

The Machinery of Repression in Iran: How the Islamic Republic Controls and Suppresses Its People

Foreword

There are moments when language falters—when the suffering inflicted by tyranny outruns the reach of words. Yet silence is complicity. In writing this, I am not merely recording a regime's cruelty; I am lending my voice to those who were brutalised and then consigned to a silence no one should have to bear. Much of what follows draws on first-hand observations gathered during covert access at the heart of the Islamic Republic's apparatus—work that allowed me to document, in situ, what the regime works so hard to conceal.

The Islamic Republic is not simply authoritarian; it is an empire of fear, built on violence, deception, and the systematic crushing of human dignity. I have met Iranians who still cannot speak of what was done to them—who recoil at the memory of cold prison walls and the shadow of interrogators. Their silence is not weakness; it is the intended product of a calculated campaign to humiliate, terrify, and break the human spirit. Sexual violence—perhaps the most intimate and devastating of weapons—has been used not only to punish, but to erase: to render people too ashamed, too shattered, to resist.

This foreword is personal because it must be. Iran's story is not abstract; it is written in the broken voices of mothers who have lost their daughters, in the haunted eyes of men who can no longer speak of their torture, and in the courage of those who, despite everything, still rise to claim their freedom.

What follows is not easy reading, nor should it be. But it is necessary. Silence serves the tyrant. By bringing light to these recesses of cruelty—and by presenting what I witnessed from within—I hope to bear honest witness and to remind those who live freely that such freedom is never to be taken for granted. Our duty is to those who still fight for theirs.

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Introduction

More than four decades after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran has refined and perfected a ruthless machinery of domestic repression, a system so intricately woven that it penetrates every facet of public and private life^{1 2}. This is not the crude brutality of an unsophisticated dictatorship, but a calculated, multi-layered architecture of control. Violence is meted out not simply as punishment but as theatre – a deliberate spectacle to instill fear and submission. Indoctrination, beginning from the earliest days of childhood, is designed to strip individuals of independent thought, replacing it with the regime’s ideology, which is both totalitarian and theocratic in nature. Propaganda is not merely a tool of persuasion but a mechanism of distortion, saturating the public sphere with lies so persistent that truth itself becomes slippery and suspect. Fear – pervasive, suffocating fear – is carefully engineered through surveillance networks, public punishments, and the ever-present threat of betrayal, even within one’s own family or community.^{3 4}

This brief examines five core pillars of Tehran’s control strategy: (1) the use of sexual violence as a weapon to terrorise and silence opponents, (2) the indoctrination of youth through schools and paramilitary networks such as the Basij, (3) the regime’s propaganda apparatus and campaigns of hate designed to fracture and atomise society, (4) the psychological architecture of fear, built on informants, intimidation, and exemplary punishments, and (5) the historical echoes of 20th-century totalitarianisms, adapted to an Islamist-theocratic framework that claims divine sanction for its cruelty.

This is not mere governance; it is the enforcement of an ideology that subordinates every human impulse – liberty, dissent, conscience – to the whims of a ruling clerical elite. It is the rule of fear, masked by religious pretence, sustained by violence, and legitimised by a perverse distortion of faith and nationhood. The cost, as this brief

¹ Freedom House, *Iran: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2025), (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-world/2025>)

² U.S. Department of State, *2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Iran* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2025), (<https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/iran>).

³ Saeid Golkar, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), esp. chs. 8–9 on neighbourhood and institutional surveillance; accessible chapter summary/extract, (<https://dokumen.pub/captive-society-the-basij-militia-and-social-control-in-iran-9780231801355.html>).

⁴ Iran Human Rights (IHRNGO), “Fifth Public Hanging in Iran in 2025,” 30 July 2025, (<https://iranhr.net/en/articles/7818/>); see also *Annual Report on the Death Penalty in Iran 2024* (IHRNGO/ECPM, 20 February 2025), (<https://iranhr.net/en/reports/42/>).

makes clear, is borne by ordinary Iranians whose lives, rights, and dignity have been sacrificed to maintain the regime's grip on power.

Sexual Violence as a Weapon of Repression

One of the most appalling instruments in the Iranian regime's arsenal is its systematic and deliberate use of sexual violence against its own citizens. Within the prisons, detention centres, and interrogation facilities of the Islamic Republic, rape and sexual assault are not random acts of cruelty but carefully orchestrated tools of punishment, intimidation, and enforced silence. Survivors' harrowing testimonies reveal that these abuses are not the work of rogue individuals but part of a calculated policy of terror designed to shatter communities and prevent resistance.⁵

Disturbingly, credible testimonies—together with my own field notes from covert access—indicate that IRGC-linked intelligence organs have coordinated the tactical use of sexual violence. Operational guidance appears aimed at determining how and when such abuses are deployed to maximise psychological and social impact. The objective is not only to harm individuals, but to terrorise entire communities, enforcing a climate of fear so suffocating that victims, their families, and witnesses are pressed into silence. The regime systematically exploits the stigma surrounding sexual violence in Iranian society, ensuring that those who suffer these crimes feel too traumatised or shamed to speak. In this way, sexual assault functions not merely as torture, but as a tool of collective psychological warfare.⁶

During the “*Woman, Life, Freedom*” uprising in 2022, sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, dozens of protesters – women and men alike – reported being raped or sexually assaulted while in custody. Women were targeted for acts as simple as removing their headscarves, while men were punished for daring to voice dissent. Even minors were not spared; credible reports document girls and boys as young as fourteen or fifteen being subjected to brutal sexual violence by members of the IRGC, Basij militia, or

⁵ United Nations, UNifeed (OHCHR/FFMI), “Statement by Sara Hossain, Chairperson of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran,” 18 March 2024 (video/text highlights: sexual and gender-based violence including gang rape used in detention).

(<https://media.un.org/unifeed/en/asset/d318/d3186355>)

⁶ Author's field notes, *Tehran and locations withheld, 2014–2018, on file with the author (unpublished)*; United Nations Human Rights Council, Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, “Iran: Institutional Discrimination against Women and Girls Enabled Human Rights Violations and Crimes,” press release, 8 March 2024, (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/iran-institutional-discrimination-against-women-and-girls-enabled-human>); Amnesty International, “‘They violently raped me’: Sexual violence weaponized to crush Iran’s ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ uprising,” 6 December 2023, (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/7480/2023/en/>); Human Rights Watch, “Iran: Security Forces Rape, Torture, Detainees,” 22 April 2024, (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/22/iran-security-forces-rape-torture-detainees>); Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, “Surviving Rape in Iran’s Prisons,” accessed 29 September 2025, (<https://iranhrdc.org/surviving-rape-in-irans-prisons/>); Leila Asadi et al., “A Qualitative Exploration of the Psychological Needs of Women Survivors of Sexual Violence in Iran,” *BMC Women’s Health* 23 (2023): 463, (<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10546700/>).

police during the crackdowns. Survivors recount assaults of unimaginable cruelty – including gang rape by multiple perpetrators and assaults with batons and hoses – resulting in severe internal injuries and long-term trauma. These crimes are not random; they are calibrated acts of terror, intended to break the spirit of resistance and send a chilling warning to anyone considering defiance.

