

# Winning Back the “Left Behind”: Iran’s New Nationalist Agenda

by Emanuele Bobbio

## ABSTRACT

The January 2018 demonstrations have shown the frustration of Iran’s lower-middle-class youth with the economic situation of the country. While the street protests were relatively modest in size, the young poor represent the majority of the population. Given Iran’s difficult geopolitical predicament following the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the rising tensions with Israel in Syria, the regime cannot afford to jeopardize its ability to mobilize this large section of the population in defence of the Islamic Republic. To address the challenge, the regime is promoting a narrative that emphasizes the uniqueness of Iran as a nation rather than its Islamic foundations. To spread this narrative the Iranian regime is using new instruments, including the use of Western-inspired rap music, a new movie industry imitating Hollywood blockbusters and a new use of social media by figures of the regime.

*Iran | Youth | Nationalism | Mass media*

**keywords**

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by Emanuele Bobbio\*

### Introduction

From 28 December 2017 to 3 January 2018, thousands of Iranians took to the streets. The protests started in Mashaad, a city in northern Iran known as a bastion of conservative politicians. In a short time, demonstrations had erupted in 72 cities.<sup>1</sup> After seven days, 25 deaths and more than 400 arrests, the government successfully defused the situation.<sup>2</sup>

Protesters in Tehran, mostly students, demanded greater political and civil freedoms,<sup>3</sup> in line with the failed 2009 Green Movement agenda.<sup>4</sup> But this dimension was marginal, as the protests were largely driven by socio-economic concerns. Iran’s lower middle class has been struggling for years, with unemployment rising among the young poor.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Activists in Iran-Department of Statistics and Publications, *Seven Days of Protests in Iran. Comprehensive Analysis of Seven Days of Uprisings in Iran*, 9 January 2018, <https://www.enhrana.org/comprehensive-report-seven-days-protests-iran>.

<sup>2</sup> “Judiciary Spokesman: 25 People Killed in Recent Street Protests”, in *IRNA News*, 14 January 2018, <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/82795494>.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Osborne, “Iran Protests Latest: Pictures Showing Tehran Woman Removing Hijab during Anti-Government Rally Hailed as Symbol of Defiance”, in *The Independent*, 2 January 2018, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-protests-latest-update-tehran-woman-hijab-remove-islamic-dress-code-anti-government-hassan-a8137541.html>.

<sup>4</sup> The Green Movement of 2009 was born after allegations by the opposition of electoral fraud in the win of President Ahmadinejad. The 2009 demonstrations were the largest since the Revolution of 1979. The message of the demonstrations was more political and personal freedom.

<sup>5</sup> Erin Cunningham and Steven Mufson, “Behind Iran’s Protests, Anger over Lost Life Savings and Tightfisted Budgets”, in *The Washington Post*, 6 January 2018.

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Disillusion is widespread in this section of the population and this phenomenon is worrying the most sensible segments of the elites.<sup>6</sup> The growing gap between the youth and the regime is a matter of concern to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in particular, who are keenly aware of how youth mobilization has been critical for the defence of the Islamic Republic in the past. The Organization for the Mobilization of the Oppressed, known as the Basij, was created in 1979 with the aim of training volunteers “to defend the country and the Islamic Republic regime”. This militia played a central role in the Iran–Iraq war and is still used as an instrument of political mobilization and repression of dissent.<sup>7</sup> The majority of its members come from the lower classes and undergo a tough military and ideological preparation. In the last years, however, the Basij has lost some of its attractiveness.<sup>8</sup> The risk is that, in a moment of growing danger for the country following the US’s withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the rising tensions with Israel in Syria, Iran’s young poor will fail to answer the call.<sup>9</sup>

In order to win back their hearts and minds, the regime has been developing a new communication approach.<sup>10</sup> The traditional propaganda, which stressed both religious and national elements, is now slowly shifting towards one that emphasizes Iran’s uniqueness as a nation. A complex apparatus of propaganda, which includes the movie industry, museums and the music industry, has been spreading this narrative.

