This chapter begins with a discussion of the formation of Shiite Islam, from succession to the Prophet Muhammad through the tragedy of Imam Husayn’s martyrdom at Karbala. It examines the traditions and beliefs that transformed the political movement that backed the Prophet’s descendants into a separate variant of the Islamic faith, including the occultation of the Twelfth Imam. It then discusses the rise of clerical authority in the Shiite religion, and the creation of the marja al-taqlid in nineteenth-century Iraq. Reactions to Western imperialism and the Islamic movement in Iran are also discussed. The role of clergy in political activism, the emergence of pro-clerical armed groups such as the Fada’iyan-e Islam, and the impact of Ruhollah Khomeini on Islamist activism are explored. The influence of Western political ideologies on Islamist thought, especially that of Ali Shariati, and revolutionary organizations such as the Mojahedin-e Khalq are also discussed.

Iran has had a vested interest in shaping the outcomes of the Arab Spring. The IRGC had learned with the fall of Saddam that it could successfully exploit power vacuums for strategic gains. Syria’s civil war and the war against ISIS in Iraq were new entryways for the organization. Under Qassem Soleimani, the IRGC’s Qods Force led Iran’s campaigns
in both countries. These were strategic efforts designed to protect Iran’s allies. But their resilience was rooted in religion. The IRGC saw these conflicts as part of a larger Sunni Arab and Western conspiracy against Iran and its allies. It was a war intrinsically against Shiism and the family of the Prophet. To defeat the jihadist scourge and its Sunni Arab benefactors, the IRGC mobilized pro-Iranian, pro-Shiite supporters in Syria and Iraq. These relationships helped Iran advance its agenda and expand its influence. They also intensified sectarian hatreds.

Introduction
Afshon Ostovar

in Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards

This chapter begins with a narrative of the 2011 takeover of the British Embassy in Tehran by Basij students. The semiotics of the episode are used to explain some of the core characteristics of the IRGC: its Shiite religious identity, relationship to clerical authority, politics, heroes, special devotion to the supreme leader, and privileged place in revolutionary Iran. Brief overviews of the IRGC and the scholarly literature on the IRGC are provided. To further broaden understanding of the IRGC, this chapter considers larger conceptual and theoretical issues: the IRGC’s relationship to pro-clerical activism; the centrality of the supreme leader to the IRGC’s identity and place in Iran’s Islamic system; the role of conflict in the development of the IRGC and the Islamic Republic; and the IRGC’s impact on the formation and development of Iran’s Islamic system (nezam).

Exporting the Revolution
Afshon Ostovar

This chapter discusses Iran’s desire to export its revolution and the IRGC’s role in that effort. After war with Saddam began, exporting the revolution became a divisive issue that split the Khomeinist movement. Radicals saw it as a fundamental responsibility of Iran’s government.
Opponents argued that foreign adventurism was contrary to Iran’s national interests and that the war should take priority. Through its Office of Liberation movements, the IRGC was the main mechanism for foreign intervention. It had success in Lebanon, where it helped establish Hezbollah, through which the IRGC became involved in anti-American terrorism. The IRGC’s radicals gradually grew antagonistic to their top command and to the clerical leadership in Tehran. After exposing Tehran’s secret dealings with the United States (i.e., the Iran-Contra Affair), radicals were purged from the IRGC. With the downfall of Ayatollah Montazeri, the patron of the radicals, conservatives became the center of power in Tehran.

**Warriors of Karbala**

Afshon Ostovar

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Item type: chapter

Shiite Islam is central to the IRGC’s organizational identity. This chapter examines the organization’s approach to identity formation and how it expressed that identity through cultural work. Early on in its career, the IRGC placed emphasis on the production and distribution of its ideas. It published journals, books, and pamphlets, and created artwork such as political posters. Visuality was an important medium for expressions of IRGC identity. Its organizational emblem is the primary visual articulation of the IRGC’s self-conception. Posters, photographs, and other artwork were also used by the IRGC to communicate its sense of self, politics, and religious perspectives. The war was the context for the development of IRGC culture and identity in the 1980s. The experiences of war helped forge IRGC identity, the development of which can be seen in the visual imagery produced by the organization in the 1980s.

**Conclusion**

Afshon Ostovar

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The concluding chapter returns to the central themes of the book: the role of conflict—regional, political, religious, and ideological—in the formation of the IRGC and the Islamic Republic; the IRGC’s role in the development of Iran’s revolutionary state; the IRGC’s relationship to Shiite clerical authority and pro-clerical activism; the role of religion in its domestic and foreign involvement; and the centrality of the supreme leader to the IRGC’s identity and place in Iran’s Islamic system. It then looks ahead at potential challenges the IRGC could face in the future: the threat posed by Iran’s enduring regional rivalries and continued regional conflicts; the threat sectarianism poses to Iran’s long-term security and stability; the IRGC’s need for an enemy and the problem of peace; and the opportunities and pitfalls that will follow the inevitable death or replacement of Ali Khamenei as Supreme Leader.

The Long War
Afshon Ostovar

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After the successful spring 1982 offenses, Iran’s leaders decided to push into Iraq. The counter-invasion of Iraq was a turning point in the war. The IRGC’s influence in the war steadily grew during this period. It continued to advocate for a mass infantry tactical approach that focused on human wave attacks. The Basij militia, and the young boys and teenagers who volunteered to fight within its ranks, became central to the IRGC’s manpower-centered strategy. This approach inflicted high-costs on Iranian forces, but had little success against Iraqi defenses. Though Iranian fighters were driven by revolutionary zeal, international support for Saddam turned the war in his favor. Saddam sought to pressure Iran into ending hostilities by using chemical weapons, attacking its oil industry, and hitting its cities with ballistic missiles. The IRGC stressed religious faith, and used Shiite metaphors to inspire its soldiers in what seemed to be a futile war.

