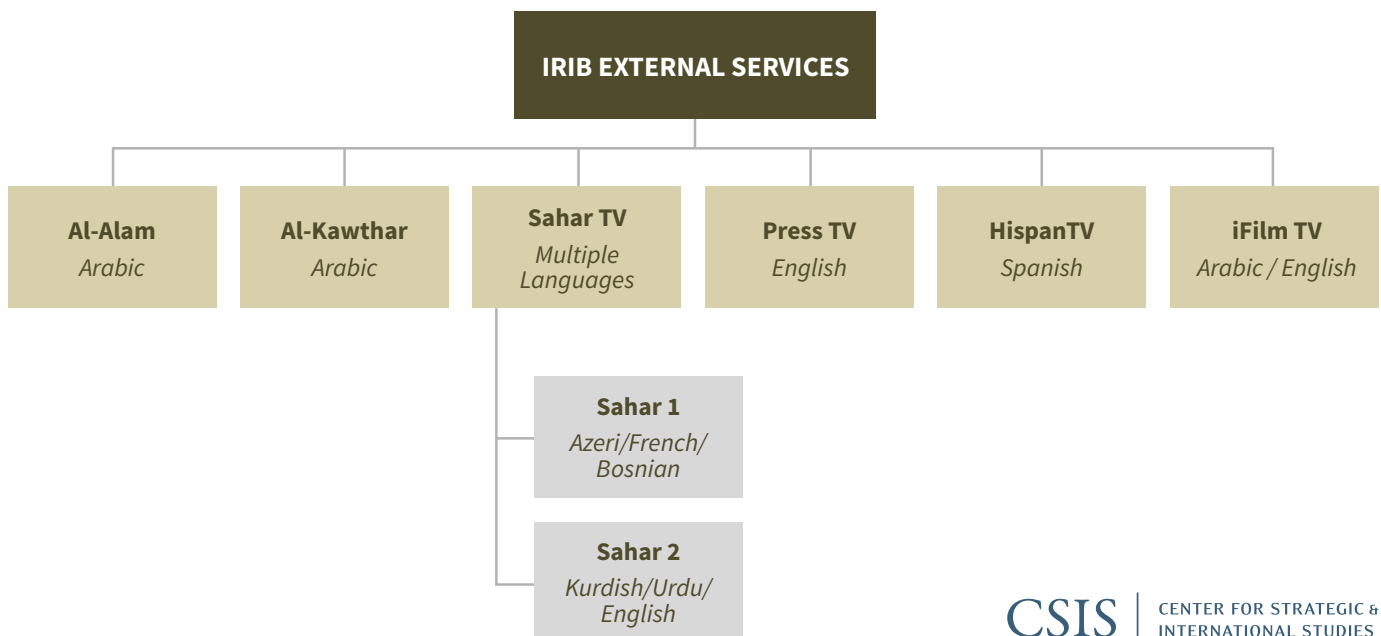
Bosnian; and Sahar 2, which broadcasts 24 hours per day in Kurdish, English, and Urdu.[26]

- **Press TV** is IRIB's 24-hour English-language news channel, launched in July 2007, which aims to offer a different perspective to mainstream Western news outlets like CNN and the BBC.[27] Press TV is frequently critical of the United States and other Western countries.[28] Press TV has international studios in Beirut, Damascus, Washington, and London, and it transmits across the world through satellites and live-streaming from its website.[29]

- **HispanTV**, IRIB's Spanish-language news channel, launched in December 2011.[30]

- **iFilm TV**, IRIB's Arabic-language entertainment channel, was introduced in September 2010. It broadcasts Iranian films and television shows dubbed into both Arabic and English.[31]

Supplementing IRIB's foreign-language channels is the **Jaam-e Jam** (or "Cup of Jamshid," a Persian mythological figure) network offers Persian-language programming aimed at Iranian expatriates and those interested in Persian culture and civilization.[32] Jaam-e Jam was established in December 1997 and has expanded into three separate channels: Channel 1 broadcasts to Europe and the Middle East; Channel 2 primarily broadcasts to North America; and Channel 3 serves the Asia-Pacific region.[33] In addition, some of Iran's partners, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, have established television stations. In 1991, Hezbollah created its own television station, Al-Manar (the Lighthouse), to supplement its newspapers and radio stations. In 2000, Hezbollah began broadcasting Al-Manar via satellite from its base of operations in the Shia-controlled neighborhood of Harat Hurayk in the southern suburbs of Beirut.

Figure 3: External Channels for Iranians Living Abroad
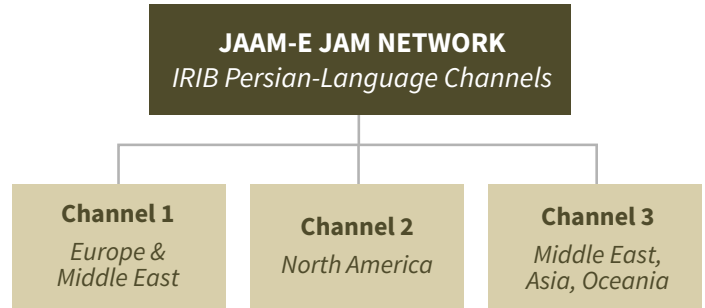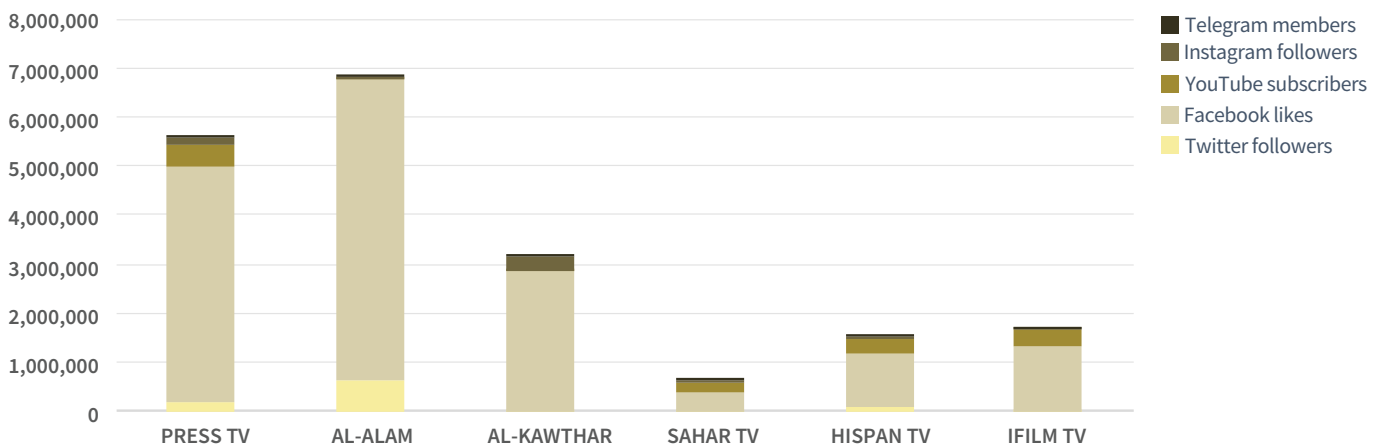

