



The Soft War

UNDERSTANDING IRAN'S
DOMESTIC IDEOLOGICAL CRISIS



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A M E R I C A N E N T E R P R I S E I N S T I T U T E

Executive Summary

The Islamic Republic of Iran has entered a serious domestic crisis that threatens the regime's long-term survival and that the Mahsa Amini protest movement has deepened. The regime's killing of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 sparked a series of spontaneous demonstrations that devolved into a countrywide and monthslong protest movement and fundamentally altered the relationship between the Islamic Republic and its people. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has correctly diagnosed the root of the Mahsa Amini movement as an increasingly insurmountable ideological rift between the regime and Iran's youth but has chosen to confront his restive people rather than accommodate them.

Khamenei has blamed waning regime support on a so-called ideological soft war that he believes the US is waging against the Iranian population, especially the youth. Khamenei has built and is increasingly reinforcing an ideological infrastructure to counter mounting anti-regime sentiments among Iranian youth. These reactive efforts are multipronged and pervasive; exist at the national, provincial, and virtual levels; and aim to counter Western influence in Iran. Soft war encompasses censoring the internet and media, promoting pro-regime cultural initiatives, increasing control of Iranian educational and cultural entities, and monitoring the population to punish those who fail to adhere to the regime's stringent ideology.

Iran's soft-war policies reflect Supreme Leader Khamenei's long-held concern that demographic changes and waning revolutionary ideals present an existential threat to the regime's survival. The soft-war effort signals a broader policy shift in Tehran wherein the regime increasingly prioritizes addressing soft-power threats. Iranian officials have calculated in recent years that the US will not invade Iran. Instead, they have expressed alarm about a potential

domestic uprising—and possible regime overthrow—inspired by Western and Western-affiliated cultural products.

This rhetorical shift became most salient in 2015 and 2016, as Iran joined the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and Khamenei concretized it by granting the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) greater control over state media production, distribution, and indoctrination. The IRGC's increased influence over the Iranian information space is further diminishing the already-limited political plurality in the regime.

The regime—at least in its current form—cannot sustain itself without the support of Iran's youth. Because 48 percent of Iranians are between age 25 and 54, almost half of Iran's population has little or no memory of the Islamic Revolution and the formative Iran-Iraq War. This demographic must eventually occupy key roles in the regime but is increasingly spearheading countrywide acts of anti-regime defiance. Khamenei's soft-war strategy is an inadequate response to the Iranian people's grievances that will instead likely exacerbate the very anti-regime sentiments he seeks to suppress.

Khamenei's failure to reconcile the differences between the Iranian people and his political system has serious implications for the Islamic Republic's future. Khamenei's endorsement of censorship, indoctrination, propaganda, and limitations on political plurality will likely foster deeper distrust of the regime among Iranian youth. The regime's failure to make any concessions to protesters, such as abolishing mandatory veiling or the morality patrol, will likely fuel these anti-regime sentiments further. The supreme leader's flawed soft-war strategy carries the additional risk of widening intra-regime fissures at a particularly sensitive juncture in Iran's history as 84-year-old Khamenei prepares to eventually be succeeded.

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The Islamic Republic has entered a serious domestic crisis that threatens the regime's long-term survival. On September 16, 2022, 22-year-old Iranian Kurd Mahsa Amini succumbed to injuries from being brutally arrested and detained by the Islamic Republic's morality patrol.¹ The morality patrol, a unit of the Iranian Law Enforcement Command, had arrested Amini for "improper" veiling in Tehran weeks after President Ebrahim Raisi had ordered the government to further restrict and police how women dressed.²

Amini's killing sparked a series of spontaneous demonstrations that evolved into a countrywide and monthslong protest movement and fundamentally altered the relationship between the Islamic Republic and its people.³ The Mahsa Amini protest movement built on mounting anti-regime sentiments developed in previous periods of civil unrest in Iran, but this movement was unique in its scope, duration, and revolutionary tone.⁴ Amini's killing sparked the first women-led movement of its kind in Iran and created unprecedented unity among disparate ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic demographics in the country.⁵

Anti-regime protests persisted for months after Amini's death, occurring in all 31 of Iran's provinces.⁶ Over 70 security personnel died in this protest movement—significantly more than in any other protest wave in the Islamic Republic's history—and many demonstrators cohered into organized protest groups.⁷ Protesters moved beyond advocating targeted political and socioeconomic reforms—which they had largely done in prior demonstrations—and demanded fundamental changes in the regime in an explicitly revolutionary tone.⁸

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has correctly diagnosed the root of the Mahsa Amini movement as an increasingly insurmountable ideological rift between the regime and Iran's youth.⁹ Young Iranians spearheaded the Mahsa Amini protest wave. Universities and schools became centers for anti-regime activity as students protested the Islamic Republic and its core ideology. An outlet affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) estimated in the movement's initial days that 93 percent of protesters were younger than 25.¹⁰

Khamenei has chosen to confront his restive people rather than accommodate them. He has rejected calls for structural changes in the regime and reinforced—rather than easing—mandatory veiling months after Amini's death. Khamenei has refused to accept that a growing portion of Iranians reject core elements of the regime's ideology on their own and instead blames the movement and all previous protest waves on a soft-power war, or "soft war," that the US and its allies are supposedly waging on Iranian youth. Khamenei has seemingly doubled down on his long-standing ideological framework.

Khamenei has thus concluded that he was right all along to focus on combating the supposed US-led soft war through increasingly and uncompromisingly indoctrinating Iranian youth. Khamenei has been building, and is now reinforcing, a soft-power infrastructure to solve the problem he has defined. His own soft-war efforts are multipronged and pervasive; exist at the national, provincial, and virtual levels; and aim to counter Western influence in Iran. Soft war encompasses censoring the internet and media, promoting pro-regime cultural initiatives, increasing

control of Iranian educational and cultural entities, and monitoring the population to punish those who fail to adhere to the regime's stringent ideology.

Iran's soft-war policies reflect Khamenei's long-held concern that demographic changes and waning revolutionary ideals present an existential threat to the regime's survival. This soft war signals a broader policy shift in Tehran wherein the regime increasingly prioritizes soft-power threats. Iranian officials have calculated in recent years that the US will not invade Iran. Instead, they have expressed alarm about a potential domestic uprising—and possible regime overthrow—inspired by Western and Western-affiliated cultural products.