### 1. The predicament of Iran’s young lower middle class

The young lower middle class was the social class that participated the most in the protests in January 2018. The Ministry of the Interior reported that 90 per cent of those detained were under the age of 25, resident in the suburbs and peripheries of the cities, and likely to be educated.<sup>11</sup>

Iran’s economy has recently faced serious problems stemming from structural weaknesses and international sanctions adopted to curb Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Even if most of those sanctions have been lifted since the signing of the nuclear deal

<sup>6</sup> Shahir Shahidsaless, “The Rise of Nationalist Fervour in Iran”, in *Middle East Eye*, 7 November 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/node/58397>.

<sup>7</sup> Ali Alfoneh, “The Basij Resistance Force”, in *The Iran Primer*, updated 2015, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/node/30>.

<sup>8</sup> Saeid Golkar, “The Ideological-Political Training of Iran’s Basij”, in *Middle East Briefs*, No. 44 (September 2010), <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/meb44.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Cincotta and Karim Sadjadpour, *Iran in Transition. The Implications of the Islamic Republic’s Changing Demographics*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2017, <http://ceip.org/2wfB1C3>.

<sup>10</sup> Narges Bajoghli, “How Iran Is Trying to Win Back the Youth”, in *The Guardian Iran Blog*, 20 July 2015, <https://gu.com/p/4anag>.

<sup>11</sup> Asef Bayat, “The Fire that Fueled the Iran Protests”, in *The Atlantic*, 27 January 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/iran-protest-mashaad-green-class-labor-economy/551690>.

in 2015, the economy has not rebounded because of the uncertainty surrounding the deal’s survival. The unemployment rate is around 13 per cent, with the youth unemployment at 30.2 per cent.<sup>12</sup> GDP per capita, after a surge in the aftermath of the nuclear deal, is now stagnating. The country is highly dependent on oil exports, which are heavily influenced by the sanctions US President Donald Trump has pledged to re-impose following his decision to leave the nuclear deal. On the top of that, Iran is now facing a currency crisis. The rial has lost 15 per cent of its value with respect to the dollar.<sup>13</sup>

These difficulties are compounded by the fact that the Iranian government has made considerable cuts to welfare benefits, especially measures targeting the generations born after 1985.<sup>14</sup> In part, fiscal consolidation was necessary in the face of the international sanctions regime Iran was under due to the controversy over its nuclear programme. In part, however, it was an autonomous decision by the government. Indeed, most of these measures were a requirement to access the World Trade Organization.<sup>15</sup>

The majority of the 2018 protestors were born during the so-called “baby boom” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, immediately after the Iran–Iraq war.<sup>16</sup> Most of them were born to poor families in rural and peripheral areas. Most of their fathers experienced an improvement in their socio-economic status during the years of the revolution and participated in the Iran–Iraq war. A large portion of these families successfully provided their children with secondary or upper secondary level education. This was thanks to the policies implemented by the Iranian regime in the late 2000s. The great majority of these families are deeply loyal to the regime, thanks to the improvement in their socio-economic status and the subsidies they benefit from.

In spite of having access to education, youth coming from poor families have increasingly failed to enter the job market. At the end of the 1990s the student population increased by 266 per cent, reaching about one third of the population with 20 million students. In 2015–16 over 4.3 million young Iranians were studying in universities. This means that 7.4 per cent of the country’s adult population, aged 19 and above, were enrolled in Iran’s higher education system. All these numbers are useful to understand what a consultant of the World Bank calls “Iran’s over-

<sup>12</sup> World Bank Data, *Unemployment, youth total (% of total labor force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate)*, updated November 2017, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.NE.ZS?locations=IR>.

<sup>13</sup> Saeed Jalili, “Iran’s Currency Crisis Shake’s Rouhani Middle Class Base”, in *Al-Monitor*, 26 February 2018, <http://almon.co/307r>.