Source: CSIS Transnational Threat Project

IRIB's role as the "soldiers of the soft war" has traditionally been reflected in its high levels of funding from the Iranian government.[34] According to several sources, IRIB received between $900 million and $1 billion annually between 2009 and 2012, though funding has been cut dramatically following increased U.S. sanctions.[35] IRIB was only allotted $409.91 million, less than half of its 2012 budget, according to Iran's publicly-released budget for the year 139, which spanned from March 2017 through March 2018.[36]

Because there is little reliable publicly available data on IRIB viewers, we analyzed the IRIB's social media accounts to better understand one facet of the organization's reach. As illustrated in Figure 4, IRIB stations are generally the most active on Facebook, with a total of 16.5 million page "likes" between Press TV, Al-Alam, Al-Kawthar, Sahar TV, HispanTV, and iFilm TV.[37] Other platforms perform less well: IRIB maintains only around 1.5 million total Twitter and Instagram followers across all of its branches.
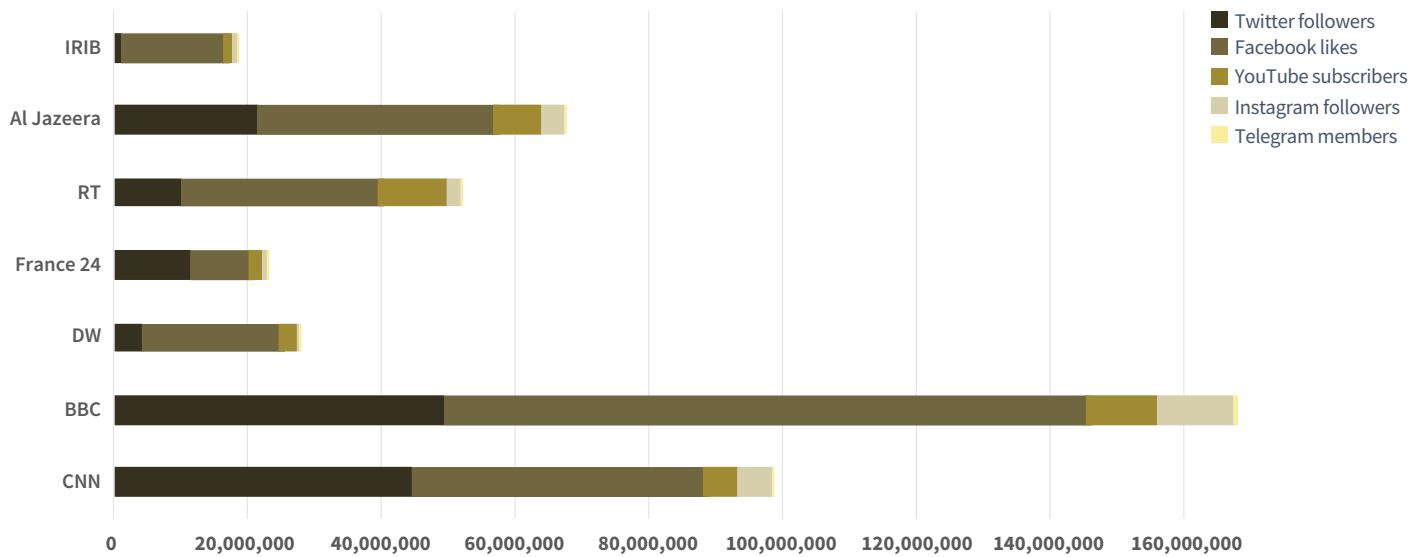
IRIB's global influence appears to be limited when compared to other media outlets. Figure 5 compares the social media

Figure 4: IRIB Social Media Reach

Data compiled by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project. Current as of April 16, 2019.

Figure 5: Social Media Reach: IRIB vs. Competitors

Data compiled by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project. Current as of April 16, 2019.

reach of IRIB international stations (Press TV, Al-Alam, al-Kawthar, Sahar TV, Hispan TV, and iFilm TV) and the international stations of several of its main competitors, such as Al Jazeera (Qatar), RT (Russia), France 24 (France), DW (Germany), BBC (United Kingdom), and CNN (United States). IRIB stations have fewer total Twitter followers, Facebook likes, YouTube subscribers, Instagram followers, and Telegram members than any of the others, suggesting it has less social media reach around the world.