This rhetorical shift became most salient in 2015 and 2016 as Iran joined the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and Khamenei concretized it by granting the IRGC greater control over state media production, distribution, and indoctrination. The supreme leader began purging central soft-power entities—such as the Friday prayer leader (FPL) network—of moderates around this time, a phenomenon that would eventually extend to Iran's political sphere and universities. However, Khamenei's allies are unlikely to successfully implement his vision, wherein indoctrination is a panacea for growing disillusionment among Iranian youth and for systemic corruption.

The crisis that the Mahsa Amini protests embody will likely endure after the movement ends because Khamenei has demonstrated an unwillingness to recognize this movement's threat to the regime's stability and survival. Khamenei's rhetoric throughout the Mahsa Amini movement conveys his uncompromising commitment to his own ideology and unwillingness to concede to his increasingly restive populace. The supreme leader's inability to confront the Islamic Republic's ailments effectively or take measures to bridge the growing gap between the regime and its people is making the crisis of the Mahsa Amini movement permanent rather than a passing challenge.

All these phenomena are visible in the regime's approach to waging its soft war against Western influence and Khamenei's continuation and expansion of that effort during the Mahsa Amini protests and

after they died down. The regime is trying to ideologize Iran out of its problems when the ideology itself causes unrest. The Islamic Republic's crisis has, therefore, only entered a new phase.

State of Play: Iran's Soft-War Crisis

Soft war is one of the three threats the regime perceives to its national security. These include hard threats, semihard threats, and soft threats.¹¹ Iranian academics describe all three threats as driven by the same thing: Iran's enemies attempting to destabilize Iranian territorial integrity, ideas, behavioral patterns, and political sovereignty. The differences among hard threats, semihard threats, and soft threats lie in how Iran's adversaries supposedly seek to achieve these objectives.¹²

- *Hard threats* use military force to threaten or violate a state's territorial integrity.¹³
- *Semihard threats* covertly infiltrate and undermine government institutions.¹⁴ Iranian military doctrine cites domestic dissent staged by foreign agents, espionage, cyberwarfare, and sabotage as examples of semihard threats.
- *Soft threats* use sociopolitical instruments to erode regime legitimacy and national identity and change a population's behavioral patterns.¹⁵ "Soft war" refers to one state actor's soft threats against another state actor in order to sway public opinion and incite regime change.

Iranian officials and academics cite psychological operations and media war as tools in the soft-war framework, although these should not be equated with soft war. Psychological operations are, for example, described as ideological campaigns aimed at swaying public opinion, while soft war is a broader concept that encompasses all campaigns to influence the people of Iran. "Soft war" thus encompasses the Iranian population at large, although Iranian officials frame it as a threat that predominantly targets Iranian youth.

Anti-Regime Protests. Recent unrest and demographic changes further exacerbate Iranian leaders' concern about the so-called soft-war threat. Politically and economically motivated protests have become more prevalent in recent years as the regime faces a growing legitimacy crisis. The 2017–18 Dey, 2019 gasoline, and 2022–23 Mahsa Amini protest movements were widespread and included populations that have historically supported the regime.¹⁶ The November 2019 demonstrations resulted in the highest number of protester casualties in the regime's history.¹⁷ The most significant period of unrest, however, is the monthslong protest wave following Amini's killing due to the movement's scope, duration, and revolutionary tone.

Some Iranian officials have correctly diagnosed the root of unrest in recent years—an increasingly overt rejection of the Islamic Republic's foundational ideology and economic policies—but Khamenei is unwilling to craft meaningful solutions to address such problems. Iranian officials have accurately warned that Iranian youth do not share the same ideals as the regime's founders and are more likely to participate in anti-regime protests amid significant demographic shifts.¹⁸

Generational Turnover. Moreover, the Islamic Republic faces its first meaningful generational turnover since its founding in 1979, which threatens to weaken the regime's hold on power. Because 48 percent of Iranians are between ages 25 and 54, almost half of Iran's population has little or no memory of the Islamic Revolution and the formative Iran-Iraq War.¹⁹ This demographic must eventually occupy key roles in the regime but is increasingly spearheading countrywide acts of anti-regime defiance.

Iranian officials witnessed hundreds of university students and schoolchildren—specifically girls—destroying or refusing to participate in regime propaganda in the Mahsa Amini movement's early weeks.²⁰ This demographic increasingly flouts mandatory veiling standards: Iranian girls and women are appearing in public spaces without the veil, and some of their male counterparts have started wearing one to humorously demonstrate their support.²¹

Social media users have circulated footage of young children—some apparently school-age—chanting anti-regime slogans.²² This generation's participation in the Mahsa Amini protest movement—and the regime's brutal suppression thereof—will serve as a crucible for Iranian youth's memories and likely further cement their desire for change.

Regime officials, however, have largely signaled an uncompromising approach to the widening gap between Iran's leaders and youth and have rejected calls for meaningful sociopolitical and economic reforms.²³ Supreme Leader Khamenei instead seeks to transmit his generation's revolutionary ideals to a demographic that is calling for increasingly fundamental changes in the regime.²⁴ The regime pursues this objective partially by minimizing domestic consumption of Western—and particularly diasporic—cultural and media products.

Media Consumption in the Islamic Republic.

Most Iranians, including regime loyalists and IRGC members, consume Western and diaspora media and cultural products and dismiss state-produced media as propaganda.²⁵ The regime estimates that two to four million Iranians live and work outside Iran, some of whom produce alternatives to regime propaganda and state-run media.²⁶ Some studies estimated that, as of 2012, 70 percent of the Iranian population had access to television satellites that broadcast over 120 diaspora Persian channels.²⁷

Domestic Iranian consumption of foreign-generated content is almost certainly higher today following the advent of social media and instant messaging platforms such as Telegram. A 2016 Harvard University study reported that diaspora and reformist journalists constituted the highest-density Iranian sources on Twitter, at 21.9 percent of the entire network.²⁸ The same study found that more than half the viewers consuming diaspora content were in Iran, underscoring diaspora media's influence in the country.²⁹ State and state-affiliated media outlets attributed the deaths of protesters in the 2022–23 protest wave to obscure health issues and accidents even as independent and anti-regime outlets available to many Iranians told the truth, likely further cementing

the Iranian population's distrust of regime-affiliated media outlets.