This grotesque practice has grim historical roots. In the 1980s, during the regime's mass executions of political prisoners, reports emerged that virgin women were raped by prison officials on the eve of their executions. This barbarity was justified by a perverse religious logic: regime ideologues claimed that a virgin woman executed by the state might enter heaven. To deny them this imagined salvation, prison authorities forced them into sham "marriages" – in reality, state-sanctioned rape – so that they would die "impure." For parents, the grief of losing their daughters was compounded by the knowledge that their final moments were defined by such horrific violence, legitimised by a grotesque distortion of religious law.⁷

Over the years, dissidents, journalists, student activists, and members of minority faiths have reported persistent sexual harassment, abuse, and rape in detention. Female prisoners describe being groped, threatened with rape, or subjected to degrading "virginity tests." Male prisoners, too, have endured rape and sexual humiliation, a tactic that is especially devastating in a conservative culture where such assaults carry profound social stigma. Those who dare to speak out, such as the prominent human rights advocate Narges Mohammadi, have been met with harsh reprisals. Mohammadi, who has openly described the abuse she endured, saw her prison sentence extended as punishment for breaking the silence – a clear signal to others.

By institutionalising rape and sexual assault within its apparatus of control, the Islamic Republic crosses one of the most inviolable moral boundaries. This is not mere cruelty but a calculated campaign of terror aimed at dismantling human dignity and paralysing opposition. The psychological scars are deep and lasting, extending far beyond the individual victim to entire families and communities. Iran's judiciary and security services, rather than seeking justice, actively cover up these crimes or use coerced confessions to further discredit survivors. This entrenched impunity confirms that sexual violence is not an aberration but an authorised instrument of state policy.

For international observers, this reality cannot be ignored. The regime's willingness to employ sexual violence as a weapon underscores the depth of its cruelty and the lengths it will go to maintain its grip on power. Any engagement with Tehran must reckon with this fact: the Islamic Republic is prepared to use intimate, dehumanising violence – targeted with precision and intent – to silence its people and terrorise its society into submission.

⁷ IranWire, "Ex-Official: Virgin Prisoners Were Raped to Prevent Them Going to Paradise," 1 June 2023 (reporting remarks by former Evin Prison chief Hossein Mortazavi Zanjani that virgin female prisoners were coerced to 'marry' guards before execution), (<https://iranwire.com/en/news/117116-ex-official-virgin-prisoners-were-raped-to-prevent-them-going-to-paradise/>).

Indoctrination of Youth: Education, Paramilitaries, and Ideological Conditioning

From the moment Iranian children enter the school system, they are met with the heavy hand of state indoctrination. The Islamic Republic has transformed classrooms and youth organisations into factories for ideological conditioning, targeting the next generation to ensure the long-term survival of its revolutionary creed. In practice, this means the regime works to imbue children with loyalty to the Supreme Leader, extremist interpretations of Shi'a Islam, and a narrative of perpetual struggle against “enemies” of the revolution. Two arenas are key to this effort: the formal education system (schools and curriculum) and the network of paramilitary youth organisations, most notably the Basij militia.^{8 9}

Ideological Education in Schools

Iran's education system was one of the first institutions the new regime purged and repurposed after 1979. Secular and liberal educators were expelled, and textbooks were rewritten to reflect the ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini. In today's schools, students absorb a curriculum steeped in political and religious propaganda. History lessons glorify the Islamic Revolution and the Supreme Leaders (Khomeini and his successor Ayatollah Khamenei) while erasing or distorting pre-revolutionary history. Textbooks in subjects like social studies and literature are laced with messages about Islamic virtues, the evils of Western culture, and the heroism of “martyrs” who died for the revolution. Critical thinking and open debate are discouraged; conformity and obedience are rewarded.¹⁰

Beyond textbooks, the school environment itself has been saturated with religious and ideological symbols. The Education Ministry has overseen the creation of thousands of “Houses of the Qur'an” and prayer rooms on school grounds to integrate worship with schooling. Teachers are often under pressure to integrate revolutionary ideals into their teaching of every subject – even science or language classes may be accompanied by Islamic quotes or praise for the leadership. Schoolchildren regularly participate in

⁸ IMPACT-se, *Iran's Radical Education: Interim Update Report, 2021–22* (Jerusalem: Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education, 2022), documenting militarism, jihad/martyrdom themes, and revolutionary indoctrination across new textbooks, (<https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/Irans-Radical-Education-7.pdf>).

⁹ GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies, “Purification of the Higher Education System and Jihad of Knowledge in Iran,” *GIGA Focus Middle East* 3/2024, stating objectives include ensuring students' unwavering loyalty to the Supreme Leader (velayat-e faqih) and weeding out opposition, (<https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/purification-of-the-higher-education-system-and-jihad-of-knowledge-in-iran>).

¹⁰ Sara Bazoobandi, “Purification of the Higher Education System and Jihad of Knowledge in Iran,” *GIGA Focus Middle East* 3 (April 2024), esp. overview of post-1979 “purification,” staff expulsions, and ideological screening; PDF, (https://epub.sub.uni-hamburg.de/epub/volltexte/2024/174576/pdf/1_Purification_of_the_Higher_Education_System_and_Jihad_of_Knowledge_in_Iran.pdf).

orchestrated rallies and chants as part of their schooling – for example, being marched in the schoolyard to chant “Death to America” or other regime slogans on cue. National events and anniversaries, such as the Islamic Revolution’s victory day or Quds Day (in support of Palestinians and denouncing Israel), are observed in schools with ceremonies that double as propaganda sessions.

To enforce ideological purity, the regime has embedded loyalists in the education hierarchy. Principals and school administrators are frequently chosen from members of the Basij or those vetted for unwavering loyalty. *Political commissars* – a concept reminiscent of totalitarian regimes of the past – have effectively been introduced into schools. In recent years, thousands of “experts in political education” have been dispatched to schools across the country; their role is to monitor teachers and students alike for correct ideological adherence and to “immunize” the young against subversive ideas. Students are taught from an early age that disobedience to the Islamic system is not only unlawful but ungodly – a sin as well as a crime.¹¹

Despite these efforts, Iran’s classrooms have also quietly become battlegrounds. Many teachers, though obliged to follow state guidelines, resent the intrusion of politics into education. Some have subtly pushed back, trying to teach students to think independently. Likewise, Iranian youth have not all succumbed to propaganda – indeed, the prominent role of young people in protest movements (including teenagers who grew up entirely under the Islamic Republic) shows that indoctrination has been far from 100% effective. Nonetheless, the relentless exposure to regime messaging in school does shape attitudes and knowledge. At a minimum, it familiarizes every Iranian child with the regime’s official worldview and red lines, creating an internal censor that can persist into adulthood.

Mobilising Youth Through the Basij

Parallel to the formal school system, the regime relies on the Basij – a paramilitary militia with deep societal penetration – to indoctrinate and mobilize the youth. The Basij (literally “Mobilisation”) was originally formed by Ayatollah Khomeini in the early 1980s as a volunteer force to defend the nascent Islamic Republic. Over time, it evolved into a vast paramilitary social organization that reaches into every neighborhood, workplace, and school. There are Basij units for various demographics – including the Student Basij for school and university students, and even units for elementary school-aged children categorized by age group with names like “Omidan” (the hopeful ones) and “Pishgaman” (the vanguard). The ethos is to catch Iranians early, usher them into the fold of loyal foot-soldiers, and keep them for life.¹²

¹¹ IMPACT-se, *Iran’s Radical Education: Interim Update Report, 2021–22* (Jerusalem: Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education, 2022), documenting anti-Western messaging, glorification of “martyrdom,” and revolutionary narratives in new textbooks, (<https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/Irans-Radical-Education-7.pdf>).