Despite the limited reach of official IRIB-sanctioned outlets, however, Iran is also concurrently involved in aggressive disinformation campaigns on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These campaigns frequently involve fake accounts and pages which parrot IRIB propaganda, including support for the Iran nuclear deal, opposition to the United States' recent designation of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organization, and condemnation of President Trump's decision to continue supporting Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states involved in Yemen.[38] These efforts are widespread. One recent assessment of Iranian influence operations by the cyber security company FireEye concluded that Iranian influence operations are "significant" and demonstrate that Iran "continues to engage in and experiment with online, social media-driven influence operations to shape political discourse."[39]
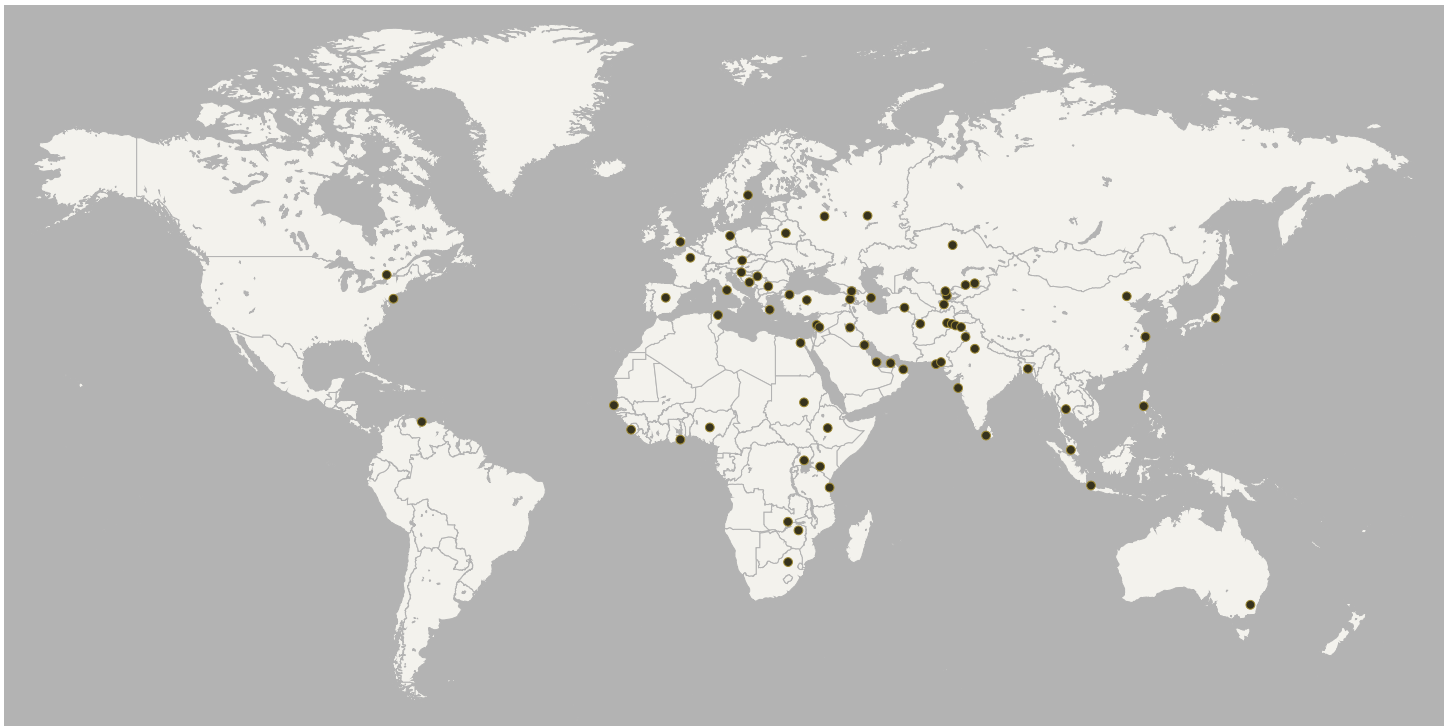
THE ISLAMIC CULTURE AND RELATIONS ORGANIZATION

The Iranian government established the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO) in an attempt to streamline

Iran's cultural and religious outreach. Like other aspects of Iran's soft power, it is heavily centralized.[40] The ICRO is nominally under the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance but is funded by—and reports to—the Office of the Supreme Leader.[41] The ICRO's mission is to strengthen ties with countries and populations overseas through educational, religious, and artistic events and exhibitions.[42] It attempts to export the ideals of the Islamic revolution, foster Islamic unity, and strengthen relations with other Muslim countries. The ICRO varies its messages according to local cultures and conditions. For example, it emphasizes Persian commonalities in parts of Afghanistan and Tajikistan, but targets Shia communities in Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Syria.[43] Figure 7 highlights the ICRO's organizational structure.
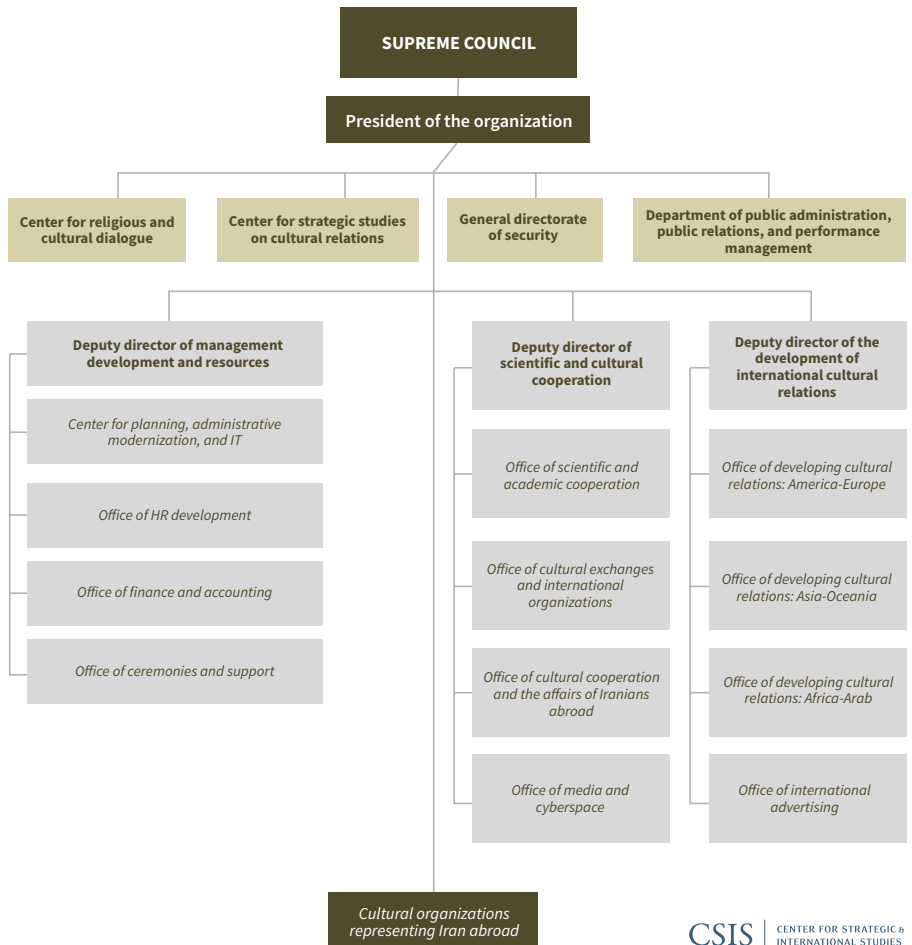
The ICRO organizes Iranian cultural exhibitions in foreign countries, hosts cultural and religious events for Iranian expatriates, and promotes Persian language and literature. It also has an in-house international publishing shop known as Al-Hoda, which prints and distributes literature on Iran and Persian culture in 25 languages.[44] According to our research, the ICRO has at least 72 *official* locations across the globe, as highlighted in Figure 6. It is most active in neighboring countries. There are seven ICRO offices in Pakistan; three in Afghanistan; and two each in Turkey, Russia, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan.[45] However, there are numerous *unofficial* cultural centers directly or indirectly affiliated with Iran which attempt to expand Iran's influence in areas where it seeks to maintain a lower profile. For example, while the ICRO lacks a significant official presence