Senior Iranian officials interpret domestic consumption of foreign media as evidence of decreased confidence in and threats to regime legitimacy. Iranian officials and outlets have acknowledged that most of the population consumes foreign and diaspora cultural products and have repeatedly emphasized that this threatens the regime.³⁰ Increased domestic consumption of foreign and diaspora media coincides with significant decreases in state-run media viewership.³¹ Young Iranians are reportedly dissatisfied with the regime, pessimistic about their futures, and increasingly eager to leave the country.³² Khamenei has stressed the need to “vaccinate” Iranians against foreign cultural products to protect Iranian youth and preserve the regime's revolutionary identity.³³

The regime often claims that the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia fund popular diaspora media outlets such as BBC Persian, Iran International, Manoto, and Voice of America to incite protests within Iran's borders, particularly during periods of unrest.³⁴ Iran reportedly demanded that Saudi Arabia cease supporting Iran International—an anti-regime outlet that Iranian officials claim the Saudi government funds—during rapprochement talks with Saudi officials in early 2023. There is no evidence to support claims that diaspora outlets are attempting to overthrow the Islamic Republic. But these outlets' reporting does frequently invalidate regime narratives, and Iranian officials are accordingly responding to this threat to their ability to dominate and shape the domestic Iranian information space.

Many diaspora outlets are in fact anti-regime, and some do receive US and EU funding. Popular diaspora outlets such as BBC Persian, Kayhan London, and Manoto circulate nostalgic content about life in the prerevolutionary Pahlavi dynasty, which they favorably compare to life in the Islamic Republic.³⁵ Iranian film director Mostafa Azizi has affirmed that the Iranian population—specifically Iranian youth—consume and internalize nostalgic diaspora programs, causing them to “own the nostalgia that once belonged to their parents and to view that time as a

lost paradise.”³⁶ Other outlets such as Radio Farda—with which more than 15.7 percent of adults in Iran interact weekly—receive funding from the US government and promote democratic values often antithetical to the values of the Islamic Republic.³⁷

The US has furthermore attempted to reduce Iranian censorship and pursued information operations in Iran. The Obama administration included the Victims of Iranian Censorship Act, which aimed to enhance the Iranian population's freedom of information, in the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act. Iranian media reported that the act would weaponize online media against the regime and alleged that the Pentagon had allocated \$55 million to achieve this goal.³⁸ President Donald Trump similarly green-lit an extensive Pentagon information operations campaign in Iran.³⁹ The plan included 200 measures to shake Iranians' faith in the Islamic Republic and its ability to succeed in combat.⁴⁰

The regime's approach . . . rests on the conviction . . . that the solution is dominating the information space and increasingly forcing the Iranian people's ideologization.

Iranian leadership views the US and its allies as responsible for increased domestic unrest and seeks to counter these threats rather than addressing the economic hardship, endemic corruption, and political repression that often incite unrest. The Iranian regime is thus not wrong to perceive Western media as a threat to its control over its population

or to conclude that Western governments and the anti-regime diaspora actively fund and support some of that media.

The regime has apparently spent far less time considering why foreign-produced content is so popular and effective. Instead, it has focused on blocking its people's access to such content and, increasingly, flooding the information space with its own narratives. The regime's approach to the soft war that it has concluded the West is waging against it thus rests on the conviction that the regime's ideology is correct, that the Iranian people would embrace that ideology fully if it were presented to them clearly and without competition from other views, and that the solution is dominating the information space and increasingly forcing the Iranian people's ideologization.

Conceptualizing and Implementing Soft War

Soft war is not a new concept; in fact, it predates the 1979 revolution that birthed the Islamic Republic. The Islamic Republic's definition of "soft war" overlaps with the term "westoxification," first coined in the 1940s.⁴¹ "Westoxification" pejoratively describes Iran's acceptance and internalization of Western ideas that result in the loss of Iranian cultural identity.⁴² Influential revolutionary thinkers popularized the term in the 1960s and framed political Islam as the solution to Iran's eroding national identity.

Westoxification became a cornerstone of prerevolutionary ideology and, later, a standard political term in postrevolutionary Iran.⁴³ The Islamic Republic's definition of "soft war" reconceptualizes and reinvigorates "westoxification" to transmit revolutionary ideals to the next generation. Khamenei and other senior officials leverage the notion of a US-led soft war against Iran to unify the Iranian population against the US and its allies and justify increasingly repressive social control policies.

The Islamic Republic implemented soft-war policies as far back as 1980, although these policies were not yet termed as such. Islamic Republic founder

and first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini seemingly viewed foreign ideology as the greatest threat to the newly founded Islamic Republic, stating: "We are not afraid of economic sanctions or military intervention. What we are afraid of is western universities training our youth in the interests of West or East."⁴⁴ Khomeini launched a Cultural Revolution from 1980 to 1983 to purge universities of Western and non-Islamic influence, banning thousands of books, students, and lecturers from Iranian higher education. Some institutions established to oversee university purges, such as the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (SCCR), still exist today. Khomeini similarly purged the regime of so-called Western cultural products such as music, although Iranian officials have since relaxed this ban.⁴⁵

The regime began using the Iran-Iraq War to unify the Iranian population against its enemies. The Iran-Iraq War was a crucible for the regime. Saddam Hussein launched a full-scale invasion of Iran in 1980, enormously straining the newly formed Islamic Republic. Hussein sought to exploit Iran's diminished postrevolutionary military—weakened by purges and equipment shortages—to secure a swift victory.⁴⁶ The war instead dragged on for eight years and ended inconclusively.

Khomeini used Hussein's invasion to cement his hold on power and unify the Iranian population. The war facilitated the IRGC's ascent and became an integral component of the Islamic Republic's national identity and culture. Iranian officials frequently reference the war as demonstrating the Islamic Republic's resilience against perceived aggression from its enemies.⁴⁷ Some regime officials claim that America's soft-war campaign against Iran began around the time of the Iran-Iraq War.⁴⁸ The regime has since expanded these foundational narratives to include Iran's so-called soft war against the US.