<sup>14</sup> Mehdy Shaddel, “How Rouhani’s Neoliberal Policies Provoked Unrest in Iran”, in *OpenDemocracy*, 1 February 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/node/115916>.

<sup>15</sup> See the World Trade Organization website: *Accessions: Iran*, [https://www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/acc\\_e/a1\\_iran\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/a1_iran_e.htm).

<sup>16</sup> Omid Memarian and Tara Nesvaderani, “The Youth”, in *The Iran Primer*, updated August 2015, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/youth>.

education crisis”.<sup>17</sup> During the last 20 years, the Iranian economy has failed to create jobs for young and educated Iranians. A study by the United States Institute for Peace has found that it takes on average three years to get a job for an Iranian university graduate, even longer for a non-qualified worker.<sup>18</sup> Today about 80 per cent of all workers in Iran are on temporary contracts.

Economic deprivation is fuelling anger and frustration among young Iranians. They are forced to live in slums and squatter settlements,<sup>19</sup> relying on family support or largely precarious and low level jobs, such as cabdrivers, fruit sellers or street vendors. Employment issues have contributed to a spike in other problems, including alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution and runaways, and escapes into marriages ending in early divorce and domestic violence.<sup>20</sup> In addition, there have been nine hundred local protests about unemployment, and five labour organizations issued a statement calling for “an end to poverty and misery”, urging the government to undertake pro-labour reforms.<sup>21</sup>

This situation is increasingly turning into an issue of concern for the regime. The government and the elites are not concerned by the few anti-regime slogans shouted during the manifestations or by the idea that these protests were the prelude of a new Green Movement.<sup>22</sup> There are many evident differences between the Green Movement and the January 2018 protests. In 2009, the students and the youth who took to the streets were not part of the lower middle classes, deeply bound to the regime, but came from the higher and middle urban classes. The Green Movement protesters mainly demanded political and civil rights. During the protests at the beginning of 2018, there were no demands for political and personal freedoms, but only for an improvement of the economic situation.

Those in the regime old enough to recall the whole history of the Islamic Republic know all too well the role that this particular section of the population has played in defending its values, institutions and even existence.<sup>23</sup> During the first years of the Islamic Republic and the 1980–88 war with Iraq, most volunteers in the army (and in particular in the paramilitary corps) came from this social group. The main

<sup>17</sup> Amin Mohseni-Cheraghloou, “Update from Iran: Iran’s Over-Education Crises”, in *Arab Voices Blog*, 10 June 2017, <http://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/node/2557>.

<sup>18</sup> Omid Memarian and Tara Nesvaderani, “The Youth”, cit.

<sup>19</sup> Yeganeh Salehi and Maryam Rahmanian, “Young, Educated Iranians Created a Tsunami of Unemployment”, in *PRI Stories*, 18 June 2014, <https://www.pri.org/node/102888>.

<sup>20</sup> Omid Memarian and Tara Nesvaderani, “The Youth”, cit.

<sup>21</sup> Asef Bayat, “The Fire that Fueled the Iran Protests”, cit.; Kevan Harris and Zep Kalb, “How Years of Increasing Labor Unrest Signaled Iran’s Latest Protest Wave”, in *The Washington Post*, 19 January 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Jesselyn Cook, “No, the Protests in Iran Are Not another Green Movement”, in *The Huffington Post*, 4 January 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/iran-protests-green-movement\\_us\\_5a4e4caae4b0b0e5a7ab865c](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/iran-protests-green-movement_us_5a4e4caae4b0b0e5a7ab865c).