Figure 6: Map of Official ICRO Offices Overseas

Source: Data compiled by the Transnational Threats Project.

in the Western Hemisphere—with only two offices in North America (New York City and Ottawa) and one in South America (Caracas)—it maintains a growing number of informal cultural centers in the region. There are over 100 centers in Latin America alone, according to one estimate.[46]

The ICRO is also responsible for appointing cultural attachés in Iranian embassies abroad, who help promote Iranian culture and political values. They frequently interact with social elites from host countries. The attachés can also provide cover for Iranian intelligence operations. For instance, Mohsen Rabbani, an Iranian cultural attaché in Argentina, was indicted for his role in the bombing of a Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires in 1994.[47] Outside of its official locations and unofficial cultural centers abroad, the ICRO also relies on other groups operating under its umbrella to fulfill its cultural diplomacy mission:

Figure 7: ICRO Organization Chart

Source: "Meet the Organization," Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, http://www.icro.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=261&pageid=32272. Translation by CSIS.

- The Ahl al-Bait World Assembly, which oversees relations with global Shia populations;

- The World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, which oversees relations with non-Shia Muslims;

- The Islamic Development Organization (IDO), which publishes religious and other material and sends missionaries abroad;

- The Qom Seminary Office of Islamic Propaganda, which also sends missionaries and clerics abroad; and

- The Center for Interreligious Dialogue and Civilization (CID), which engages in dialogue with religious figures and institutions inside and outside Iran.[48]

IRANIAN INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITIES

The primary educational institution used to export Iranian values internationally is Al-Mustafa International University (MIU). According to Article 9 of MIU's founding statute, its goals include training jurisprudents, clergy, researchers, experts, trainers, propagandists, translators, tutors, and managers and promoting "pure Mohammedan Islam."[49] Its teachings reflect its conservative Shia ideology and the political goals of Iran's top leadership. MIU, like the ICRO and IRIB, falls under the direct control of the Office of the Supreme Leader. Ayatollah Khamenei directly appoints and removes MIU's president and trustees' committee and

holds an advisory position with the power to dissolve MIU at any point.[50]

MIU's international presence is significant, 60 overseas branches across the world.[51] It is unclear how many of these are direct affiliates, as MIU is structured to incorporate four types of educational units: direct subsidiaries; affiliated units, which follow MIU's administrative rules and requirements; connected (often community-based) units, which receive support from Al-Mustafa; and cooperative units, which are contracted to perform specific educational and research tasks.[52] Additionally, MIU offers online educational services for those unable to travel to its branches and in 2014 opened 360 Qur'anic centers (called Dal-ol-Qur'an) outside of its regular university branches to increase its reach.[53] Figure 8 shows the location of 58 MIU subsidiaries and affiliates. Most are outside of Iran, including the Islamic College of London and an increasing number of branches in West Africa.

CHARITABLE FOUNDATIONS

Islamic charitable foundations, or *bonyads*, have also been an important instrument of Iranian soft power. Some foundations existed prior to the 1979 revolution, including in the form of *waqfs* (or religious endowments). They provided humanitarian aid to the poor and other populations in need, though they also served as slush funds for some elites.[54] After the 1979 revolution, there