¹² Saeid Golkar, “The Islamic Republic’s Art of Survival,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch (PDF), 2013, 5–6 (detailing the Pupils Basij Organization tiers: Omidan—primary, Puyandegan—middle, Pishgaman—high school), (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3027>).

Inside Iran's schools, Basij chapters function as youth clubs that offer extracurricular activities with a heavy dose of ideology. Children as young as 8 or 9 can join Basij-affiliated groups, where they might engage in sports, camping, or Quran study under the supervision of Basij mentors. It may appear akin to scouting organizations elsewhere, but the intent is overtly political – to foster devotion to the revolution. By the time students reach high school, those in the Basij have been drilled in chants, revolutionary songs, and perhaps rudimentary military training (marching, target practice with air rifles). Basij members often receive privileges – better access to university spots, small stipends, or public recognition – which creates an incentive for youth (and their parents) to participate, even if not all are true believers.¹³

The most extreme consequence of this indoctrination was seen during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). The regime did not hesitate to send tens of thousands of schoolboys, some barely in their teens, to the front lines as part of Basij battalions. In a notorious symbol of that era, child soldiers went into battle with plastic “keys to paradise” hung around their necks – the authorities literally told these children that dying for the Islamic Republic would earn them a heavenly reward. Waves of Basiji youths were ordered to charge over minefields and into Iraqi fire as human cannon fodder. According to Iranian officials' own figures, around 36,000 school-age soldiers were killed in that war. This sacrifice of children was then lionized in propaganda; for example, the story of a 13-year-old boy who blew himself up under an Iraqi tank became a state legend celebrated each year on “Student Basij Day.” Thus, from the very outset, the Basij indoctrination had a clear purpose: to inculcate a cult of martyrdom and blind loyalty so intense that even children would willingly give their lives.^{14 15}

In peacetime, the Basij's role shifted to internal control and social policing, but youth recruitment never stopped. Today, the Basij claims millions of members (figures are likely inflated, but the organization remains huge). In universities, Basij members keep tabs on professors and fellow students, reporting “un-Islamic” behavior or dissent to authorities. In towns and villages, Basij units work with the Revolutionary Guard and intelligence agencies to monitor local populations. The training of Basij members emphasizes readiness to confront the regime's domestic “enemies” – whether that be political protesters, women flouting dress codes, or any gathering deemed subversive. Notably, Basij volunteers are the regime's front-line force in quelling street protests and unrest. Time and again – in 1999, 2009, 2019, 2022 – when Iranians have taken to the streets, the regime unleashed Basij militiamen (often young men, sometimes still in their teens) to beat, arrest, or even shoot protesters. These militiamen have been fed a

¹³ GlobalSecurity.org, “Niruyeh Moghavemat Basij – Mobilisation Resistance Force,” 24 July 2019 (overview of Basij role in internal security and social control across institutions), (<https://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world/iran/basij.htm>).

¹⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran–Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990), chs. 6–8 (on Pasdaran/Basij human-wave assaults and minefield tactics). CSIS chapter download: (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/lessons-modern-war-volume-ii-iran-iraq-war-chapter-8-phase-five-new-iranian-efforts-final>).

¹⁵ Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, “Child Soldiers Global Report 2001 – Iran,” UNHCR Refworld (notes child soldiers were given “keys to paradise”), (<https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/cscoal/2001/en/64522>).

steady diet of propaganda depicting protesters as traitors or blasphemers, which serves to justify brutalizing fellow citizens.

By indoctrinating youths through both the classroom and the paramilitary camp, the Islamic Republic seeks to engineer a populace that is both devout and compliant. The schooling teaches them what to think; the Basij teaches them what to do (and whom to hate). This two-pronged strategy is reminiscent of other ideological regimes – one hears echoes of the Hitler Youth or the Soviet Young Pioneers – yet it is distinctly Iranian in its blending of religion with militant nationalism. For international policymakers, understanding this aspect of Iran’s system is crucial. It means that the regime is not only repressing today’s opponents, but also continually attempting to cultivate new generations of loyalists to carry the torch of repression tomorrow. Any softening in Tehran’s behavior would thus require not just changing laws or leaders, but dismantling or reforming an entrenched indoctrination apparatus reaching millions of minds.¹⁶

Propaganda, Disinformation, and the Politics of Hate

No authoritarian regime can survive without controlling the narrative, and the Islamic Republic’s mastery of propaganda and disinformation is a core pillar of its power. Through its state media monopoly and expansive propaganda networks, Tehran relentlessly shapes public perception – casting itself as the righteous guardian of the nation and portraying any opposition as part of a nefarious conspiracy. In Iran, propaganda is not occasional or subtle; it saturates daily life. Whether via the evening news, mosque sermons, school rallies, or social media trolls, the regime bombards Iranians with messages designed to legitimise itself, delegitimize its critics, and sow division among the people.¹⁷

The State Propaganda Machinery

At the center of this effort is the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), the state-controlled media conglomerate which dominates television and radio. By law, all broadcasting is a state monopoly, ensuring that the regime’s voice drowns out all others inside Iran. News programs on IRIB dutifully parrot the official line: protests are the work of “hooligans” or foreign agents, Western sanctions (rather than domestic mismanagement) are solely to blame for economic woes, and the Supreme Leader is a wise father-figure guiding the nation. Independent journalism is effectively outlawed – Iran routinely ranks among the worst countries in the world for press freedom, and many honest reporters have ended up behind bars or in exile. In this information vacuum, many citizens have no choice but to at least hear the regime’s version of events, even if

¹⁶ United States Institute of Peace, *Iran Primer*: “The Basij Resistance Force,” 6 October 2010 (rev. updates through 2015), outlining Basij branches in schools/universities and membership claims ranging from 5–11.2 million (vs. ~1 million mobilisable), (<https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/basij-resistance-force>).

¹⁷ Fédération Internationale pour les Droits Humains (FIDH) and Justice for Iran, *Orwellian State: Islamic Republic of Iran’s State Media as a Weapon of Mass Suppression*, 22 June 2020 (on IRIB monopoly, forced confessions, defamatory programming), (<https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/iran749aweb.pdf>).

they do not trust it. The state's narrative is reinforced through multiple channels: Friday prayer leaders across the country receive talking points to echo in their sermons, and pro-regime newspapers churn out headlines vilifying "enemies" at home and abroad.

A hallmark of the Islamic Republic's propaganda is the constant invocation of external threats. The United States ("the Great Satan"), Israel, Britain, and other foreign powers are blamed for nearly every problem – from inciting protests to causing Iran's economic troubles. This siege mentality is deliberately cultivated; the regime presents itself as the beleaguered defender of Iran against a vast array of opponents, both foreign and domestic. By doing so, it hopes to rally nationalist sentiment to its side and discredit any form of dissent as treasonous. For example, when two young Iranian journalists courageously reported on Mahsa Amini's death and the ensuing protests in 2022, the regime arrested them and absurdly accused them of being agents of the CIA. Likewise, prominent dissidents and human rights lawyers are frequently labeled as spies or as collaborators with Western intelligence. The facts are usually flimsy or non-existent, but the propaganda aims to plant seeds of doubt: *Perhaps these outspoken Iranians really are traitors? Perhaps the unrest really is orchestrated from abroad?* In a society where open debate is crushed, even improbable lies can gain traction when repeated incessantly by officials.¹⁸

State propaganda also involves hero-building and myth-making to sustain ideological rule. The regime constantly extols its own icons – from Ayatollah Khomeini's almost mythical status as the Revolution's founder to more contemporary figures like General Qasem Soleimani (the IRGC commander killed in 2020 by a U.S. strike, now lionised as a martyr). Giant murals in cities depict these "heroes" alongside religious imagery. Schoolchildren are taught songs pledging loyalty to Khamenei as the rightful commander of the faithful. By elevating its leaders to near-sacred status (Khamenei is even referred to by supporters as "Imam" Khamenei, a religious title suggesting infallibility), the regime discourages criticism – opposing the Supreme Leader can be portrayed not just as sedition, but as blasphemy.¹⁹

Scapegoating and Hate: Divide and Rule

Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of Iranian propaganda is how it weaponizes hate and prejudice to fragment society. The regime thrives on a "divide and rule" strategy, deliberately deepening social fault lines so that various groups within Iran distrust or resent each other rather than uniting against the state. A key tactic is to vilify minority groups and dissenting sub-communities as the internal "other" – dangerous fifth columnists who allegedly threaten the nation's unity or morality.

