



“The Owj Arts and Media Organization:”
An Iranian NGO, tied to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps,
plays a central role in the struggle for hearts and minds at home
and abroad

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Main Argument

The Arts and Media Owj Organization (literally: “climax”) is a non-governmental organization operating in Iran since the spring of 2011. The organization initiates, leads and promotes activity in the spheres of art and culture inspired by **the values of the Islamic Revolution** and in accordance with the official ideology of the Iranian regime. **The Owj organization is tied to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the content distributed by it is used to promote radical worldviews reflective of the position of the Iranian regime and the revolutionary current in Iran.** The productions of the organization **reflect a critical position toward the nuclear policy adopted by President Rouhani, deep hostility toward the United States, Israel and recently Saudi Arabia as well.** The anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist activism of the organization includes, among other facets, **involvement in Holocaust denial and production of movies and television serials that reflect anti-Zionist and even anti-Semitic views.**



Tehran by Owj, titled “American-style honesty” (ISNA, October 26, 2013). The purpose of the posters was to warn Iranians involved in the nuclear negotiations not to trust their American counterparts. On the left: a poster from a competition titled “Death to America” that was organized by Owj (Tasnim, October 23, 2013)

- ▶ The Owj organization operates through centers specializing in specific fields, such as: production of feature films, production of documentary movies, graphic design, production of short videos, productions for children and youth, etc. As part of its activities, the organization produces a wide variety of content that is distributed through feature films, documentaries, television series, billboards, books, computer games, poetry nights and more. **A large share of the Owj organization's work currently focuses on the cinema and television industries in Iran.** In recent years, the organization has become one of the central institutions involved in this industry, producing hundreds of movies and television programs.
- ▶ Although most of the Owj Organization's work is focused on Iran, it **began carrying out cultural activities beyond Iran's borders, in particular in Syria and Iraq.** The activities of the organization in Syria and Iraq are part of Iran's efforts to employ **soft power to secure its interests in the region** (along with "hard power") and entrench its hold over these countries **in part through economic, religious and cultural activities.** Over the past two years, the organization has also played a role in the propaganda campaign waged by Iranian authorities **in an effort to rally Iranian public opinion to support Iran's ongoing military involvement in Syria and Iraq** as well as to forestall internal criticism against these interventions. In addition, the organization is involved in commemoration of Iranian fighters killed in the military campaigns in Syria and Iraq.
- ▶ In recent years, **Iranian and Western media connected the Owj organization to the IRGC.** The claims that the organization receives financial support from the IRGC **were recently confirmed by the organization's director, who declared in February 2018 that he is proud that his organization receives financial support for its activities from the IRGC.** The IRGC's backing of the organization also involves **logistical support for Owj's activities**, for example by granting permits for filming movies on sites used by the IRGC. **This support for the Owj organization provides the IRGC with an additional channel for activity and influence in the spheres of media and culture, as well as direct involvement in content distributed to the general public. At the same time, this involvement in artistic and cultural work has also aroused internal criticism.**
- ▶ In summary, in recent years, the Owj organization has emerged as a **central Iranian institution that plays an increasingly expansive role in promoting cultural activities and spreading radical messages in line with the ideology of the regime and in**

accordance with the principles of the Islamic Revolution. The significant resources at its disposal, its ties to the IRGC and its worldview, which is aligned with the official ideology of the regime, **make the Owj Organization into a leading player in the intensive hearts and minds campaign waged by the Islamic Republic internally and regionally.**

The structure of the report

- ▶ The report includes the following chapters:
 - ◆ The Owj organization: establishment, mission and modes of action
 - ◆ Evolution of Owj's activities
 - ◆ Owj's extensive work in the Iranian film and TV industries
 - ◆ Criticism of the nuclear deal (JCPOA) and hostility toward the United States and Saudi Arabia
 - ◆ Owj's involvement in the hearts and minds campaigns in Syria, Iraq, the Shi'ite world and Saudi Arabia
 - ◆ Anti-Israel activity and Holocaust denial
 - ◆ Owj's ties to the IRGC

The Owj Organization: Establishment, Mission and Modes of Action

The Arts and Media Owj Organization is a non-governmental organization that **began its operation in the spring of 2011**. Its establishment was apparently related to the efforts of the religious-conservative establishment in Iran to improve its ability to handle the challenges it faced at the time. The riots led by the reformist opposition, which erupted following the presidential elections in Iran in the summer of 2009, were considered by the regime as the most significant threat to its stability since the Islamic Revolution, and a manifestation of the growing influence of Western-liberal ideas on Iranian society, and in particular, the youth.