Figure 8: Map of Al-Mustafa International University Locations
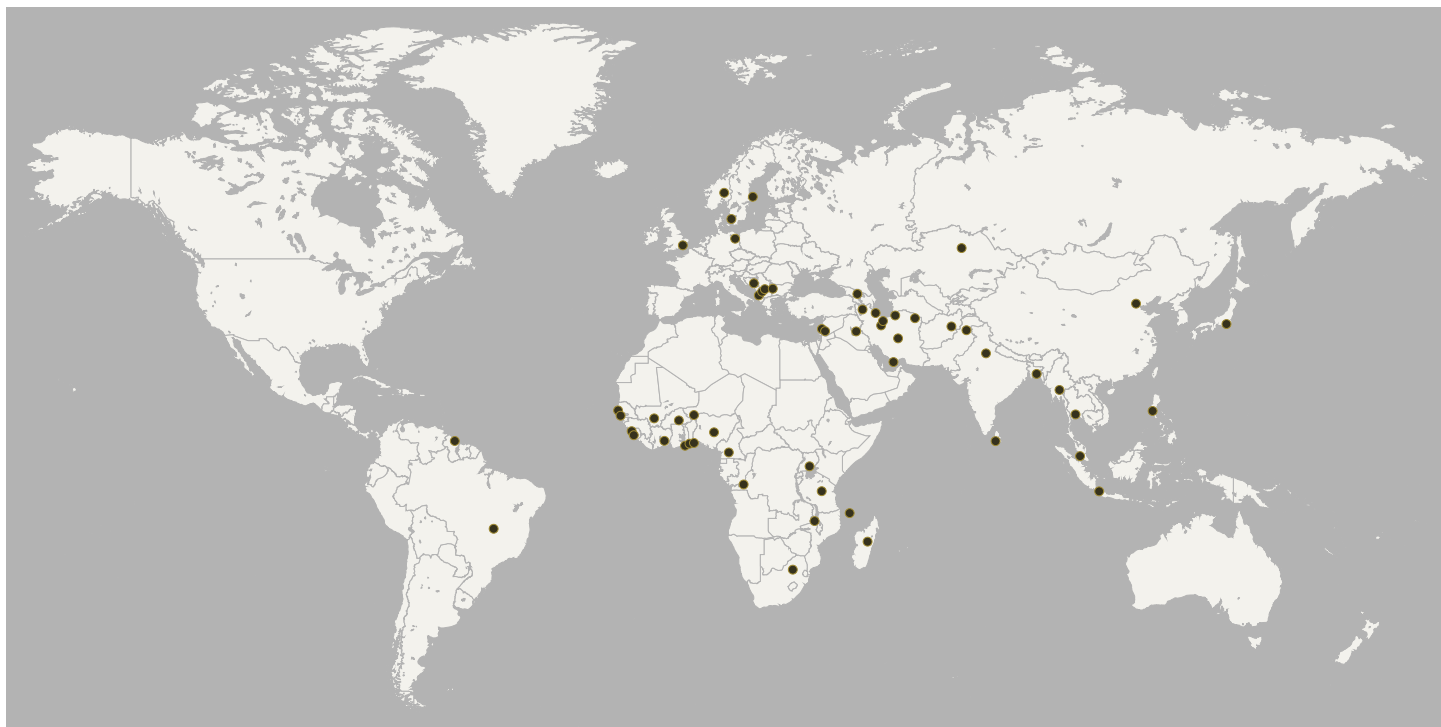
Source: Data compiled by the Transnational Threats Project.

was a major increase in the scale and scope of *bonyads*. The supreme leader appoints the directors of the *bonyads*. They are ostensibly non-profit organizations that provide social and public services, and they are legally exempt from taxation and some government regulations. Yet many also engage in commercial and financial activities like banking, trade, and manufacturing.[55] Overall, the *bonyads* remain a cornerstone of clerical power, accounting for an estimated 10 to 20 percent of Iran's gross domestic product.[56]

Among the first *bonyads* established after the revolution was the Bonyad-e Shahid (or Martyrs' Foundation), which provides aid to the surviving relatives of dead or wounded soldiers. Now known as the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans, it gives specialized services such as in-kind transfers, educational support, and housing services to widows, orphans, and victims of Iranian wars.[57] The Bonyad-e Mostazafan va Janbazan (or Oppressed and Disabled Foundation) provides assistance to disabled individuals but also owns hotels, a shipping line, petrochemical companies, and a substantial amount of real estate.[58] In addition, the Komiteh-ye Emdad-e Imam (or Imam Khomeini Relief Committee) collects donations and distributes funding for welfare, cultural, and educational purposes in countries like Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Tajikistan.[59] In culture and the arts, the Farabi Cinema Foundation promotes cinema and is a powerful vehicle for disseminating Islamic ideology. Similarly, the Astan-e Quds-e Razavi *bonyad* in Mashhad, Iran oversees the Imam Reza shrine and other institutions that belong to the organization. Astan-e Quds-e Razavi includes several libraries and museums, and it publishes Islamic materials in English, Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Turkish.[60]

WEAKNESSES AND OPPORTUNITIES

While organizations like IRIB do not have the global reach of some competitors like the BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera, Iran's soft power activities have still been worrisome. Tehran is expanding its propaganda across the globe, conducting aggressive disinformation campaigns, and exporting its revolutionary ideology through a growing network of television programs, social media outlets, cultural centers, and other formal and informal platforms. Iran is able to reach more people in more areas of the globe than ever before, a huge benefit to Iranian leaders. These programs and activities sometimes spew anti-American, anti-Zionist, and even anti-Sunni propaganda. In addition, Iran continues to have significant influence among Shia communities in Lebanon and Iraq, as well as in pockets of West Africa and Latin America.

However, its *jang-e-narm* strategy has several critical weaknesses: credibility problems (including corruption), the ability of Western governments and companies to identify and target Iranian influence operations, low public opinion, and vulnerabilities from U.S. and other Western soft power.

Limited Credibility: Iran's top-down approach and authoritarian system undermine the credibility and attractiveness of its message and have fueled corruption.[61] Iranian programming is dominated by official statements, weakening its objectivity.[62] In addition, the *bonyads* have been accused of substantial waste, inefficiency, mismanagement, and corruption. *Bonyad* companies compete with Iran's private sector, though they have a significant advantage over private businesses because of their better political connections and favorable access to capital and tax exemptions.[63] All of these weaknesses make Iran vulnerable to a U.S. and Western information campaign that highlights problems to populations in Iran and abroad.