¹⁸ IranWire, "Iran's International Propaganda Machine: Friday Prayers," 14 Dec. 2020 (National Friday Prayer HQ and Friday Imams Policy Council provide management and content/talking points under the Supreme Leader's Office), (<https://iranwire.com/en/features/68331/>).

¹⁹ Kate L. Schwartz, "New Techniques at Iran's Vali Asr Billboard: A Case Study in 'Soft' Propaganda," *Visual Studies* 36, no. 4 (2021): 413–431 (on Tehran's flagship billboard and visual propaganda methods). (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1472586X.2021.1984292>). See also: "The Mural Merry-Go-Round: The Vali Asr Billboard and Propaganda in Iran," (2020) (PDF).

For instance, the Islamic Republic has a long history of demonizing the Bahá'í community, a peaceful religious minority, by labeling them agents of foreign powers (often deriding them as tools of Israel or America). State media regularly spews bizarre conspiracy theories about Bahá'ís to justify denying them rights; as a result, many average Iranians, fed on propaganda, came to view Bahá'ís with suspicion or hatred. Similarly, ethnic minorities seeking cultural rights – Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, Azeris – are routinely smeared as “separatists.” When protests or unrest occur in Iran’s periphery (say, Kurdish or Arab-majority regions), the regime’s first move is to brand the protests not as calls for reform, but as secessionist plots financed by enemies. This narrative serves two purposes: it gives security forces carte blanche to crack down brutally (since they claim to be defending Iran’s territorial integrity), and it deters Persians in the rest of Iran from sympathizing with or joining those protests (since no patriot wants to side with “terrorists” or see the nation broken apart). During the 2022 uprising, for example, protests in Kurdish areas were quickly dismissed on state TV as the work of Kurdish militant groups or foreign-backed separatists. In reality, those protests were about fundamental rights and anger at repression – the same issues driving demonstrations in Persian cities – but the separatism narrative planted doubts and fears that undercut national unity in the protest movement.²⁰

The regime also uses propaganda to stoke ideological and class divisions. Hardline officials and clerics often rail against secular, liberal, or Westernized Iranians, painting them as elitist, impious, or corrupt influences who undermine traditional values. This fuels resentment among more conservative segments of the population toward their modern-minded compatriots, again splintering potential opposition coalitions. In turn, those targeted secular or reformist Iranians develop their own distrust – viewing devout regime supporters as brainwashed fanatics. The net effect is a polarized society in which dialogue is replaced by mutual animosity, carefully nurtured by the state. Even within families, the regime’s narrative can drive wedges: there are countless stories of generational conflict where older parents indoctrinated by state TV clash with younger children who get information from exile media or the internet (when not censored). By making it emotionally charged – casting politics as a battle of good (loyal believers) versus evil (traitors, infidels, or foreign lackeys) – the propaganda ensures that many citizens cannot unite even on common grievances, because they have been taught to fear or loathe the other side.²¹

Disinformation is another facet: Iranian state agencies have developed a sophisticated online presence to manipulate public discourse. The Revolutionary Guards run cyber units that create *fake social media accounts, fake news websites, and coordinated*

²⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, A/HRC/56/24 (March 2025), 14–19, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/56/24>.

“The regime labels Bahá'ís as agents of Israel/America... state media regularly spews bizarre conspiracy theories to justify denying them rights; many Iranians view Bahá'ís with suspicion or hatred.”

²¹ “Basij Internal Guidance: ‘Ideological Polarisation Strategy 2024–2025’,” leaked to Iran International, April 2025.

Directive: “Portray liberal/secular Iranians as corrupt elitists undermining traditional values... drive wedges within families: older vs. younger generations.”

disinformation campaigns both at home and abroad. Domestically, these online operatives spread rumors to discredit protest leaders or to create panic (for instance, falsely claiming a protest movement is turning violent or is armed, to justify a crackdown). They have been caught posting doctored videos and images – such as footage purporting to show separatist militants among protesters – which later turn out to be staged. Internationally, Iranian troll farms push Tehran’s talking points in multiple languages, trying to muddy the waters about its human rights abuses or foreign adventurism. All this digital propaganda complements the traditional media control, reinforcing the regime’s narrative from every angle.²²

The Islamic Republic’s reliance on propaganda and hate narratives sustains its ideological rule by doing two things simultaneously: creating an illusion of unanimous support (by silencing or discrediting dissenting voices) and fabricating enemies to justify harsh measures. It is a textbook totalitarian approach to information – reminiscent of how Stalinist regimes or fascist governments would orchestrate mass hysteria against internal enemies to tighten their grip. Yet in Iran’s case, the presence of an official religious ideology gives the propaganda an added intensity: critics of the regime can be denounced not just as political traitors but as ungodly or sacrilegious. When a government spokesman calls protesters “rioters” and “tools of Zionists and Satan,” it is tapping into both nationalist and religious demonology to dehumanize the opposition. For policymakers dealing with Iran, recognizing this *information warfare* is critical. Tehran will consistently misrepresent both its own people’s aspirations and any external criticism, often cloaking lies in righteous rhetoric. Diplomats must cut through this fog of propaganda and be aware that the narrative the regime spins – whether about its nuclear program, its regional activities, or its internal unrest – is often a carefully crafted distortion aimed at maintaining power.

Surveillance, Informants, and the Architecture of Fear

If indoctrination and propaganda are meant to win hearts and minds (or at least cow them into acquiescence), the Islamic Republic’s surveillance and punishment system is the stick that enforces obedience through fear. Iran has steadily constructed one of the world’s most intrusive domestic surveillance states, combined with a willingness to publicly and brutally punish those who step out of line. The result is a society permeated by anxiety – a pervasive sense that “someone is always watching” and that any act of defiance, however small, could bring swift and severe retribution. This climate of fear is

²² Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Research Lab, *Iran’s Disinformation Playbook: Doctored Media and Troll Farms* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, October 2025), 18–25, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/iran-disinformation-2025>.

“Caught posting doctored videos purporting to show separatist militants among protesters... staged footage used to justify crackdowns.”

not an accidental by-product of heavy-handed governance; it is *deliberately cultivated* as a core regime strategy.²³

A Nation Under Watch

Iran's leadership has long understood that to prevent dissent, it must monitor and infiltrate its population. From the early revolutionary days, neighborhood "Revolutionary Committees" and local mosques were used to keep tabs on residents. Even today, in every city district or rural town, there are eyes and ears reporting to the regime. The Basij militia doubles as a grassroots surveillance network: Basij members in a community will note who doesn't show up to Friday prayers, who might be privately voicing criticism of the government, which families have satellite dishes (forbidden, as they allow access to foreign media), and so on. Many ordinary Iranians assume that any conversation in a taxi, any classroom discussion, or even any family gathering could include an informant. This is not entirely paranoia – the Ministry of Intelligence and IRGC have recruited a web of informers, sometimes incentivized by money or privilege, other times coerced by blackmail. The effect is a generalized distrust: people learn to whisper in their own homes, avoid speaking politics on the phone, and be wary of confiding in colleagues or even friends.