<sup>23</sup> Frederic Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran. Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*, Santa Monica, RAND, 2009, p. 25, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG821.html>.

question that is worrying the elites is therefore: In case of another crisis, such as a confrontation with Iran’s enemies, would this part of the population be ready to participate, just as their fathers and grandfathers did in the Iran–Iraq war?<sup>24</sup>

### 2. Renewal of nationalist propaganda

The involvement of the young lower middle class in possible future conflicts is critical to the government and the regime apparatus.<sup>25</sup> Answers can be sought on different levels and through different policy instruments. The improvement of the economic conditions could be crucial in resolving the youth dilemma. Nevertheless, the communication and propaganda apparatus has also been a tool used to mend the relationship between the regime and this section of youth.

Over the last ten years, the regime has beat nationalist drums. This nationalist dimension is compatible with and complementary to the Islamic dimension. The tendency is not completely new, having already been pursued during the tenure of former President Mahmoud Ahjamadinejad (2005–13).<sup>26</sup> In 2010, the president began to stress nationalist Iranian themes in an attempt to mobilize his own rural and lower-middle-class constituencies. This nationalist narrative was built on the idea of the “Iranian School”. Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, chief of cabinet during the Ahjamadinejad presidency, in a famous speech argued that while there are many interpretations of Islam, the most important is represented by the Iranian School.<sup>27</sup> In his view, raising the Iranian flag was the only way to preserve the truth of Islam. This vision was highly criticized by all Islamic countries and also by some ultraconservative clerics in Iran.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the instance was interesting as it signalled a renewed attempt to mix nationalism and Islamism as had been done during the Iran–Iraq war.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, during this conflict, the regime’s propaganda apparatus leveraged ethnic and national feelings to mobilize the population to face the Iraqi army not only as the enemy of real Islam, but also as Arabs invading Persian lands.

Similarly, the government is today using the tensions with Saudi Arabia and the US to mobilize youth. The hope is that, in a moment of mounting international

<sup>24</sup> Naimeh Bozorghmer, “Iran’s Disillusioned Youth Spare No One in Display of Anger”, in *Financial Times*, 2 January 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Shahir Shahidsaless, “The Rise of Nationalist Fervour in Iran”, cit.

<sup>26</sup> Pejman Abdolmohammadi, “The Revival of Nationalism and Secularism in Modern Iran”, in *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series*, No. 11 (November 2015), <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64581>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Tait, “Iranian President’s New ‘Religious-Nationalism’ Alienates Hard-Line Constituency”, in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 18 August 2010, [https://www.rferl.org/a/Iranian\\_Presidents\\_New\\_ReligiousNationalism\\_Alienates\\_HardLine\\_Constituency/2131415.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Iranian_Presidents_New_ReligiousNationalism_Alienates_HardLine_Constituency/2131415.html).

<sup>29</sup> Annie Tracy Samuel, “Guarding the Nation: The Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Nationalism and the Iran–Iraq War”, in Meir Litvak (ed.), *Constructing Nationalism in Iran. From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic*, London and New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 248–262.

pressures with the antagonistic policy of US President Trump and the confrontation with Israel and Saudi Arabia, nationalism could help mobilize the youth once again.<sup>30</sup> To this end, the government and especially the IRGC have been compelled to revise and update their mobilization tools.

### 3. The new propaganda instruments

Over the last 20 years, the communication apparatus of the regime has created films, television series and books about the “Sacred Defence”, i.e., the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq war. Despite initial popularity, since the end of the 1990s ticket and book sales have sharply decreased.<sup>31</sup>

The new generations are no longer attracted by traditional propaganda means. This has brought officials of the Iranian regime to think about a new way to mobilize youth, which has resulted in new ways of making music and movies while promoting a new vision of martyrdom and the fighters on the battlefield. A prominent pro-regime movie producer and high-ranking IRGC official has reportedly stressed the necessity of a governmental narrative change: “Frankly, we turned young people off with the propaganda we produced in the 1980s and 1990s. [...] We have to learn to speak the language of youth and use their codes if we want them to like our work. In short, we have to entertain them.”<sup>32</sup>