Regime leadership mobilized the IRGC—most notably the Basij—to ideologize the Iranian population in the years following the Iran-Iraq War. Khomeini formed the Basij as an independent volunteer militia in 1979, and it eventually became a branch of the IRGC responsible for civil defense and social

control. The Basij uses quasi-professional paramilitary units to permeate almost every layer of Iranian society, promoting revolutionary ideals and suppressing domestic dissent.⁴⁹

Basij indoctrination efforts were initially *internal* to the organization. Basij members began receiving ideological and political training, for example, in 1985.⁵⁰ Iranian leadership increasingly leveraged the Basij to ideologize the Iranian population throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. The Basij recruited 300,000 members alone to counter “cultural invasion[s]” in 1994, coinciding with increased Iranian satellite television use.⁵¹

The year 1994 marked a twofold shift in the Basij’s approach to indoctrination. Ideology was no longer viewed as an individual responsibility but rather as an *external* threat—tantamount to invasion—that necessitated action. Khamenei likened this approach to vaccinating Iranian society against ideology or culture deemed incompatible with the Islamic-Iranian identity.⁵²

Soft War from 2009 to the Present. In 2009, the regime expanded its efforts to indoctrinate the Iranian public, which it began describing through the lens of soft war. The term “soft war” was popularized following the June 2009 Green Movement, the largest protest wave since the regime’s inception 30 years earlier.⁵³ Iranian officials used the term several dozen times from 2000 to 2005. This figure doubled between 2008 and 2009 and tripled following the Green Movement.⁵⁴ Officials used “soft war” several times a day by 2011 to describe anti-regime rhetoric and activities.⁵⁵

Iranian authorities expanded Basij ideological branches to neutralize these internal security threats. The Basij gained responsibility for managing all the Guards’ sociocultural activities—including education, media, and ideology—and countering soft-power threats. In October 2009, Khamenei appointed IRGC Maj. Gen. Mohammad Reza Naghdi as Basij commander to oversee the Basij’s reorganization. Naghdi established more than 22 branches to penetrate and indoctrinate all strata of Iranian society and, later, recruited Iranian media officials to circulate

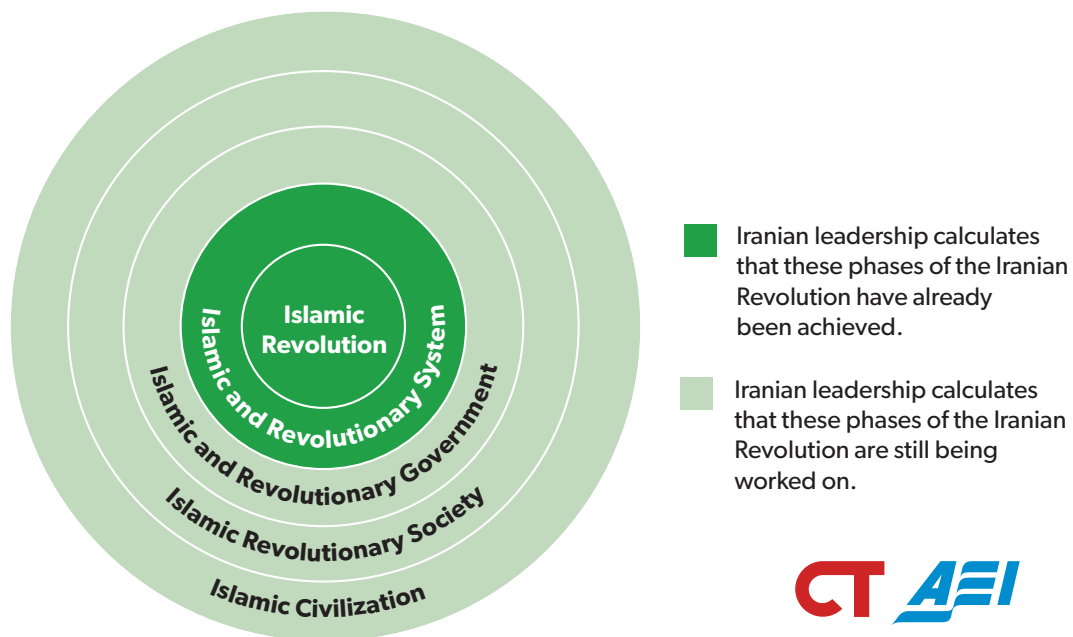
pro-regime rhetoric in select state-owned media outlets.⁵⁶

Khamenei has demonstrated a willingness to exert even greater control over the Iranian information space since 2016. Iranian leadership became less concerned with the US invading Iran following the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011.⁵⁷ Continued US reluctance to reengage with Iraq—despite significant territorial gains by the Islamic State—further solidified this line of thought. The Islamic Republic thus identified addressing sociocultural threats as more urgent than countering a possible invasion and began prioritizing these threats accordingly. The regime has combated the so-called soft war against it since the Iran-Iraq War.

Recent changes to the regime’s soft-war infrastructure build on and reinforce this history to reflect Iran’s shifting perceptions of threats from the US. In 2016, Khamenei coined the term “explanation jihad,” describing an offensive soft-war strategy wherein regime supporters counter negative perceptions of the Islamic Republic.⁵⁸ The term further signals the regime’s increased prioritization of soft-power threats since 2016.

Khamenei has delegated to the armed forces—particularly the IRGC—and regime loyalists greater responsibility over the Iranian soft-war infrastructure in recent years. More concretely, the IRGC and regime loyalists are increasingly *producing* regime propaganda—not just disseminating it. Since 2016, Iran’s soft-war infrastructure has changed in three key ways that signal unprecedented IRGC and regime-loyalist control over the Iranian information space:

1. The IRGC established the Baghiyatollah al Azam Sociocultural Headquarters to improve soft-war capabilities in 2016;⁵⁹
2. Khamenei has purged moderates and reformists from the supreme leader representatives and FPL network since 2016;⁶⁰ and
3. Khamenei introduced his seminal second step initiative in 2019.

Figure 1. Phases of the Revolution

Source: Author.

Recent changes in the regime's soft-war infrastructure signal a broader shift in Iranian defense strategy and threat calculus. In the past several years, Iranian leaders have expressed increased confidence in their defensive military powers and ability to deter attacks from the US.⁶¹ The supreme leader's foreign affairs adviser, Ali Akbar Velayati, definitively denied in 2016 that the US could enter a military conflict with Iran.⁶² Senior military officials have similarly asserted that Iran successfully deterred the US and its partners from attacking the country and that the US downgraded its military posture vis-à-vis Iran from offensive to defensive.⁶³

Changes in Iran's military command structure in 2016 further signaled that Iranian officials were internalizing this rhetoric. Khamenei reorganized the Iranian military in mid-2016 to better support its expeditionary operations, thereby de-prioritizing the threat of an invasion.⁶⁴ In a similar vein, Khamenei may be prioritizing Iranian soft war because his advisers calculate the US is unlikely to invade or attack Iran in the coming years.