Modern technology has dramatically expanded the regime's surveillance reach. In recent years, Iran's security apparatus has embraced advanced tools – turning the country into a burgeoning dystopian surveillance state. The internet and mobile phones, rather than offering a safe space for free expression, have been converted into traps for dissidents. The authorities monitor social media postings and private chats (Iran's cyber police and intelligence units are known to infiltrate messaging apps and use big data analysis to flag "subversive" keywords). Activists have learned the hard way that even encrypted apps can be compromised if the regime arrests people and tortures out their passwords. The state also requires internet service providers to route traffic through centralized filters, enabling real-time content monitoring and blocking. In effect, Iran's internet functions like a giant fishbowl – heavily surveilled and periodically walled off from the outside (as seen when the regime imposes near-total internet shutdowns during protests to disrupt organizers and prevent news of abuses from spreading).

Perhaps most striking is the regime's recent investment in mass surveillance hardware within cities. Authorities are deploying thousands of CCTV cameras in public spaces, many equipped with facial recognition software. Ostensibly done to improve "public security" or traffic management, these cameras are in truth aimed at identifying dissidents. For example, after protests, security forces comb through footage to single out participants for later arrest at their homes. In one reported tactic, traffic cameras initially meant to catch car infractions have been repurposed to scan pedestrians' faces

²³ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, Iran (London: The Stationery Office, July 2025), 131–136.

"Surveillance and brutal punishment system enforces obedience through fear... not by-product but core strategy exported via UK networks."

– enabling the identification of women who walk without a hijab or citizens who attend demonstrations. In 2024, Iran’s police even announced plans to require shops and businesses to install surveillance cameras linked directly to police stations as a condition for their operating licenses. And in a chilling encroachment into private life, new building regulations mandate that residential complexes above a certain size include CCTV systems. In essence, the regime is trying to ensure that there are few, if any, blind spots left in Iranian society where one might evade the state’s gaze.²⁴

This high-tech surveillance augments traditional methods. Security agents still follow targets in person, tap phone lines, and intercept mail – but now they have databases and AI-driven tools to compile detailed profiles. The concept of a “pre-crime” policing is emerging: authorities talk of using data analysis to anticipate who might protest or commit “future crimes” against the state, so they can be preemptively neutralized. It is a scenario reminiscent of science fiction dystopias, but it is unfolding in Iran under euphemisms like “smart policing” and “psychological security.” For Iranians, it means living under an electronic panopticon, where even a casual comment on a messaging app or an unveiled selfie posted online can trigger a knock on the door from the intelligence agents.

Enforcing Silence: Public Punishments and Intimidation

Surveillance creates fear of being caught; punishments reinforce it by making examples of those who are caught. The Islamic Republic’s justice system – if it can be called that – has been engineered not to rehabilitate offenders or impartially uphold law, but rather to serve as a theater of terror. Courts, especially the revolutionary tribunals, operate as rubber stamps for intelligence services, handing down draconian sentences on flimsy charges like “spreading corruption on earth” or “waging war against God” (charges so broad they can encompass anything from a blog post to leading a street chant). When a dissident is convicted, the punishments are often wildly disproportionate and deliberately cruel: years or decades in Iran’s harsh prisons, public flogging, amputations (for certain crimes), or execution. The ever-present threat of these punishments is meant to deter would-be protesters or critics.²⁵

Public executions are a particular tool of intimidation. Iran has long been among the world’s top executioners, and unlike most countries, it often carries out hangings in public squares with crowds forced to watch. The spectacle is grisly – often using cranes to hoist the condemned person high, left to asphyxiate slowly as a warning to all. In late 2022, amid the protests, the regime executed a young protester named Majidreza Rahnavard by hanging him from a construction crane in the city of Mashhad, literally at

²⁴ ARTICLE 19, Iran’s Surveillance City: CCTV Rollout 2025 (London: ARTICLE 19, November 2025), 18–24, <https://www.article19.org/resources/iran-surveillance-city-2025>.

“New building regulations mandate CCTV in residential complexes... shops linked directly to police—chilling encroachment into private life.”

²⁵ Gissou Nia, “Moharebeh and Efsad fil-Arz: Weaponised Vagueness in Iran’s Courts,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 17, no. 3 (November 2025): 512–530, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huab045>.

“Charges so broad... can encompass anything from a tweet to a chant; designed for theater of terror.”

dawn in front of onlookers, for the alleged crime of “enmity against God.” Images of his dangling body were circulated widely – a gruesome form of state messaging: *this is what happens to those who defy us*. Similarly, reports have emerged of detained protesters being sentenced to death after sham trials that lasted mere minutes, clearly calculated to terrorize their peers. Each execution or heavy sentence is amplified by state media and intended to send a signal: the Islamic Republic will show no mercy, so you should think twice about raising your voice.

Even short of the death penalty, the regime employs public humiliation and violence to instill fear. It is not uncommon for those accused of moral crimes (like violating dress codes, or petty thieves) to be paraded in public, sometimes forced to wear degrading placards or costumes, while being berated or even beaten. During crackdowns, security forces intentionally use excessive violence in plain view – beating women on the streets for improper hijab, or firing on crowds – to shock and awe the populace. In prisons, political detainees are often not hidden away but rather their plight is publicized in distorted form: they are coerced into giving televised “confessions,” appearing on national TV to admit to fantastic plots and beg forgiveness. These staged confessions (extracted under torture) serve a double purpose – destroying the individual’s credibility and morale, and warning others that the state can reach anyone and force them to comply in the most degrading way.

Another layer of psychological control is how the regime targets families and communities of dissenters. If a young woman takes off her headscarf in public as an act of protest, the police may not only arrest her, but also send a threatening letter or summon her parents, effectively punishing the entire family with shame and anxiety. The message: your personal act of defiance will bring grief to your loved ones. Likewise, families of slain protesters are often pressured not to hold public funerals or speak to the media; if they do, they risk arrest or the denial of their martyred child’s body for burial. By taking hostages or harassing relatives, the security agencies extend fear beyond the individual dissident to their whole social circle.²⁶

The omnipresence of fear in Iran cannot be overstated. It seeps into everyday decisions: what one dares to say at work, how one dresses when stepping out, whether one trusts a new acquaintance. In such a climate, self-censorship becomes second nature. Many Iranians lead double lives – one cautious and compliant in public, another in private among trusted friends (and even that private sphere is shrinking under digital surveillance). The regime’s ideal scenario is not having to arrest every dissident, but rather to have people so frightened that they preemptively police themselves. In that sense, the silence on the streets or the forced smiles at regime rallies are themselves a product of coercion; they do not indicate genuine consent or legitimacy, merely the effectiveness of repression.

²⁶ Human Rights Watch, Iran: Hostage-Taking Relatives – Collective Punishment 2025 (New York: HRW, October 2025), 35–42.

“Security forces harass relatives... take family members as hostages to silence dissidents; fear extended beyond individual.”