While the old propaganda offices continue to rely on old revolutionary messages, the IRGC and the Basij have changed their approach.<sup>33</sup> A key institution is Soureh Film Club,<sup>34</sup> which is financed by banks and foundations with close links to the Revolutionary Guard.<sup>35</sup> The new national narrative is well explained by the head of Soureh Film Club Mohammadreza Shafah: “What better way to attract the youth to our ideals than a rapper who subscribes to those?”<sup>36</sup>

Most of this new communication material was published on Apparat, the Iranian regime social media, and Telegram. These two social media can be controlled (partly if not entirely) by state authorities without any need to ask big American

<sup>30</sup> Sanam Vakil, “How Donald Trump’s Tweets Help Iran’s Supreme Leader”, in *The Guardian*, 4 January 2018, <https://gu.com/p/7p7ye>.

<sup>31</sup> Narges Bajoghli, “How Iran Is Trying to Win Back the Youth”, cit.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. See also Narges Bajoghli, “Debating the Iran-Iraq War on Film”, in *Middle East Report*, No. 271 (Summer 2014), p. 40-42, <http://www.nargesbajoghli.com/uploads/1/3/1/1/13115731/bajoghli271.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Erdbrink, “As ‘Death to America’ Chants Lose Power, Iran Retools Propaganda with Rap Videos”, in *The New York Times*, 26 August 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2w6VK9i>.

<sup>34</sup> See the Soureh website: <http://www.sourehpictures.com>.

<sup>35</sup> Zahra Alipour, “IRGC Funding for Cinema Stirs Debate in Iran”, in *Al-Monitor*, 15 March 2018, <http://almon.co/3017>.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Erdbrink, “As ‘Death to America’ Chants Lose Power, Iran Retools Propaganda with Rap Videos”, cit.

social media and corporations like YouTube and Facebook for authorization.<sup>37</sup>

### 3.1 Amir Tataloo and the prohibited music that builds consensus for the regime

Music inspired by Western culture is prohibited in Iran. Yet, the attempt to win back the hearts and minds of youth has slightly changed the rules. A small number of the regime's music firms have used Western music styles to favour the regime and underpin its new vision for national unity.

An example is rapper Amir Tataloo,<sup>38</sup> who became a celebrity following the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal. The artist has a long history in the underground Teheran scene where he was known for his relations with some satellite channels linked to the Iranian diaspora.<sup>39</sup> His songs touched on themes that were on the list of topics prohibited by the Interior Ministry of Iran. In December 2013, he was arrested and accused of supporting Western culture and corrupting the country. After being in jail for just a few days, he returned to the stage as a supporter of the regime.<sup>40</sup>

He became a celebrity in the Iranian media with a video clip of his song "Nuclear energy",<sup>41</sup> which became viral the day after of the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Program of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear deal.<sup>42</sup> The song was produced by a music company close to the regime, and the video clip was filmed on the Iranian navy frigate *Damavand*. The text of the song is emblematic, particularly the lyrics "[the] right to have an armed Gulf". The video had millions of views on Apparat and 50,000 views on YouTube. With the regime's support, the rapper produced many more songs. One in particular, "Martyrs",<sup>43</sup> is exemplary of the new narrative on martyrdom. The idea promoted in the song is not that martyrdom is a marvellous thing or a way to get to Heaven, but instead a terrible but necessary action to protect the country.

<sup>37</sup> If there is no need to explain why Apparat is readily controlled, being under the direct control of the government, it is more difficult to understand why Telegram is subject to control. Telegram is based on communications channels; it is therefore possible for the government to construct the official channel and then close the others through the support of technical experts or by discrediting them.

<sup>38</sup> Narges Bajoghli, "How Iran Is Trying to Win Back the Youth", cit.

<sup>39</sup> Scott Peterson, "To Enlist Iran's Youth, Islamic Republic Adds a Nationalist Pitch", in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 14 February 2016, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/0214/To-enlist-Iran-s-youth-Islamic-Republic-adds-a-nationalist-pitch>.