Khamenei's Second Step Manifesto. Khamenei introduced the second step initiative in 2019 to reinvigorate revolutionary ideology among Iranian youth and bolster Iran's soft-war capabilities. If soft war is the preeminent problem the regime faces, then the second step is Khamenei's solution. Supreme Leader Khamenei views the second step as his political legacy and contribution to the revolutionary cause.⁶⁵

Khamenei first introduced this initiative in a speech commemorating the Islamic Republic's 40th anniversary on February 11, 2019.⁶⁶ The speech calls on Iranian youth to preserve and expand on revolutionary ideals in five generational phases.

Khamenei describes the Islamic Revolution as a continuum that started in 1979 and will end with an Iran-led transnational Islamic civilization. Iran's first supreme leader, Khomeini, defined and executed the first phase by starting the revolution itself in 1979 and the second phase by establishing an Islamic and revolutionary system that adhered to revolutionary ideals.⁶⁷ (See Figure 1.)

The third phase, Islamic and revolutionary government, aims to eliminate liberals from Iran's political system.⁶⁸ Khamenei thinks the regime has not yet accomplished this objective.⁶⁹ The fourth phase, Islamic revolutionary society, focuses on ideologizing Iranians and eradicating Western and liberal influence from the population. The fifth phase, Islamic civilization, will culminate in a transnational Islamic civilization led by Iran's supreme leader and rival the US-led international order.⁷⁰

The second step initiative aims to ensure the next generation of Iranian leadership maintains the same revolutionary ideals as its predecessors. Khamenei's second step initiative is *not* the same as the second phase of the revolution, which Khamenei calculates that Khomeini already accomplished.⁷¹ Nor is it new. The second step initiative, rather, builds on Khamenei's five-step vision to portray the revolution as an evolving event that demands active and diligent participation from Iran's population. In his 2019 second step speech, Khamenei tasked Iranian youth specifically with carrying the Islamic Republic into the third, fourth, and fifth stages of its revolution.

The second step initiative is a comprehensive plan to repel and counter Western influence in Iran, spearheaded by Iranian youth and supported by corresponding government entities. Iranian youth play a pivotal role in Khamenei's manifesto. Khamenei addresses his speech to young Iranians directly and frames the second step as a road map for preserving and expanding on revolutionary ideals.

Khamenei claims that Western soft war against his regime impedes Iranian youth from implementing his five-step vision and preserving the Islamic Republic in its current form. The second step speech describes Western and Iranian diaspora cultural products as a propaganda siege aimed at eroding domestic confidence in the regime. This siege's ramifications are, according to Khamenei, wide-ranging. The Iranian leader blames Western soft war for everything from decreased confidence in the regime's economic policies, which occurred amid former President Trump's maximum-pressure campaign, to decreased piety.

Khamenei calls on Iranian youth to reject foreign narratives critical of the regime, decrease economic

reliance on external actors, and assume the mantle of advancing Iran's Islamic Revolution. The second step initiative tasks sociocultural government entities with crafting and implementing censorship policies to shield the Iranian youth from these narratives. The initiative simultaneously encourages officials to reward young regime loyalists with leadership positions throughout Iran's political structure.

Iranian officials have since disseminated the second step ideology to various working groups, conferences, and educational programs throughout Iran's political structure. Second step entities are decentralized and exist at the national and provincial levels.⁷² Examples of these entities include clerical educational seminars focused on second step ideology and law enforcement working groups dedicated to implementing Khamenei's vision.⁷³ These initiatives propagate second step ideology in crucial nodes of the regime's support base, such as among IRGC members and clerics.⁷⁴

These initiatives aim chiefly to increase political participation among Iranian youth and educate officials on how to do so. Preexisting soft-war entities—such as the IRGC Baghiyatollah al Azam Sociocultural Headquarters and the Islamic Propaganda Organization—enforce the ideals enshrined in the second step speech.⁷⁵ Khamenei's second step requires officials to exert greater control over the Iranian information space, and Iranian officials frequently invoke Khamenei's second step speech when discussing censorship.

Soft War and Shifting Iranian Threat Perceptions.

From 2015 to 2016, Khamenei's advisers and allies increasingly viewed US objectives vis-à-vis Iran through the lens of soft war. While Iranian officials agreed that the US and its allies were unlikely to invade Iranian territory, they rejected the notion that the US had forsaken its regime-change objectives entirely. Regime leadership instead asserted that the US sought to overthrow the Islamic Republic solely through soft-power tactics.

Former Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani linked 2015 JCPOA negotiations to the so-called soft war and urged Iranians to “preserve

and protect [our] culture. . . . We accept and implement the JCPOA, but that doesn't mean we won't be challenged."⁷⁶

Iranian soft-war literature around this time frequently linked American academic Joseph Nye's notion of soft power to America's Iran strategy.⁷⁷ Nye had endorsed applying US soft power to Iran and in 2008 told Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs:

There is a joke that I'm sure you heard that says in the Middle East, the governments like the United States but people don't. Iran is the one exception because the government hates the United States but the people don't. But I think the point behind the joke is that the Americans have not been very good at using soft power in the case of Iran.⁷⁸

Khamenei may have reinforced Iranian soft-war efforts in 2016 in response to this perceived US soft-power threat. Khamenei may also have anticipated that the JCPOA would lead to greater exposure to Western ideals and culture and sought to mitigate the risks this would entail.

Regime officials likely aim to offensively combat the perceived US-led soft war on Iran. Armed forces spokesperson Abolfazl Shekarchi described Iranian efforts to counter soft-power threats as 90 percent reactive, including responding to and refuting Western reporting.⁷⁹ Shekarchi and other military officials increasingly advocate⁸⁰ an offensive soft-war approach that will predict and preempt Western sociocultural threats.

An offensive soft-war strategy will likely result in greater censorship as Iranian officials seek to promote hard-line, pro-regime media and marginalize those who challenge state-sanctioned narratives.⁸¹ An offensive soft-war strategy may also include increased Iranian information operations against the US and its allies, possibly in coordination with China and Russia. In June 2022, the US Department of Homeland Security reported that Iran sought to exacerbate internal divisions in the US through disinformation campaigns.⁸² Khamenei has likely been granting his allies and the armed forces greater control over the

soft-war infrastructure to facilitate Iran's shift from a defensive to an offensive soft-war posture.

Soft War and Censorship. Internet restrictions are a crucial component of the regime's attempts to limit Western and diaspora cultural products. Iranian leadership has historically enforced internet blackouts and targeted restrictions during unrest to preempt further anti-regime activity.