The War on Terror
Afshon Ostovar

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September 11th opened a window for brief collaboration between Tehran and Washington. Through Iranian diplomats, the IRGC’s Qods Force, and its chief, Qassem Soleimani, provided intelligence to American diplomats on Taliban positions and provided advice on how to defeat their shared enemy in Afghanistan. Any budding trust between the two ended after President George W. Bush’s designation of Iran as a member of the “axis of evil.” However, the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban—Iran’s two main enemies—greatly benefited the IRGC. The IRGC utilized ties to Iraqi Shiite organizations and developed a cadre of Shiite client militias to gain influence in Iraq and target US forces. Washington’s pressure on Iran, and allusions to potential war, help legitimize the IRGC’s influence in Iranian and Iraqi politics. The IRGC helped elect President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, who became a stalwart patron for the IRGC’s hardline politics and foreign adventurism.

Big Bang, Big Crunch
Afshon Ostovar

in Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards

President Barack Obama sought a new beginning with Iran, but the violence that followed the contested re-election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad made that impossible. The IRGC and Basij were deeply involved in the brutal suppression of the protests that followed Iran’s 2009 election. They saw the protests as an American plot to destroy Iran’s Islamic system. Washington increased pressure on Iran through sanctions on its nuclear program and the IRGC. At the same time, Iran blamed Israel for an assassination campaign against Iranian scientists. The Arab Spring exacerbated tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbors, who competed for influence in the changing region. The combination of pressures provoked a response by the IRGC, which was linked to assassination plots targeting Saudi and Israeli officials in several countries, including in the United States.
Vanguard of the Imam
Afshon Ostovar

in Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards
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This chapter covers the emergence of the IRGC and its role in monopolization of pro-Khomeini clerical power after Iran’s 1979 revolution. During this period, the IRGC was a fledgling organization that had been established to unify disparate militant groups loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini. Its pro-Khomeini activism brought the IRGC into conflict with competing revolutionary groups and anyone that did not adequately adhere to Khomeini’s authority. The IRGC’s politics were rooted in the revolutionary and reactionary ideologies of its founders, many of whom had once been members of the Islamist-Marxist Mojahedin-e Khalq and had become vehement enemies of that organization. The IRGC led the campaign against Khomeini’s revolutionary opponents, violently crushing the leftist and Marxist opposition. The IRGC’s political ground war paved the way for Khomeini’s greatest victory: the ratification of the Islamic constitution which cemented the concept of clerical rule (velayat-e faqih) as the foundation of Iran’s revolutionary system (nezam).

When Johnny Comes Marching Home
Afshon Ostovar

in Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards
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This chapter examines the postwar expansion of the IRGC. A key transformation during this period was the decision by Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to avoid total demobilization by instead expanding the purviews of the IRGC and the Basij to include morals policing, domestic security, and state-funded construction. With expanded interests and a larger portfolio, the IRGC gained a greater stake in the regime and more power to influence domestic politics. The IRGC used its influence to counter the reformist movement. Through grassroots activism and outright political pressure, the IRGC stymied President Mohammad Khatami’s reformist government. Backed by war veteran activist groups such as Ansar-e Hezbollah, the IRGC became the leading bulwark against social and political change in Iran. It became the
chief advocate for the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and a defender of hardliner and conservative interests.

Vanguard of the Imam
Afshon Ostovar

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This book is about the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and its ascent to become one of the most formidable entities in Iran and the Middle East. It follows the organization from its birth in the midst of the 1979 revolution through the succeeding decades of the Islamic Republic’s maturation. The IRGC is a multifaceted military organization with a distinct raison d’être: the defense of Iran’s theocratic system. Pursuing that mission has allowed the IRGC to expand beyond the military sphere and become influential in the political, economic, strategic, sociocultural, and regional arenas. This book conceptualizes the IRGC as the product of three intersecting impulses and experiences: pro-clerical activism in Shiite Islam; devotion to the supreme leader; and the impact of conflict on organizational development and state formation. These concepts underpin this study, and are threaded through discussions on the IRGC’s religious and ideological foundations; its development during the Iran-Iraq war; its role in exporting the revolution; the place of religion in the IRGC’s politics and self-conception; the IRGC’s suppression of pro-democracy reformism in the 1990s; the impact of post-9/11 American foreign policy on the IRGC’s domestic and foreign influence; the organization’s retaliatory use of terrorism outside of Iran; and the religious and strategic motivations for its interventions in Syria and Iraq following the Arab Spring. By exploring this subject matter, this book is at once a comprehensive history of the IRGC, a thematic history of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and an entryway into the complex world of war, politics, and identity in the Middle East.

The Imposed War
Afshon Ostovar

in Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards

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This chapter covers the first period of the Iran-Iraq war, from Saddam’s invasion in September 1980 to the spring offenses of 1982. The IRGC had little training or resources when the war began. Its limited capabilities forced the IRGC to develop unique approaches to warfare. In Tehran, political infighting stalled Iran’s war effort and led to the downfall of President Bani-Sadr and his supporters from the left. Armed conflict erupted on the streets of Iran and the IRGC crushed what remained of the Mojahedin-e Khalq and Marxist opposition to Khomeini. With Khomeinists in firm control of the war, the IRGC began to play a bigger role in the fighting. The IRGC used mass infantry assaults, known as human wave attacks, to great effect on the battlefield. Iran’s forces gained the upper hand and through offenses in 1982 liberated the city of Khorramshahr and pushed Saddam’s forces back into Iraq.