Countering Iranian Information Operations: Iran's over-centralization has also made targeting and removing its internet-based content possible for social media companies. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other companies and platforms have removed hundreds of fake accounts and pages linked to IRIB that used anti-Saudi, anti-Israeli, and anti-U.S. narratives as part of a global influence campaign.[64] In May 2019, for example, FireEye released a report exposing an Iranian information campaign that involved social media accounts posing as Americans, even going so far as publishing opinion letters in American news outlets under the same fake personas.[65] Meanwhile, in 2018, Google took down IRIB-linked channels on YouTube and accounts on Google Plus and Blogger that engaged in phishing and hacking attempts, conducted influence operations, and engaged in digital attacks against political campaigns. Google analysts identified technical data linked to the official IRIB IP address space, domain ownership linked to IRIB account information, and account metadata and subscriber information associated with the IRIB.[66]

Iran's top-down approach and authoritarian system undermine the credibility and attractiveness of its message and have fueled corruption.

Negative Views in Much of the Muslim World: Negative views of Iran have increased or remained low in much of the

Middle East and North Africa, according to polling data.[67] For example, one poll concluded that Iran (along with the United States) is the most unpopular government in the Middle East, among a list that also included Russia, China, the European Union, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia.[68] Outside of the Middle East and North Africa, some polling indicates that views of Iran have declined or remained low in North America, Europe, Asia, and Latin America—including Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia and Indonesia.[69]

One notable exception is Lebanon, where a sizable chunk of the population remains sympathetic to Iran and where Lebanese Hezbollah remains part of the government. Another is Iraq, where there is a majority Shia population and substantial Iranian influence. Still, between 2015 and 2018, Iraqi Shia with favorable opinions towards Iran dropped by over 30 percentage points. Meanwhile, Iraqi Shia who believe that Iran is a threat to Iraqi sovereignty jumped from 25 percent to 58 percent.[70]

This decline in Iraqi public opinion may be partially attributable to Najaf's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, whose "quietist" school of Iraqi Shiism shuns direct clerical participation in politics. Sistani's stance is an implicit rebuke of Islamic Republic founder Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (the Islamic system of clerical rule).[71] Increasing popular disillusionment may also be due to Iran's relationship with the controversial Popular Mobilization Forces, its negative influence on the Iraqi economy, and its role in water shortages in Basra and southern Iraq. These fissures create opportunities for the United States and its partners—including Gulf countries—to continue to engage with Iraq's Shia communities. Riyadh, for example, has established a political and economic relationship with Muqtada al-Sadr, an Iraqi politician and Shia militia leader. There may be opportunities for Iraq to work with Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to further develop economic ties—including rail, road, and electricity links—with southern Iraqi cities like Basra.[72]

Successes of U.S. and Western Soft Power: Iranian leaders have expressed alarm that the Iranian population is increasingly attracted to Western culture and political values. Iranian leaders have long been concerned about "Westoxification" (or *gharbzadegi*), including the loss of Iranian culture to Western arts and education, and remain concerned today about Western soft power. As Ayatollah Khamenei lamented, "The issue of engineering information and the new means of mass communication that have entered the arena are all tools for dominating the culture of a country . . . The same is true of the internet, of cyberspace, and of information services and tools. These

things cannot be in the hands of the enemy. Yet, today they are in his hands. Today, [the media networks] are tools and instruments for cultural infiltration. Today, they are the enemy's tools for cultural domination."[73]

Khamenei has voiced particular concern about the vulnerability of Iran's younger generation, which he warned may be more attracted to Western culture than their predecessors. "There are so many 'misguiding troubles' in cyberspace, on satellite channels, and other such media," he complained in a 2018 speech. "Youth are subject to all of this."[74]

Khamenei's concern is understandable. While satellite dishes are illegal within Iran, at least 70 percent of the population owns them and uses them to stream satellite channels from abroad.[75] Historically, this content has been created and broadcast by large Western media corporations, such as BBC Persian, Voice of America's Persian News Network, and Radio Farda (the Iranian branch of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty). In recent years, however, their popularity has been outstripped by smaller, highly targeted networks, often established by Iranians in exile.[76] The most popular of these is Manoto TV, a London-based network with creative programming designed to appeal to younger generations, which claimed 40 million viewers in 2018.[77] For many within Iran, the ability to receive some news unfiltered by the state has had the effect that Khamenei feared.

There exists a "bottom-up" movement of Iranians that seek to counter the regime's messaging from within. The degree to which foreign media has fomented this opposition is a matter of debate, but Iran's internal fissures represent a vulnerability to the regime. Between 2017 and 2019, there have been thousands of protests across Iran fueled by anger at the government's economic policies, opposition to Khamenei's theocratic regime, and concerns about issues like corruption, environmental devastation, and repression of women. These protests have involved labor unions, truck drivers, teachers, students, and others, though they have not coalesced into a unified protest movement—at least not yet.[78]

Iran's vulnerabilities suggest that a major component of U.S. competition with Iran should be ideological. After all, the U.S. information campaign against the Soviet Union— which included such platforms and systems as Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Voice of America, and the U.S. Information Agency—was critical in winning the Cold War. The United States' strengths—including its democratic values and commitment to a free and independent media— are also some of Iran's most acute weaknesses.

Iran's vulnerabilities suggest that a major component of U.S. competition with Iran should be ideological.

The United States and other government partners, news outlets, and even the private sector should increase their coverage of the Iranian regime's political and economic challenges, augment their coverage of protests (including the causes), and even aid protesters. The U.S. State Department's Internet freedom program—which seeks to counter the efforts of authoritarian regimes like Iran to censor, monitor, and control the Internet—has had some successes in helping individuals bypass firewalls by using tools and software like Tor.[79] The U.S. government also needs to increase its funding to public diplomacy and other information efforts, just as it did during the Cold War. In the 1980s, the United States drastically increased its resources for information campaigns. The budget for Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty more than doubled from $82 million in 1981 to $170 million in 1988. The U.S. Information Agency's budget nearly doubled from $458 million 1981 to $820 million in 1988. And the U.S. government's entire public diplomacy budget nearly doubled from 1981 to 1988.[80]

The best offense against Iran and its authoritarian regime may not be just using military, financial, or diplomatic instruments—but soft power. ∎

Seth G. Jones *is the Harold Brown Chair and director of the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He is the author, most recently, of "A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland" (W.W. Norton).*

Danika Newlee *is the program manager and research associate for the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).*

ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, Ayatollah Khamenei, "The U.S. Opposes Anything that Will Make Iran Powerful," October 4, 2018, http://english.khamenei.ir/news/5991/The-U-S-opposes-anything-that-will-make-Iran-powerful.