Many senior Iranian officials have advocated permanent social media restrictions, claiming that social media promotes ideals that are incompatible with the Islamic Republic. Former Attorney General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri claimed in October 2022 that Instagram and WhatsApp encouraged crime and "promiscuity."⁸³ Other officials have opposed permanent restrictions due to the enormous impact they would have on the economy. An Iranian outlet estimated that the internet restrictions imposed at the beginning of the Mahsa Amini protest movement in October 2022 lost the economy \$1.5 million every hour.⁸⁴

The regime has promoted increasingly Orwellian means to implement soft-war policies in recent years. Iranian leadership stood down the morality patrol following Amini's death but has continued to enforce mandatory veiling in new, and perhaps more efficient, ways. Several Iranian officials have acknowledged that the regime intends to enforce the hijab requirement partially "through smart methods," implying the use of advanced technologies such as facial recognition and surveillance cameras.⁸⁵ Iranian law enforcement officials have recently announced the closure of establishments serving unveiled customers, suggesting that the regime likely seeks to implement surveillance and collective punishment as alternatives to physical confrontation.

The Soft-War Infrastructure

The Iranian soft-war infrastructure targets every level of Iranian society and exists at the national and provincial levels. Officially, sociocultural entities such as the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance establish an ideological framework in which regime entities

must operate.⁸⁶ Decision-making bodies such as the SCCR then craft cultural resolutions within this framework, which parliament passes into binding legislation.⁸⁷ The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance ensures that the General Culture Council, which the SCCR formed in 1986, implements regime-vetted sociocultural practices.⁸⁸

General culture councils are pervasive; there are more than 300 councils throughout the country.⁸⁹ The *national* General Culture Council monitors domestic culture, facilitates cooperation among the regime's cultural entities, and implements sociocultural policies aligned with SCCR resolutions and the values established by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The council includes 30 members from regime-sanctioned sociocultural entities such as the state-run Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting and the Interior Ministry. The council contains various sub-councils that ensure everything from stationery to children's toys is ideologically consistent with the regime's cultural framework.⁹⁰

The *provincial* and *local* general culture councils operate under the purview of provincial FPLs and supreme leader representatives, deputy governors, and the secretary general of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.⁹¹ The provincial and local councils have many of the same responsibilities as the national council but perform them on a more granular level. The provincial and local councils are charged with enforcing guidance from the SCCR's cultural engineering document, which informs provincial officials how to enforce cultural policies and circumvent Western culture.⁹² This document's content varies by province.⁹³ The provincial and local culture councils host religious and cultural community events, hold information sessions, and meet with local media, theoretically monitoring anti-regime activities and enforcing state-sanctioned cultural policies.⁹⁴

The reality, however, is far more intricate. The legal status of SCCR resolutions is contested, and parliament is often unaware of these resolutions entirely.⁹⁵ Khamenei often stresses the SCCR's importance and has described it as "the only means of protecting [Iranian] culture against cultural and media invasions from malicious foreigners."⁹⁶ But the SCCR has,

in many ways, failed to fulfill crucial components of Khamenei's vision.

Iranian officials openly discuss the SCCR's failure to enforce the regime's cultural policies.⁹⁷ The council has created only a handful of cultural engineering documents despite Khamenei requesting them as early as 2004.⁹⁸ The SCCR has not played a central role in enforcing sociocultural policies in recent years, but the IRGC Baghiyatollah al Azam Sociocultural Headquarters and the FPL and supreme leader representative network have done so.

Khamenei has been granting the armed forces—particularly the IRGC—and his allies increased authority over soft-war infrastructure since 2016. These pre-vetted soft-war actors work closely with the supreme leader's office to execute Khamenei's soft-war vision as delineated in his 2019 second step speech.

These actors are not monoliths. Ideological divisions and rifts are common among the Guards and exist even in the Khamenei family's inner circle.⁹⁹ Increased IRGC control of the soft-war infrastructure does not inherently mean that IRGC affiliates will pursue soft-war objectives in the same way. But it does mean that non-IRGC affiliates are less likely to shape the regime's soft-war policy, thereby limiting political and ideological plurality in an already-restricted information space.

Increased IRGC Influence: The IRGC Baghiyatollah al Azam Sociocultural Headquarters. The IRGC gained greater control over state media production, distribution, and indoctrination after establishing the IRGC Baghiyatollah al Azam Sociocultural Headquarters in 2016.¹⁰⁰ Little reporting on the headquarters exists before March 2019, when Khamenei tapped Mohammad Ali Jafari to command it. As IRGC commander from 2007 to 2019, Jafari focused on internal threats, creating and implementing the Mosaic Doctrine. The Mosaic Doctrine restructured the Iranian command-and-control architecture to ensure flexible defense capabilities and regime survival in the event of invasion.

The supreme leader—not the IRGC commander—appointed Jafari, which indicates that Jafari reports

directly to and works closely with Khamenei to execute Khamenei's soft-war vision. From 2005 to 2007, Jafari headed the IRGC's Strategic Studies Center, where he directed soft-war research on topics ranging from "velvet revolutions" to alleged US "soft regime change policies."¹⁰¹ Jafari expressed concern about "soft threats" as early as 2010 and reorganized the IRGC to better combat these perceived internal sociocultural threats.¹⁰² Jafari's appointment closely followed Khamenei's February 2019 second step speech, suggesting that the supreme leader entrusted Jafari and the headquarters with executing his vision.

The Baghiyatollah al Azam Sociocultural Headquarters grants the Guards significant control over an expansive soft-war network, streamlining regime indoctrination efforts. The Baghiyatollah al Azam Sociocultural Headquarters consolidated preexisting IRGC soft-war infrastructure in 2016.

The headquarters consists of at least five organizations, some predating its formation in 2016. These organizations fall in two categories: state-run business conglomerates called *bonyads* and media production and community engagement entities. Little is known about the headquarters' *bonyads*, but they likely use the regime's assets to fund IRGC media producers and, possibly, independent artists. *Bonyads* include the Tavana, Mabna, Hadaf, Seraj, and Asr Foundations. The main media production organization is the Khatam ol Osiya Foundation, which includes three smaller organizations: the Owj Artistic Media Organization, the Seraj Cyberspace Organization, and the Cultural Front of the Revolution provincial initiatives.