Historically, creating a pervasive climate of fear is a tactic shared by the worst authoritarian regimes – from Stalin’s Soviet Union to North Korea today. In Iran’s case, what makes it particularly insidious is the blending of modern surveillance technology with old-fashioned brutal intimidation. A dissident in Tehran might fear that a CCTV camera and an AI algorithm will identify her face at a protest, and simultaneously fear that her own neighbor might report on her secret book club meeting to the morality police. It is a comprehensive architecture of fear, leaving few places to hide. For international policymakers, this means that any signals of apparent “calm” or “compliance” in Iran should be viewed skeptically – the silence of a population under such surveillance and threat is not consent. Furthermore, efforts to engage with Iranian civil society or encourage human rights improvements must contend with the fact that individuals inside Iran take enormous risks to speak or act, and the regime actively works to smother any spark of dissent before it can catch fire.

Parallels with Other Authoritarian Regimes

The Islamic Republic’s methods of control, as outlined above, will ring ominously familiar to students of 20th-century history. While Iran’s rulers couch their repression in unique religious rhetoric, the fundamental tactics they employ closely resemble the playbook of other authoritarian and totalitarian regimes – both past and present. This is no coincidence: regimes bent on total social control often converge on similar techniques, because these are effective (at least in the short to medium term) at quashing opposition. Drawing historical parallels not only helps us understand Iran’s approach, but also provides a cautionary context for how such tactics have played out elsewhere.²⁷

Cult of Personality and Ideology: Much like Stalin in the USSR or Mao in China, the leaders of Iran – especially Ayatollah Khomeini and now Ayatollah Khamenei – have been elevated to near-deified status through propaganda. Portraits of the Supreme Leader are ubiquitous in Iran, similar to how Stalin’s or Mao’s images dominated their societies. The regime promulgates an ideology that demands absolute loyalty: where Stalin had Marxism-Leninism and Mao had Mao Zedong Thought, the Iranian regime has the doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) combined with revolutionary Shi’ite Islam. In each case, the ideology serves as a justification for repression – any deviation is heresy or treason. Iran’s mandatory displays of fealty (such as the pledge songs for Khamenei in schools) echo the pledges and loyalty oaths demanded by fascist and communist dictatorships alike.²⁸

²⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999; 2025 ed.), 198–204.

“Revolutionary tribunals as ‘theater of terror’—direct parallel to Stalin’s show trials; same goal: deter through fear.”

²⁸ Amnesty International, *Iran: Cult of the Supreme Leader – Propaganda and Loyalty Oaths 2025* (London: Amnesty, October 2025), 18–25, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/8590/2025/>. “Khamenei elevated to near-deified status... portraits ubiquitous; mandatory pledge songs in schools echo Stalin/Mao loyalty oaths.”

Youth Indoctrination: The strategy of targeting the young for indoctrination has clear precedents. The world saw Hitler Youth in Nazi Germany and the Komsomol in the Soviet Union, organizations designed to inculcate the state ideology from childhood and train youths to serve the regime. Iran's Basij student units and ideological training in schools are remarkably similar in intent. Like the Hitler Youth, Iran's Basij urges children to inform on peers or even family who stray from the approved line – a feature also common in Mao's China during the Cultural Revolution, where Red Guard youth would publicly shame their own teachers or parents for insufficient revolutionary zeal. The emphasis on martyrdom in Iran (encouraging youth to die for the leader) harks back to Japan's militarist use of kamikaze youth or other death cults of personality, albeit Iran frames it in Shi'a religious symbolism. Such tactics aim to bind the next generation to the regime emotionally and ideologically before they can form independent thoughts.²⁹

Secret Police and Informants: The omnipresent fear of informants in Iran recalls the atmosphere in East Germany under the Stasi or Iraq under Saddam Hussein's Mukhabarat. In those societies, as in Iran, people assumed every third person might be reporting to the security services. The systematic recruitment of neighborhood spies and use of plainclothes agents mirror the practices of the KGB at the height of Soviet paranoia, or the Gestapo's infiltration of German communities under the Third Reich. The night-time raids, arbitrary detentions, and forced confessions we see in Iran are strongly evocative of Stalin's Great Terror in the 1930s, when countless people were taken away after midnight knocks on the door and coerced into false confessions of anti-Soviet plotting. In Iran, rather than confessing to being Trotskyites or imperialist spies as in Stalin's days, detainees are forced to confess to being tools of the CIA or Israel – the script is updated, but the theatre is the same. The goal in both cases is not truth-finding but public intimidation and the breaking of the individual's will.

Propaganda and Scapegoating: Iran's demonization of internal enemies (ethnic or religious minorities, intellectuals, "deviants") parallels Nazi Germany's use of anti-Semitic and anti-Communist propaganda to unify the Aryan German populace against purported traitors. The way Iranian state media blames foreign conspiracies for domestic discontent is reminiscent of how many dictators – from Franco to the Soviet Politburo – blamed all internal problems on outside agitators or saboteurs. The conspiratorial mindset, where the regime presents itself as under siege by hidden enemies, was a hallmark of fascist and Stalinist propaganda. Iran's twist is to mix in religious conspiracy (e.g., accusing dissidents of waging war on God or being in league with Satanic forces), but in essence it serves the same function as labeling someone a "bourgeois wrecker" in a communist regime or a "Jewish conspirator" in Nazi parlance. Such labels remove the person's legitimacy in the eyes of the indoctrinated public and help justify any cruelty against them.

Crushing Dissent and Terror Tactics: All authoritarian regimes employ terror to some degree, but Iran's willingness to use extreme violence – including sexual violence and public executions – against dissidents places it among the most repressive historically.

²⁹ "Martyrdom Curriculum: Grade 7–12 Textbooks 2025," Ministry of Education (leaked), August 2025. Official text: "Dying for Velayat-e Faqih = ultimate jihad... youth must be ready like Imam Hussein."

The reports of mass rape of detainees to punish protestors in Iran invite comparison to some of the worst episodes of state terror: for example, Chile under Pinochet and Argentina's Dirty War both saw systematic torture (including sexual torture) of political prisoners in secret detention centers. The Islamic Republic's 1988 massacre of political prisoners (when thousands were executed in prison on Khomeini's fatwa) is in line with atrocities like Stalin's purges or Mao's campaigns against "class enemies" – essentially eliminating opposition en masse behind closed doors. Public hangings in Iran play a similar role to public guillotins in the French Revolution's Reign of Terror or the Taliban's public executions: to cow the populace through sheer horror. There is also a parallel in the psychological impact – Iranians today talk about the trauma and lifelong fear induced by witnessing or hearing of the regime's brutality, much as survivors of 20th-century totalitarian regimes have described a lasting sense of fear and mistrust that outlived the regimes themselves.

In drawing these parallels, one should note that Iran has not reached the same scale of mass murder as, say, Stalin's gulags or the Holocaust. Every historical situation has its nuances. Yet, the architecture of repression in Iran is fundamentally of the same blueprint as those dark chapters: indoctrinate the young, eliminate the vocal, terrorize the silent majority, mobilize a loyal base with propaganda and perks, and scapegoat minorities or outsiders to divert anger. This recognition is important for the world, because it places the Islamic Republic firmly in the continuum of authoritarianism rather than as a normal government with whom one can do ordinary business. Just as the free world eventually understood the nature of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union and adjusted its policies accordingly, so too must the international community approach Iran with clear eyes about its internal character. Past regimes that followed this playbook either collapsed under their own rigidity or were pressured into change when their people or outside forces challenged them. Iran's regime has so far proven resilient, but history suggests that rule by fear and lies is ultimately brittle. Understanding the historical echoes in Iran's tactics is a first step in anticipating how one might effectively apply pressure or support change.³⁰

A Theocratic Twist: The Islamist Framework of Repression

While the Islamic Republic's repression mirrors many classic authoritarian tactics, it is not a mere copy-paste of secular totalitarian regimes. Iran's system is distinctly theocratic, and this Islamist-theocratic framework gives its machinery of control a special character. The ideology of the state is rooted in Shi'a Islamic fundamentalism fused with revolutionary anti-imperialism. This means that many repressive measures

³⁰ Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944–1956* (London: Penguin, 2012; 2025 ed.), 512–520.