2. "Iran Adopts Aggressive Approach Toward Enemies," *Tehran Times*, July 18, 2011, https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/244231/Iran-adopts-aggressive-approach-toward-enemies.

3. On "soft power" see Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005); Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

4. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (March 2008): 94-109.

5. Amin Saikal, *Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 3.

6. Saikal, *Iran Rising*, 156.

7. Monroe Price, "Iran and the Soft War," *International Journal of Communications* 6 (2012): 2397-2415; Saikal, *Iran Rising*, 157-158.

8. Edward Wastnidge, "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War," *Politics* 35, nos. 3-4 (2015): 364-377.

9. See, for example, Ayatollah Khamenei, "The U.S. Opposes Anything that Will Make Iran Powerful," October 4, 2018, http://english.khamenei.ir/news/5991/The-U-S-opposes-anything-that-will-make-Iran-powerful.

10. Babak Rahimi, "Censorship and the Islamic Republic: Two Modes of Regulatory Measures for Media in Iran," *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 375.

11. "About Us," Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, en.iribnews.ir/en/ebout.

12. "Structure of Iran's State-Run TV IRIB," Open Source Center, December 16, 2009, https://fas.org/irp/dni/osc/iran-tv.pdf.

13. "About Us," Islamic Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting.

14. Alberto Zanconato and Farian Sabahi, "Iran-Media Landscape," *European Journalism Centre*, 2019, https://medialandscapes.org/country/iran.

15. "Structure of Iran's State-Run TV IRIB," Open Source Center.

16. BBC Monitoring, *Media Environment Guide: Iran 2012* (Caversham: BBC, 2012).

17. Wastnidge, "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power."

18. Zanconato and Sabahi, "Iran-Media Landscape."

19. U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Human Rights Abuses, Censorship, and Enhanced Monitoring by the Iranian Government," Press Release, May 30, 2018, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0397.

20. "About Us," Al-Alam News Network, Al-Alam News Network, https://en.alalam.ir/aboutus.

21. Sarah Alaoui, *Tired Narratives, Weary Publics: Public Diplomacy's Role in the Struggle for Influence in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, October 2018).

22. BBC Monitoring, *Media Environment Guide: Iran 2012*.

23. "About Us," Al Kawthar, Al Kawthar, www.alkawthartv.com/aboutus.

24. "About Us," Al Kawthar.

25. "About Us," Sahar TV, Sahar TV, http://urdu.sahartv.ir/about_us.

26. BBC Monitoring, *Media Environment Guide: Iran 2012*.

27. Wastnidge, "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power."

28. Press TV, "About PressTV," www.presstv.com/Detail/2014/12/31/390988/About-PressTV.

29. BBC Monitoring, *Media Environment Guide: Iran 2012*.

30. BBC Monitoring, *Media Environment Guide: Iran 2012*.

31. See iFilm TV, www.ifilmtv.com.

32. BBC Monitoring, *Media Environment Guide: Iran 2012*.

33. "About Us," Jam-E Jam TV Network, www.jjtvn.ir/fa/about.

34. "Supreme Leader Unveils Enemy's Conspiracy to Topple Governing System," Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), October 12, 2015.

35. See, for example, BBC Monitoring, *Media Environment Guide: Iran 2012*; and "Structure of Iran's State-Run TV IRIB," Open Source Center, December 16, 2009.

36. Islamic Republic of Iran Plan and Budget Organization, *Budget Bill 1396: Single Article and Macroeconomic Tables of the Budget Resources and Outlays* (Tehran: State Plan and Budget Organization, 2016).

37. Data from CSIS Transnational Threats Project, April 2019.

38. "Suspected Iranian Influence Operation Leverages Network of Inauthentic News Sites & Social Media Targeting Audiences in U.S., UK, Latin America, Middle East," FireEye, August 21, 2018, https://www.fireeye.com/blog/threat-research/2018/08/suspected-iranian-influence-operation.html

39. Alic Revelli and Lee Foster, "Network of Social Media Accounts Impersonates U.S. Political Candidates, Leverages U.S. and Israeli Media in Support of Iranian Interests," FireEye, May 28, 2019, https://www.fireeye.com/blog/threat-research/2019/05/social-media-network-impersonates-us-political-candidates-supports-iranian-interests.html.

40. Nadia van Maltzahn, "Iran's Cultural Diplomacy," in H. E. Chehabi, Farhad Khosrokhavar, and Clement Therme, eds., *Iran and the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honour of Mohammad-Reza Djalili* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2013), 205–221.

41. Saikal, *Iran Rising*, 161.

42. Alaoui, *Tired Narratives*, Weary Publics; Wastnidge, "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power," 364-377.

43. Wastnidge, "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power," 371; Von Maltzahn, "Iran's Cultural Diplomacy," 221.

44. Wastnidge, "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power," 371.

45. Data from CSIS Transnational Threats Project.

46. Judith Bergman, "Iran in the US Backyard," Gatestone Institute, May 8, 2018, https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/12268/iran-latin-america

47. See Department of Justice comments on Mohsen Rabbani in "Kareem Ibrahim Sentenced to Life in Prison for Conspiring to Commit Terrorist Attack at JFK Airport," United States Attorneys Office, Eastern District of New York, January 13, 2012, https://www.justice.gov/archive/usao/nye/pr/2012/2012jan13.html.