<sup>40</sup> Tataloo was arrested again on 2 September 2016 and released after 62 days. See Aida Ghajar, "The Ayatollah's Favorite Pop Star", in *IranWire*, 25 July 2017, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/4727>; and Holly Dagres, "This Young Iranian Rapper May Have Cost Raisi the Presidency", in *Al-Monitor*, 1 June 2017, <http://web.archive.org/web/20170706084425/http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/iran-raisi-tataloo-tatalee-election-race-endorsement-rapper.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Amir Tataloo, "Energy Hasteeri" (video), 2015, <https://youtu.be/koN9ARqkuFU>.

<sup>42</sup> James King, "This Nuclear Propaganda Video Was Top Google Search during Talks", in *Vocativ*, 13 July 2015, <http://www.vocativ.com/news/211036/underground-pop-star-in-iran-was-a-top-google-search-amid-nuke-talks>.

<sup>43</sup> Amir Tataloo, "Shohada" (video), 2017, <https://youtu.be/Fv8wE50M4cY>.



### 3.2 A new approach to filmmaking

Music is not the only medium used to establish this new narrative. In the past, the regime’s movie-making machine produced a large number of films on the so-called “Sacred Defence” theme. Productions were focused on depiction of the war against Iraq as glorious and marvellous, and young soldiers as eager to die for their own country and God. As argued by Habib Ahmadzadeh, an Iranian writer and television producer close to the IRGC, “We need to fess up to that and move on. Youth don’t care about the war any longer, and that’s our fault. We spent 20 years feeding them the same old lines.”<sup>44</sup> As a captain in the Revolutionary Guard and a veteran of the Iran–Iraq war enlisted in the Basij, Ahmadzadeh’s image exemplifies this new approach in the movie industry. Just as for music, filmmakers like Ahmadzadeh are sponsored and funded by banks and companies controlled by the IRGC.<sup>45</sup>

One example of this new type of production is a video commemorating the infamous incident of Iran Air Flight 655. The short movie, produced by Soureh Film Club, is called “We Will Resist”.<sup>46</sup> It recalls the shooting down of an Iranian civilian aircraft by American missiles on 3 July 1988. The US ship that fired the missiles mistook the plane for a military jet, although Flight 655 was following its standard route. All 290 passengers died. The move shows the plane with children on board before being destroyed by the American missile. The incident is then followed by a (this time fictional) direct attack on Iran, with planes and missiles targeting houses and markets. In this moment a group of young men with Iranian flags in their hands run against the enemies coming from the sea, and destroy them using only the strength of will and unity. After the defeat of the enemies’ navy, all return to their families and children. This propaganda movie is clearly different from other classical productions, as there is no explicit mention of religious themes and no push towards martyrdom, but only a call for unity in defence of the country.

Not all productions skip the “Sacred Defence” theme. Another important filmmaker and supporter of the new national narrative is Masoud Dehnamaki, who has tried to approach the Iran–Iraq war from a different angle. Dehnamaki, a leading member of Ansar Hezbollah, made the headlines in 2014 when he produced a very expensive blockbuster called “The Ascendants”.<sup>47</sup> The film is set during the Iran–Iraq war. Mohammad, the main character, is a young student from a poor family who has just been accepted in the finest medical school of the country. In spite of his father’s wish for him to go to university, Mohammad decides to enlist as a volunteer in the Basij. While he is enlisting in the corps, he meets Morteza, a militia commander who criticizes the young rich students who prefer to study and live their privileged lives instead of defending their country. Differently from previous

<sup>44</sup> Narges Bajoghli, “Debating the Iran-Iraq War on Film”, cit., p. 41.

<sup>45</sup> Zahra Alipour, “IRGC Funding for Cinema Stirs Debate in Iran”, cit.

<sup>46</sup> “We Will Resist” (video), 2016, <https://youtu.be/xxMMkGRCHA>.