In 2014, Khamenei mandated the creation of the Khatam ol Osiya Foundation, which seeks to ideologize Iranian students and families.¹⁰³ The Khatam ol Osiya Foundation oversees the Owj Artistic Media Organization and the Seraj Cyberspace Organization, established in 2011 and 2015, respectively. Khatam ol Osiya also manages a grassroots indoctrination effort called the Cultural Front of the Revolution.¹⁰⁴ These soft-war entities often work in concert with each other, the Basij, and provincial supreme leader representatives to indoctrinate Iranian society.¹⁰⁵

Owj produces cultural products such as documentaries, billboards, animations, anthems, feature films, plays, and graphics and oversees the state-run Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting service's Ofogh channel.¹⁰⁶ Owj is prolific; Executive Director Ehsan Mohammad Hassani claimed that his organization produced 11,000 cultural products in collaboration with 2,600 artists between 2011 and 2017.¹⁰⁷ Owj also curates experiences that promote revolutionary ideology, including film festivals and local poetry nights.¹⁰⁸ Owj is officially a nongovernmental organization, but Hassani himself has publicly admitted that the IRGC manages and funds it.¹⁰⁹

Seraj, initially a Basij cyber entity, develops software and videos games, researches Iranian cyber activities, and hosts indoctrination seminars aimed at local populations. Seraj has technology centers in every province.¹¹⁰

The Cultural Front of the Revolution is a provincial and local entity that distributes IRGC media products and regime-sanctioned ideology to the Iranian public. The Cultural Front's structure mirrors the SCCR's: Each provincial office interacts with local media, soft-war ministries, and supreme leader representatives.¹¹¹ The Cultural Front also organizes local cultural activities and educational initiatives that mimic spontaneous grassroots events.¹¹²

Increased Loyalist Influence: The FPL Network.

Khamenei has purged his provincial representatives and FPLs in recent years to exert even greater control over the Iranian information space. The supreme leader maintains control of the Iranian regime through an intricate network of roughly 2,000 representatives who implement his interests.¹¹³ For an overview of FLPs from 2016 to 2023, see Figure 2.

Each of Iran's 31 provinces has a supreme leader representative, who—in all but one case—is the provincial capital's permanent FPL.¹¹⁴ A Friday Imams Policy Council then appoints several temporary, or interim, FPLs to each provincial capital and other cities in the province.¹¹⁵ In other words, all supreme leader representatives are FPLs, but not all FPLs are supreme leader representatives.¹¹⁶

Permanent FPLs considerably influence their communities through weekly sermons and receive their talking points directly from the supreme leader's office.¹¹⁷ FPLs have been essential in disseminating regime propaganda since Khomeini first institutionalized them in July 1979. In 1980, Khamenei himself became Tehran's permanent FPL, a post he retains.

Supreme Leader Khamenei further cemented the regime's control over the FPL network by establishing the National Friday Prayer Headquarters in 1993. Iranian media estimates that roughly 900 Iranian cities hold Friday prayer gatherings every week.¹¹⁸ State media apparatuses widely circulate and report on the sermons at these gatherings to maximize viewership.

Provincial FPLs' weekly sermons thus partially reflect how Khamenei conceptualizes Iran's domestic and foreign policies—particularly when their sermons are rhetorically consistent. FPL sermons frequently presaged the regime's evolving response to the Mahsa Amini protest movement, for example, and set the rhetorical conditions for the violent crackdown on anti-regime activity. Several FPLs signaled that the regime would continue enforcing mandatory veiling in the months following Amini's killing and advocated executing protesters weeks before such decisions were formally announced.¹¹⁹

Permanent FPLs' influence extends beyond religion, and they often enjoy close ties to senior Iranian leadership. Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda, Khorasan Razavi Province's supreme leader representative and FPL of Mashhad—the capital of Khorasan Razavi—is incumbent President Raisi's father-in-law.¹²⁰ Permanent FPLs have also held high-ranking, nonreligious roles in the regime. Current Markazi Province supreme leader representative and Arak FPL Ayatollah Ghorban Ali Dori Najafabadi was previously reformist President Mohammad Khatami's intelligence minister from 1997 to 1999 and Iran's attorney general from 2004 to 2009.¹²¹

Khamenei has exerted greater control over the FPL network since 2016, especially in 2017. Iranian media reported that the Friday Imams Policy Council had replaced 273 FPLs between 2017 and 2019.¹²² Former Zahedan and Sistan and Baluchistan Province FPL

Abbas Ali Soleimani portrayed Friday imam purges as an effort to promote younger clerics directly sanctioned by Khamenei.¹²³ Some former FPLs suggested that the regime also sought to purge liberals from the FPL network.¹²⁴ Khamenei began directly appointing FPLs in 2017, a responsibility formerly delegated to the Friday Imams Policy Council.¹²⁵

Khamenei has increasingly placed hard-liners and armed forces affiliates in the provincial supreme leader representative network. Few of Khamenei's new appointees have the religious credential *ayatollah*, and many have backgrounds in sociocultural policy and indoctrination.

Implications

Khamenei's soft-war strategy is a wholly inadequate response to the grievances that have fueled recent waves of unrest. His failure to address Iran's soft-power crisis has serious implications for the Islamic Republic's future, as the regime—at least in its current form—cannot sustain itself without the support of Iran's youth. Khamenei's ideological inflexibility and indiscriminate use of censorship and violence, conversely, will likely exacerbate the anti-regime activity he seeks to preempt. Additionally, the supreme leader's flawed soft-war strategy risks widening intra-regime fissures at a particularly sensitive juncture in Iran's history as 84-year-old Khamenei prepares to eventually be succeeded.

The supreme leader's soft-war strategy will likely foster deeper distrust of the regime among Iranian youth. Khamenei's endorsement of censorship, indoctrination, and propaganda and limitation of political plurality have seemingly already inflamed anti-regime sentiments among the Iranian populace. Iranians—including regime officials—increasingly dismiss the veracity of reports from state-affiliated media. Iranian social media users have described as propaganda Iranian state and state-affiliated media outlets' coverage of 2022–23 terrorism incidents, poisonings of Iranian schoolgirls, and countrywide alcohol poisonings, often blaming the regime itself for such incidents.