48. Hassan Dai, "Middle Eastern Interventions in Africa: Tehran's Extensive Soft Power," *Middle East Forum*, Fall 2018, https://www.meforum.org/7254/middle-eastern-interventions-in-africa-tehran.

49. Abdolmoghset Banikamal and Wahabuddin Ra'ees, "Iran's Educational Diplomacy in the Muslim World: Activities of Al-Mustafa International University in Malaysia and Afghanistan," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 1 (2018).

50. Banikamal and Ra'ees, "Iran's Educational Diplomacy in the Muslim World."

51. Banikamal and Ra'ees, "Iran's Educational Diplomacy in the Muslim World."

52. "About Us," Al-Mustafa International University, 2017, en.miu.ac.ir/#aboutus.

53. "Al-Mustafa Opens 360 Qur'anic Centers Abroad," *Financial Tribune*, November 21, 2014, https://financialtribune.com/articles/art-and-culture/5121/al-mustafa-opens-360-qur-anic-centers-abroad#.

54. Ali A. Saeidi, "The Accountability of Para-Governmental Organizations (Bonyads): The Case of Iranian Foundations," *Iranian Studies* 37, no. 3 (September 2004): 479-498; Abbas William Samii, "The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Informal Networks," *Naval War College Review* 59, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 1-27; David E. Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010), 57.

55. Saikal, Iran Rising, 72-73.

56. Thomas Erdbrink, David D. Kirkpatrick, and Nilo Tabrizy, "How Corruption and Cronyism in Banking Fueled Iran's Protests," *New York Times*, January 20, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/20/world/middleeast/iran-protests-corruption-banks.html; Thaler, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads,* 158; Samii, "The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Informal Networks," 5.

57. Saeidi, "The Accountability of Para-Governmental Organizations (Bonyads)," 479-498.

58. Samii, "The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Informal Networks," 5.

59. Saikal, *Iran Rising*, 160.

60. Saikal, *Iran Rising*, 161.

61. Saikal, *Iran Rising*, 165.

62. Mahmoud Reza Golshan-Pezhou, "Lozoom beh Rokh Keshi-ye Ghodrat-e Narm-e Iran [Need for Boosting Iran's Soft Power]," *IR Diplomacy*, March 30, 2012, http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/page/1899414.

63. See, for example, Erdbrink, "How Corruption and Cronyism in Banking Fueled Iran's Protests."

64. Alaoui, *Tired Narratives, Weary Publics*.

65. Revelli and Foster, "Network of Social Media Accounts Impersonates U.S. Political Candidates, Leverages U.S. and Israeli Media in Support of Iranian Interests."

66. Kent Walker, "An Update on State-Sponsored Activity," Google, August 23, 2018, https://blog.google/technology/safety-security/update-state-sponsored-activity/; *Suspected Iranian Influence Operation: Leveraging Inauthentic News Sites and Social Media Aimed at U.S., U.K., Other Audiences* (Milpitas, CA: FireEye, 2018), https://www.fireeye.com/content/dam/fireeye-www/current-threats/pdfs/rpt-FireEye-Iranian-IO.pdf.

67. Janell Getterolf and Jacob Poushter, *Key Middle East Publics See Russia, Turkey and U.S. All Playing Larger Roles in Region* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, December 11, 2017); Hani Zainulbhai and Richard Wike, *Iran's Global Image Mostly Negative* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, June 18, 2015); James Zogby, "The Arab and Iranian Disconnect," *Huffington Post*, January 29, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-arab-and-iranian-disconnect_b_6240264; James Zogby et al., *Middle East Public Opinion* (Washington, DC: Zogby Research Services, 2018).

68. Zogby, *Middle East Public Opinion*.

69. Hani Zainulbhai and Richard Wike, *Iran's Global Image Mostly Negative* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, June 18, 2015).

70. Munqith al-Dagher, "Iran's Influence in Iraq Is declining," *IIACSS*, November 16, 2018, https://iiacss.org/irans-influence-in-iraq-is-declining-heres-why/.

71. Linda Robinson, et. al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018), 125-170.

72. For media reports on possible commercial links between southern Iraq and Gulf States, see Evan Langenhahn, "For Saudi Arabia, an Electric Opportunity in Iraq," *War on the Rocks*, August 30, 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/for-saudi-arabia-an-electric-opportunity-in-iraq/; "Saudi Arabia's Use of Soft Power in Iraq Is Making Iran Nervous," *Economist,* March 8, 2018, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/03/08/saudi-arabias-use-of-soft-power-in-iraq-is-making-iran-nervous; Erika

Solomon, "Sunni Saudi Arabia Courts an Ally in Iraq's Shia," *Financial Times*, April 1, 2018, https://www.ft.com/content/b4cb47b4-2d1c-11e8-9b4b-bc4b9f08f381.

73. Ayatollah Khamenei, "Speech on 27th Demise Anniversary of Imam Khomeini," June 3, 2016, http://english.khamenei.ir/news/3891/Ayatollah-Khamenei-s-Speech-on-27th-Demise-Anniversary-of-Imam.

74. Ayatollah Khamenei, "The Enemy Uses the Media to Wage Economic War against Iran," September 6, 2018, http://english.khamenei.ir/news/5932/The-enemy-uses-the-media-to-wage-economic-war-against-Iran.

75. Suddaf Chaudry, "Are Iranian Satellite Channels Aiding Regime Change?" *The Arab Weekly*, February 18, 2018, https://thearabweekly.com/are-iranian-satellite-channels-aiding-regime-change.

76. BBC Monitoring, *Media Environment Guide: Iran 2012*.

77. Chaudry, "Are Iranian Satellite Channels Aiding Regime Change?"

78. See, for example, Mike Saidi, *More Protests, No Progress: The 2018 Iran Protests* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, December 2018).

79. Ryan Henry, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, and Erin York, *Portfolio Assessment of the Department of State Internet Freedom Program* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014).

80. United States General Accounting Office, *U.S. Information Agency: Options for Addressing Possible Budget Reductions* (Washington, D.C.: GAO, 1996), 18-19.