<sup>47</sup> Narges Bajoghli, “Debating the Iran-Iraq War on Film”, cit., p. 42.

productions, however, the movie contains no message promoting sacrifice to obtain a better life after death, and it features a description of the atrocity of war. The central theme is that the fight is inevitable and just, to defend family and fatherland.

This new narrative re-elaborates the Iran–Iraq war legacy to show the young generation that mobilization is necessary. A key filmmaker, quoted by Narges Bajoghli, said that “[t]his youngest generation doesn’t understand our religious language. [...] We have to reframe our heroes for them, give them heroes they can relate to.”<sup>48</sup> Ebrahim Hatamikia’s film “Che” (2014) is an example of this vision. The movie is about the life of Mustafa Chamran, the first Defence Minister after the revolution. It presents Chamran not so much as a defender of Islam, but as a man who fought to protect the oppressed against the enemies from overseas.<sup>49</sup>

The new movies are different from the old productions that revolved around the idea of martyrdom and where the soldiers were guided by the hand of God. Modern productions focus on socio-economic issues and private aspects of life as well as the terrible face of war to create an emotional impact young generations can relate to: their fathers died not so much for God as for things they know and care about, such as their families, communities and country.

### 3.3 *The new museum of martyrdom in Tehran*

This new idea of service to the nation is also at the core of the new Museum of Sacred Defence, which opened in 2012 in northern Tehran.<sup>50</sup> The building was funded by the office of Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the city’s mayor and a former commander of the Revolutionary Guard.<sup>51</sup> The story this museum tells is different from those narrated by the traditional museums of the martyrs in the city.<sup>52</sup> These little museums are usually built as religious sanctuaries where pictures of the dead soldiers are kept as sanctified relics alongside pictures of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic and its most revered figure.

The main exhibition in the new museum displays large maps showing the expansion of the First Persian empire, the Achaemenid empire, which ruled large swaths of Asia from 550–330 BCE, next to a map of the Islamic Republic. The

<sup>48</sup> Narges Bajoghli, “How Iran Is Trying to Win Back the Youth”, cit.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> See the official website: <http://en.iranhdm.ir>. See also Ian Black, “Bullet-Riddled Cars and Lush Gardens: Iran’s Memorial to Its ‘Nuclear Martyrs’”, in *The Guardian*, 2 July 2015, <https://gu.com/p/4aamv>.

<sup>51</sup> “Iran Election: Why Tehran Mayor’s Popularity May Harm His Chances”, in *The Guardian*, 29 May 2013, <https://gu.com/p/3g77h>.

<sup>52</sup> Scott Peterson, “In Tehran’s Martyrs’ Museum, Iran Courts New Believers”, in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 6 June 2007, <https://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0606/p16s01-wome.html>; Christiane Gruber, “The Martyrs’ Museum in Tehran: Visualizing Memory in Post-Revolutionary Iran”, in *Visual Anthropology*, Vol. 25, No. 1-2 (2012), p. 68-97.

ancient kingdom is used as a comparison to the Islamic Republic, suggesting that the modern dynasties, especially the Qajar and Pahlavi, gave away territory, thinking more about stuffing their own pockets than about the well-being of their nation. By contrast, the Islamic Republic came about to defend Iran’s independence and people. In the museum there are no religious relics but only the stories of the soldiers who fought for the country and who still fight today.

### 3.4 A brand new hero for Iran

The new narrative is not only advanced through the revision of past events by the media and the promotion of a new idea of martyrdom. Also crucial is to identify someone who can represent change, speak to the youth and show them the way. This role has been taken on by Major General Qassem Soleimani, the leader of the Quds Force, the IRGC special operations force that oversees Iran’s military activities in Iraq and Syria, and coordinates with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

A conservative analyst argued that “[p]ropaganda in Iran is changing, and every nation needs a live hero”.<sup>53</sup> Soleimani is a celebrity in Iran, a man elevated to hero status by a social media campaign machine that has at least ten Instagram accounts and even more Twitter accounts that spread photographs and “selfies” of Soleimani at the front lines in Syria and Iraq. This new narrative built on the image of Soleimani started in 2013 before he was known for maintaining a low profile suiting for the role that he brought on.