► President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad posed another challenge to the conservative establishment due to political battles between him and the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. In the last two years of Ahmadinejad’s term in office (2011-2013), these battles turned into a serious political rift within the Iranian leadership, which also reflected a significant ideological struggle over the identity of the Islamic Republic. The messianic and anti-clerical worldview of the president’s associates, which were labeled by their opponents as “the deviant current,” the emphasis of the national-cultural aspect of Iranian identity over Islam, and the challenges to the status of the clergy, were all perceived as significant threats by the religious establishment. **The founding of the Owj Organization can thus be seen as an effort by regime supporters to bolster “the revolutionary forces” in the spheres of culture, art and the media.**



**The logo of the Owj Organization
(from the website of the organization)**

- ▶ The official website of the organization (www.owjmedia.org) does not mention the names of the organization’s founders and does not provide information about its budget, but it does describe its goals and missions. **The purpose of the organization, as defined by the goals detailed on the website, is to initiate and lead activities in the spheres of culture and art in line with the values of the Islamic Revolution and in accordance with the official ideology of the Iranian regime.** The missions of the organizations, as elaborated during its establishment, included: setting a strategic policy in the fields of artistic creation in the spirit of the Revolution’s values, identifying and empowering institutions and “young talents,” and organizing and distributing professional productions.
- ▶ **The organization is headed by Ehsan Mohammad Hassani**, a 35-year-old man, who previously served in several roles at the Foundation for the Preservation and Publication of The Iran-Iraq War’s Works and Values (Shargh, April 12, 2016). In addition to his position as the director of Owj, Mohammad Hassani also serves as the director of the “Basij of the Artists” (Jahan-e Sanat, February 15, 2018). This body was established in 2005 to help organize pro-regime artists and assist the campaign against the Western “cultural assault” on Iran. The Spokesman of Owj Organization is Mohammad Zoghi, a student activist, who previously served as the director of the Daneshjou (“student”) news agency, which is tied to the organization of Basij of the Students (Fars, February 16, 2015).



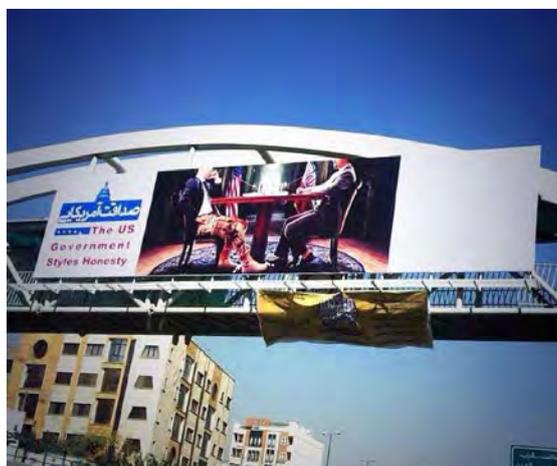
On the right: The Director of the Owj Organization, Ehsan Mohammad Hassani (Fars, October 27, 2013). On the left: The Spokesman of Owj, Mohammad Zoghi (Fars, February 16, 2015)

- ▶ **The Owj Organization operates through seven or nine centers** (there are different reports on the matter), each of them responsible for a defined domain: **feature films, documentary films, animation, screenwriting, graphic design, short video production, productions for children and youth, and international media.** In addition, the

organization collaborates with the Ofogh TV channel that was launched in 2014 and also broadcasts online, under the supervision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, although not under its direct control. Additional content produced by the organization is provided to other media channels (www.rouydad24.ir, May 6, 2018; Jahan-e Sanat, February 15, 2018). According to the organization’s director, **Owj is also involved in co-productions with foreign filmmakers and 40 foreign media outlets are using content produced by the organization** (Tasnim, August 7, 2017).

Evolution of Owj’s Activities

► The organization first gained attention in October 2013, when its activist installed billboards titled “Honesty, American-style.” The purpose of the billboards was to warn the Iranians involved in the nuclear negotiations not to trust their American counterparts. The billboards presented an American diplomat sitting at the negotiations’ table while wearing a suit, military briefs and boots, and directing his weapons toward his Iranian counterpart under the table. **Following criticism of the billboards voiced by supporters of President Rouhani, the director of the Owj Organization admitted that these posters were the initiative of his organization.** He emphasized that they were erected in coordination with the Tehran municipality. He clarified that the organization had no intention to criticize the policies of the government or to voice opposition to the nuclear negotiations, but only to **express the “historical distrust” felt by the Iranian people toward the United States and cast doubt about its honesty** (Mashregh News, October 26, 2013; Fars, October 27, 2013).



A billboard installed in Tehran warning about the dangers of entrusting the United States in the negotiations (Twitter, October 23, 2013)

► This was not the last time that a propaganda effort of the organization caused controversy. Recently, a firestorm erupted against the organizations following a billboard **mounted in Tehran ahead of the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia**. The poster, hung to salute the Iranian national team, said: **“all of us are champions together: one nation, one heartbeat.”** The poster included several characters representing the various and diverse ethnic groups that make up Iranian society, but it **did not include even one female character**. **Following widespread public outcry due to the exclusion of women, the sign was removed and replaced with another.**



“All of us are champions together” (Twitter, June 15, 2018)

► **In recent years, the work of the organization expanded significantly.** At a press conference held in August 2017, the Director of the Owj Organization, Ehsan Mohammad Hassani, updated that **since the establishment of the organization, Owj has produced 11,000 pieces of work in various fields in cooperation with 2,600 artists.** Among these works, as of the summer of 2017, the organization produced **700 documentary movies, 11 feature films and 400 animation videos.** **The organization was also in the planning stages for producing eight television series and 12 additional feature films** (Tasnim, August 7, 2017).