Figure 2. FPLs, 2016–23

Title	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Friday Prayer Leader Policy Council Chief	Reza Taghvi	Mohammad Javad Haj Ali Akbari						
Fars Province Supreme Leader Representative	Ayatollah Asadollah Imani		Ayatollah Lotfollah Dezhkam					
Gilan Province Supreme Leader Representative	Zainoul Abdin Ghorbani		Rasoul Falahati Gilani					
Hamedan Supreme Leader Representative	Mohammad Taha Mohammadi			Habibollah Shabani Mosseghi				
Hormozgan Supreme Leader Representative	Naim Abadi			Mohammad Ebadizadeh				
Ilam Province Supreme Leader Representative	Mohammad Naghi Lotfi		Sheikhallah Nour Karimi Tabar					
Kerman Province Supreme Leader Representative	Ayatollah Yahya Jafari	Hassan Alidadi Soleimani						
Khuzestan Province Supreme Leader Representative	Ayatollah Mousavi Jazayeri			Abdol Nabi Mousavifard				
Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad Province Supreme Leader Representative	Ayatollah Sharafudin Malek Hosseini				Ayatollah Nasir Hosseini			
Kurdistan Supreme Leader Representative	Mohammad Hosseini Shahrودي				Abdol Reza Pourzahabi			
Lorestan Province Supreme Leader Representative	Ahmad Miremadi			Ahmad Reza Shahrokhi				
Mazandaran Province Supreme Leader Representative	Ayatollah Noroullah Tabarsi			Mohammad Bagher Mohammadi Laini				
North Khorasan Supreme Leader Representative	Ayatollah Abdolghassem Yaghoubi				Reza Nouri			
Semnan Province Supreme Leader Representative	Ayatollah Mohammad Shahcheragi					Morteza Matiei		
Sistan and Baluchistan Supreme Leader Representative	Abbas Ali Soleimani			Mostafa Mahami				
South Khorasan Province Supreme Leader Representative	Ali Reza Ebadi							

 Ties to the armed forces

 Ayatollah



Source: Author.

Anti-Regime Protests. The regime's failure to make any concessions to Mahsa Amini protesters, such as abolishing mandatory veiling, will likely further fuel anti-regime sentiments. Khamenei's response to the Mahsa Amini protest movement demonstrated his ideological inflexibility, particularly on sociocultural issues such as mandatory veiling. This is because Khamenei, senior clerics, and other hard-line politicians view sociocultural laws such as mandatory veiling as intrinsic to the Islamic Republic's identity and survival.

The regime views enforced veiling as a foundation of its Islamic identity and authority. The pro-regime loyalists in the state security services and population would view the failure to enforce veiling as a betrayal of the 1979 Islamic Revolution's ideal and the martyrs who sacrificed themselves during the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War to preserve those ideals. These perspectives are largely incompatible with recent demands from Iranian youth to abolish mandatory veiling and relax other sociocultural laws.

Intra-Regime Fissures. Khamenei's soft-war strategy risks further dividing the regime amid an imminent supreme leader succession. Khamenei's increased delegation of soft war and political structures to regime loyalists such as IRGC members and other hard-liners has limited political plurality in the regime, frustrating moderates and reformists.

Khamenei's uncompromising approach to Iran's soft-power crisis and recent protests risks further exacerbating intra-regime tensions caused by the Mahsa Amini protest movement. Actors across the political spectrum had divergent interpretations of and solutions to the Mahsa Amini movement. Khamenei's implementation of his myopic soft-war strategy will likely further divide the regime along these ideological lines. Such divisions will risk destabilizing the regime before 84-year-old Khamenei is eventually succeeded, when the regime must cohere and unify to preserve itself.

Trajectory of the Domestic Environment. Iranian officials may have succeeded in quelling the Mahsa Amini protest wave and those protests that

preceded it, but, by their own admission, this success is likely temporary. Security forces violently suppressed anti-regime demonstrations from September to December 2022. Human rights organizations estimate that the regime killed over 500 protesters—including many children—and detained, arrested, and tortured tens of thousands of others. Iranian officials have yet to meaningfully address protesters' grievances and are instead reinforcing unpopular social control policies such as mandatory veiling.

The regime may have quelled protests, but Iranian youth continue to demonstrate their courage by participating in small, sustainable acts of anti-regime defiance that reject the Islamic Republic's ideological core. The Iranian population has characterized Amini and protesters who were killed as martyrs of a nascent movement, symbols of defiance that the regime has failed to suppress. Iranian officials recognize that Amini's killing was the catalyst, not the cause, of anti-regime activity. Protesters agree. As an anti-regime demonstrator told Western media in February 2023, "We're ready for the next clash. . . . All it needs is a spark."¹²⁶

About the Author

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The conclusions and assessments in this report do not reflect the positions of our technology partners.



Neo4j is a highly scalable native graph database that helps organizations build intelligent applications that meet today's evolving connected data challenges including fraud detection, tax evasion, situational awareness, real-time recommendations, master data management, network security, and IT operations. Global organizations such as MITRE, Walmart, the World Economic Forum, UBS, Cisco, HP, Adidas, and Lufthansa rely on Neo4j to harness the connections in their data.



Babel Street provides the most advanced identity intelligence and risk operations platform for the world's most trusted government and commercial organizations. The AI-enabled platform helps them stay informed and improves around-the-clock decision-making. Teams are empowered to rapidly detect and collaborate on what matters in seconds by transforming massive amounts of multilingual, enterprise and publicly available data into actionable insights so they can act with confidence. Babel Street is headquartered in the U.S. with offices near Washington, D.C., and Boston, along with Tokyo, Tel Aviv, London, Canberra, and Ottawa.



Ntrepid is a mission-driven provider of cutting-edge managed attribution technology solutions that allows organizations to discreetly and safely conduct sophisticated cyber operations in the most hostile online environments. We leverage our deep experience in the national security community to anticipate our customers' needs and provide solutions before the requirements are expressed. Our heavy investment in R&D allows us to stay ahead of the rapidly changing internet landscape. Ntrepid's innovative solutions empower advanced online research, analysis, and data collection, while obscuring organizational identity and protecting your mission.



Linkurious' graph visualization software helps organizations detect and investigate insights hidden in graph data. It is used by government agencies and global companies in anti-money laundering, cybersecurity, or medical research. Linkurious makes today's complex connected data easy to understand for analysts.



BlackSky integrates a diverse set of sensors and data unparalleled in the industry to provide an unprecedented view of your world. They combine satellite imagery, social media, news and other data feeds to create timely and relevant insights. With machine learning, predictive algorithms, and natural language processing, BlackSky delivers critical geospatial insights about an area or topic of interest and synthesizes data from a wide array of sources including social media, news outlets, and radio communications.



Sayari is a search company, not a traditional data vendor. They build search products that allow users to find corporate, financial, and public records in hard-target countries. Sayari products cover emerging, frontier, and off-shore markets, and include corporate registries, official gazettes, litigation, vital records, customs data, and real property. They collect, structure, normalize, enrich, and index this data, often making it searchable for the very first time.