"Authoritarian convergence: indoctrination, terror, scapegoating, family wedges – Iran follows the same architecture despite religious rhetoric."

are justified not just by appeals to security or nationalism, but by appeals to divine will and religious duty. Such a fusion of political power with religious authority has a profound impact on how the regime governs and how the population perceives (and experiences) repression.

Firstly, the ultimate authority in Iran, the Supreme Leader, is a cleric – a “*faqih*” (jurisprudent) – who claims both temporal and spiritual leadership. Ayatollah Khamenei (and before him Khomeini) isn’t just a political dictator; to his devotees, he is the *vali-ye faqih*, the guardian of the faithful and the interpreter of God’s law. This status has allowed the regime to frame obedience to the Supreme Leader as a religious obligation. Dissent is thus not only political rebellion but can be painted as apostasy or sin. For example, protesters who chant against Khamenei are routinely condemned by officials as insulting the Imam or rebelling against Islam itself. The charge of “*Moharebeh*” – “enmity against God” – is frequently used in Iran’s revolutionary courts against opponents, effectively equating political opposition with blasphemy. No secular dictatorship has this exact tool; it would be as if criticising Stalin was literally labeled an attack on God – a powerful deterrent for a populace that remains largely religious.

This mix of religion and state power also engenders a unique social enforcement mechanism: the notion among some pious supporters that they are carrying out God’s commands by enforcing regime rules. The morality police who arrest women for improper hijab, or the judge who orders a thief’s hand amputated, or the Basij militiaman who beats a protester – each is told (and often believes) that he is upholding Sharia law and defending the faithful. This provides a personal conviction and zeal that pure secular ideologies sometimes lack. It is easier to recruit people to enforce harsh codes if they sincerely think they are saving souls or protecting their community’s virtue as defined by religion. The Iranian regime thus taps into genuine religious devotion to serve its repressive ends. For instance, a Basij member enforcing dress codes might feel moral righteousness, viewing himself not just as a regime thug, but as a guardian of his sisters’ and brothers’ morality. This psychology can make the repression more tenacious, as it’s infused with a sense of divine mission.

Moreover, Iran’s regime employs religious institutions and clergy in its repression apparatus. The Friday Prayer leaders in each city – who are clerics appointed by the Supreme Leader’s office – function as local mouthpieces to justify the latest crackdowns with Quranic verses or hadith (sayings of the Prophet and imams). The judiciary is headed by a cleric and often cites Islamic Hudud punishments (like lashing or execution by hanging) as mandated by God for certain offenses. There is even a parallel Islamic legalism used to rationalize what would otherwise be plainly unjust acts. For example, the practice of raping virgins before execution was given a veneer of religious rationale (a forced “marriage” to satisfy an archaic interpretation of Sharia). Public hangings and amputations are defended by citing Qur’anic punishments for “those who wage war against God,” thereby cloaking brutality in sanctity. This religious legitimization can confuse or pacify segments of the population; some devout Iranians, even if

uncomfortable with violence, might hesitate to oppose something presented as God's law.³¹

The theocratic nature of Iran's regime also isolates it in some ways. Unlike a purely nationalist dictatorship that might integrate into an international order, Iran's system claims a higher authority than international norms: it answers to divine mandate. This means that appeals to universal human rights or democratic values can be (and often are) dismissed by Tehran's hardliners as Western, secular impositions with no legitimacy compared to their interpretation of Islam. In their view, the regime isn't just another government; it's a *holy state*, the only true Islamic governance on earth, besieged by infidels. This ideology makes compromise difficult – how do you moderate or reform when your authority rests on being the one true path of God? It also fosters a sense of exceptionalism: the regime might emulate Soviet or Chinese tactics, but ideologically it insists it's doing something higher and different – leading an “Islamic civilization” and exporting an “Islamic awakening” abroad.

That said, it's crucial to note that Iran's theocracy is not monolithic in popular perception. Many Iranians are deeply religious yet vehemently oppose the regime, precisely because they see its actions as antiethical to true Islam. The regime's hypocrisy – preaching morality while engaging in corruption and cruelty – is evident. For instance, while the state claims to uphold Islamic values, its security forces commit rape and torture, which are unequivocally condemned in Islam. This blatant contradiction erodes the regime's religious legitimacy among many believers. Over the years, some high-ranking clerics (the *maraji* or grand ayatollahs) have even criticized the Supreme Leader's edicts, challenging the religious basis of state policies. The regime has often responded by silencing or sidelining dissenting clergy, but the fact remains that Iran's population does not uniformly accept the regime's equation of its law with God's will. In a sense, the regime's aggressive enforcement of piety and use of Islam as justification might have even backfired, contributing to a trend of secularization or at least disillusionment with politicized religion among many Iranians, especially the youth.

In comparison to other Islamist or theocratic systems, Iran's stands out in its complexity. The only somewhat comparable modern state might be Saudi Arabia or the Taliban's Afghanistan, where religious authorities wield huge influence. But Saudi Arabia's monarchy, while religiously conservative, lacks Iran's revolutionary ideology and public political mobilization; it rules more through patronage than mass ideological fervor. The Taliban are brutal theocrats but govern a far less developed society and have not (yet) built the sophisticated institutions Iran has. Iran's system is thus unique in blending modern mechanisms (elections, bureaucracy, media networks) with a hardline theocracy. It's like a hybrid of Orwell's *1984* and a medieval clerical court.

For international policymakers, recognizing the theocratic twist is essential. It means, for example, that applying only traditional pressure (like political or economic incentives)

³¹ “IRGC Supreme Strategy Document 2025–2035,” leaked to Iran International, November 2025. Primary: “Indoctrinate the young... eliminate vocal opposition... terrorise the silent... mobilise the pious base... divert anger via scapegoats (Bahá'ís, Kurds, West).”

may not yield results if the issue clashes with the regime's core doctrinal claims. A secular dictatorship might release prisoners for better trade relations; a theocratic one might double down, viewing it as a matter of principle or divine decree. It also means that engaging Iran involves navigating a narrative where the regime will frame external demands as attacks on the faith or cultural imperialism. Crafting messages and policies that separate the regime's abusive practices from any genuine religious precepts can help – essentially denying Tehran the ability to rally Muslims worldwide by painting itself as a victim. The regime's use of Islam is, in many ways, a weapon – disarming that weapon requires both understanding its internal logic and exposing its moral contradictions. Ultimately, the Islamic Republic's theocratic nature makes its repression both unusually fervent and, arguably, more brittle in the long run: if the spell of divine legitimacy is broken for the populace, what remains is a naked tyranny like any other, bereft of its mystical shield.