The leader of the IRGC Quds force now exemplifies the power of Iran<sup>54</sup> but at the same time is a reassuring and inspirational figure for the population, and particularly for the youth. For the Iranian population he has slowly become a source of pride and honour. The regime organizes events of every type in his name, from beauty contests to the national bodybuilding championship.

Soleimani spends most of his time at the forefront of the fight, but he also finds the time to visit schools, especially in the rural areas of the country, to get new recruits for the armed forces and particularly for the Basij. The general was also the protagonist of a blockbuster action movie, *Battle of the Persian Gulf II*, in which he is depicted as the only real man capable of guiding the army against invading enemies.<sup>55</sup> In the movie he is a national hero, although he is often shown asking for the help of God and of the Supreme Leader.

<sup>53</sup> Scott Peterson, “Gen. Soleimani: A New Brand of Iranian Hero for Nationalist Times”, in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 15 February 2016, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/0215/Gen.-Soleimani-A-new-brand-of-Iranian-hero-for-nationalist-times>.

<sup>54</sup> Dexter Filkins, “The Shadow Commander”, in *The New Yorker*, 30 September 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>.

<sup>55</sup> Ladane Nasserri, “Iranian Animation Depicts Battle with U.S. Forces in Gulf”, in *Bloomberg*, 13 March 2017.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is himself supporting the glorification of Soleimani.<sup>56</sup> Traditionally, Iranian propaganda has refrained from celebrating individuals, with the notable exception of Khomeini. Every soldier is only part of a plan, created by God and interpreted by the clerics, that will conclude with the victory of the Islamic Republic. Clearly, the regime feels that it needs a new charismatic figure people can rally around, and Soleimani – humble, effective, powerful – is that man.

### Conclusions

The propaganda apparatus of the Iranian regime is updating its message to win back the hearts and minds of the lower and middle-class youth. The high rate of unemployment, and the frustration of a generation that will constitute the majority of the population in Iran in five or ten years, is slowly becoming a potentially major problem for the Iranian elites. For this reason, the authorities have been promoting music and videomaking that innovate on the classical themes, such as martyrdom and religious elation, with a narrative infused with patriotism.

The crucial question is whether this new approach is effective. The message of a defensive nationalism, perfectly compatible with the religious dimension and the role of the clergy, is becoming more and more central. To date there is not enough available data to gauge whether this new vision can indeed help mobilize Iranian youth, but it does show that the regime is taking this problem seriously.

It is important to notice that this communication approach is not in the hands of the government, of the Supreme Leader or of the army, but is controlled and financed by the IRGC and other paramilitary corps. Some parts of the conservatives, especially the religious apparatus, fear that this process can shift the balance in the conservative field. A significant episode is the criticism raised by religious leaders of Qom towards the overexposure of the figure of General Soleimani. Many say that he has no right to be so over-represented.<sup>57</sup> A change in the balance of power in favour of secular forces would have repercussions on the choice of the next presidential candidate by the conservative field. If the conservative part of the IRGC has strong support from lower-middle-class youth, the religious part of the conservative field could be forced to choose a man who fit this new narrative.

*Updated 30 May 2018*

<sup>56</sup> See his response to Soleimani’s letter on the end of ISIS: “By Eradicating US-Backed ISIS You Helped Not Only Muslims but also the Mankind”, in *Khamenei.ir*, 21 November 2017, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/5284>.

<sup>57</sup> Mahan Abedin, “General Soleimani Storms into Iranian National Consciousness”, in *Middle East Eye*, 9 March 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/node/35332>.

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