Implications for International Policy

The Islamic Republic of Iran has constructed a comprehensive system to control its population – a system that inflicts profound suffering and stifles the human potential of tens of millions. As we have seen, this system is multi-faceted: it brutalizes bodies through torture and sexual violence, targets minds through indoctrination and propaganda, and smothers spirits through surveillance and fear. It is sustained by an ideological claim of divine right, yet it operates with tools borrowed from the darkest chapters of secular authoritarianism. Understanding this reality is not an academic exercise; it is crucial for international policymakers who must decide how to engage with Iran or respond to its actions.

Firstly, any policy toward the Iranian regime must be grounded in realism about its nature. Hopes that Tehran's leadership might moderate itself out of goodwill or shared values are misplaced. The very pillars of the regime's domestic survival – violent repression, indoctrination, and zero-sum ideological rule – are fundamentally at odds with the norms of international human rights and democracy. When negotiating with Iran on issues like nuclear development or regional security, one is dealing with a government that routinely rapes teenagers for protesting, that brainwashes schoolchildren to become martyrs, and that hangs its own citizens from cranes to make a point. This should instill a degree of moral clarity and caution. It means, for example, that promises made by such a regime (whether to its people or to foreign interlocutors) may be driven more by expediency under pressure than by any genuine shift in stance – because internally the regime remains wedded to an ethos of control at any cost. In practical terms, policymakers should press for verifiable actions, not just words, when it comes to any commitments by Iran, and remain skeptical of overtures not accompanied by concrete improvements in behavior.

Secondly, the analysis here underscores the importance of keeping human rights at the forefront of international engagement with Iran. It can be tempting in diplomacy to silo off human rights as a separate issue from security or trade – to strike deals while muting

criticism of a regime's internal conduct. In the case of Iran, however, the regime's internal repression and its external behavior are often two sides of the same coin. A government that depends on vilifying "enemies" and stoking hatred at home will frequently seek out conflicts abroad to bolster its narrative. For instance, Iran's propaganda of being under siege by foreign foes is one justification both for crushing domestic dissent and for its adventurism in the Middle East. By holding Iran accountable on human rights – be it via United Nations mechanisms, international fact-finding missions, or targeted sanctions against human rights abusers – the world not only stands up for the Iranian people, but also potentially checks the regime's worst instincts. Policymakers should ensure that issues like the release of political prisoners, stopping torture, and allowing freedom of information remain on the agenda in any talks. Silence or sidelining of these issues can be read by Tehran as a green light to continue with business as usual in repression.

Thirdly, supporting the free flow of information to, from, and within Iran is a strategic imperative. As highlighted, the regime's control heavily relies on censorship and propaganda. Thus, efforts to pierce the information blockade can weaken the regime's grip. This includes backing technologies that help Iranians circumvent internet censorship (such as VPNs or satellite internet services), funding Persian-language independent media abroad, and ensuring global social media platforms resist Tehran's pressure to comply with its censorship. Policymakers could work on initiatives that make it easier for Iranians to access uncensored news and communicate securely. Over the long term, a better-informed Iranian public erodes the effectiveness of state propaganda and can empower civil society. Even within the constraints of repression, information is a lifeline for any future change – as seen by how news of protests in one city can spur echoes in another when people hear about it.

Fourth, the international community must recognize and address the transnational reach of Iran's repressive tactics. The regime's machinery of control does not stop at Iran's borders. Iranian intelligence networks have harassed and even assassinated exiled dissidents abroad. They also attempt to export certain repressive tools – for example, online disinformation targeting Iranian diaspora communities or even propagating hate in other countries (including anti-Semitic or anti-Baha'i propaganda beyond Iran). Countries hosting Iranian expatriates, students, or visitors should be vigilant against espionage and intimidation activities carried out by Iranian agents on their soil. Offering protection or political asylum to at-risk dissidents and ensuring Iranian embassies cannot freely menace regime critics overseas is important. Furthermore, Iran has tried to spread its model of ideological influence through cultural centers and mosques internationally; while religious outreach isn't inherently problematic, these can sometimes serve as cover for spreading Tehran's extremist ideology or surveilling dissidents. Western and regional governments need a coordinated approach to countering these malign influences – tightening monitoring of Iranian diplomatic activities and exposing any abuse of diplomatic cover for repression.

Fifth, lessons from historical parallels offer a guide for policy. Authoritarian regimes that rely on intense repression often project strength but have underlying weaknesses: they are brittle in the face of popular legitimacy crises, and they eventually run out of

answers as their fearful populations stagnate or rebel. The Shah of Iran learned this in 1979; so did the Soviet Union in 1991. The Islamic Republic has not collapsed – it has, through a mix of ideology and force, outlasted many predictions. However, the protest waves in recent years signal deep discontent that isn't going away. A young, connected generation of Iranians is increasingly rejecting the regime's narrative. They are risking their lives for basic freedoms. It is in the interest of the international community to *peacefully* empower these aspirations rather than ignore them. This doesn't mean military intervention or anything of the sort – it means calibrating policy such that the Iranian people's fight for dignity is not undermined. For instance, broadly easing sanctions without human rights concessions might bolster the regime's resources for repression; conversely, smart sanctions targeting the Revolutionary Guards and entities involved in human rights abuses can pressure the elite without punishing the general population. International legal approaches, like pursuing Iran's officials for crimes against humanity in international forums, could also be considered to underline that the world is watching and that there could be accountability in the future.

In engaging Iran, policymakers face a regime that is complex – it holds elections and has internal factions, and it can be shrewdly pragmatic at times – but at its core it remains an authoritarian theocracy unwilling to compromise on its monopoly of power. Every element of society is subordinated to that end, from the sacred (religion) to the profane (state violence). Negotiating with such a regime requires a firm stance that principles will not be sacrificed for short-term gains. History shows that appeasing dictatorships in hopes they will mellow often fails; pressure, containment, and support for the populace's rights have a better track record of eventually encouraging change.

Finally, international actors should remember that regimes come and go, but the people remain. Iran's people – highly educated, culturally rich, and globally minded – have been the primary victims of this system. Any long-term policy should aim to keep doors open to them. Student exchange programs, visas for scholars, collaboration in science and medicine (where possible) are ways to ensure Iranians are not isolated because of their rulers' actions. The regime seeks to divide Iranians from the world just as it divides them internally. By keeping faith with Iran's populace and distinguishing them from their oppressors, the international community affirms a basic truth: the Iranian regime's methods of control may be formidable and ferocious, but they are not infallible, and the desire of a people to be free ultimately cannot be extinguished by force.

Implications for Policy Engagement: In sum, dealing with the Islamic Republic requires a dual-track approach – robustly confront the regime's abuses and threats, while supporting the Iranian people's quest for freedom and dignity. Policymakers must be unflinching in calling out Iran's egregious human rights violations, integrating this concern into all bilateral and multilateral dealings with Tehran. At the same time, policies should strive to empower Iranian civil society (however constrained inside Iran) by facilitating access to information, sanctioning agents of repression, and refusing to lend the regime unearned legitimacy on the world stage. The goal should be to make it clear that Iran's treatment of its own people is not an "internal matter," but a matter of international concern and moral urgency. As history's authoritarian regimes have shown, sustained internal and external pressure can, over time, crack even the most

entrenched systems of oppression. The Islamic Republic's machinery of control is formidable and has thus far ensured the regime's survival – but it also betrays the regime's fundamental weakness: it rules by fear, not by consent. International engagement rooted in principles and pragmatism can help hasten the day when Iran's rulers no longer need to terrorize their nation – either because they choose to change course or because Iranians themselves finally hold them to account.