The Director of the Owj Organization, Ehsan Mohammad Hassani, at a press conference (Tasnim, August 7, 2017)

Owj's Extensive Work in the Iranian Film and TV Industries

- ▶ The main and most fruitful sphere of activity of the Owj Organization is **production of television series, feature films and documentaries**. The production of movies and television serials is the linchpin **of the organization's effort to promote the values of the Islamic Republic and the official ideology of the Iranian regime**.
- ▶ Among the prominent films that Owj Organization helped produce are the **two movies by the director Ebrahim Hatamikia: "Bodyguard"** (2016), which focuses on the story of an Iran-Iraq war veteran who is sent to serve as the bodyguard of a young nuclear scientist, and **"Damascus Time"** (2018) which describes the tale of two Iranian pilots captured by ISIS in Syria.



The poster of the movie "Bodyguard" (Tasnim, October 26, 2016)

► Many of the documentaries and series produced under the patronage of the organization deal with various historical events from the point of view of the Islamic Republic, **and in particular, the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War.** For example, a series produced in 2017 depicts developments in the city of Khoramshahr in southwestern Iran from the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980, followed by its occupation by Iraq in October 1980, and until its liberation by Iran in May 1982. Another movie, by the name “The Abu Ghraib Strait” (in English, the movie was distributed under the name “The Lost Strait”), produced in 2018 and based on a true story, depicts the tale of an Iranian brigade that fought to defend a strategic strait against a ferocious Iraqi assault during the Iran-Iraq War.



The movie “The Abu Ghraib Strait” (Tasnim, February 12, 2018)

► Another example of a production focusing on historical events is **the television series “Standing in the Dust,”** which depicts the life of Ahmad Motevaselian, one of the four Iranian diplomats kidnapped in Lebanon in July 1982 and executed by the Phalanges militia. Motevaselian, who served as a commander in the Iran-Iraq war, was kidnapped when serving as the Iranian military attaché in Beirut.



**The poster of the movie “Standing in the Dust”
(the website of Owj Organization, July 2, 2017)**

- ▶ The serials and movies produced by the organization **also serve to promote Islamic religious values**. One such example is a television series that takes place in Yazd and portrays life around the mosque in the city. Even movies that appear not to be guided by ideology, are **marshalled to spread the worldview of the revolutionary current in Iran**. Thus, for example, Owj produced a documentary about the football star Diego Armando Maradona, which shows how the Argentinian player was able to “humiliate the imperialist countries.” Another documentary focused on the life and activities of Lawrence of Arabia, a British archeologist and officer, who operated across the Arab world in the early 20th century and during World War I. By drawing attention to the figure of Lawrence of Arabia, the movie seeks to emphasize the negative ramifications of Western imperialism in the Middle East.
- ▶ **The investment of the organization in the local cinema industry is particularly important due to the great degree of reliance on governmental support by local filmmakers**. Due to the weakness of the private sector, which manifests in the cinema industry as well, most Iranian cinematic production relies on the support of **governmental and semi-governmental bodies**. Over the past decade, it was mostly the Farabi Cinema Foundation, the governmental foundation tasked with fostering cinematic work, which invested in the local film industry. **Over the past three years, the Owj Organization has become one of the central institutions involved in Iran’s film industry, if not the leading actor in this field**. Another indicator of the success of the Owj Organization in

becoming a central player in Iran’s cinematic production sector is its participation in recent years in the Fajr Film Festival. The festival, first held in 1983, takes place annually during the ten days of victory of the Islamic Revolution in February. Starting in 1996, the festival became an international event that showcases movies from around the world.

► **The involvement of the Owj Organization in the movie industry allows it to promote its revolutionary ideological worldview**, which is especially important to Iranian hardliners due to the widespread perception among them that many of those involved in the local cinema industry have reformist and liberal tendencies. In September 2013, a few months after the formation of the new government headed by President Rouhani, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance permitted the reopening of the “House of Cinema.” This institution, which unites over 5,000 employees in the Iranian film industry, was shut down in early 2012 under the order of the minister of Islamic guidance in the government of former President Ahmadinejad. This move was justified by the claim that the directors of the House of Cinema acted against the values of the revolution and collaborated with regime opponents. Upon the reopening of the House of Cinema, the Minister of Islamic Guidance, Ali Jannati, announced that his office will do everything in its power to continue to encourage cinematic work (Aftab, September 14, 2013). **The growing involvement of the Owj Organization in Iran’s film industry can be seen as an effort to promote cinematic work in line with the Islamic revolutionary worldview.**

► The ideological messaging promoted by the organization is also distributed through other activities the organization carries out, such as: **short video productions, book publishing, video-game design and holding poetry nights**. For example, computer games the organization helped create are used to incite against the reformist opposition. **In several video games, which focus on the 2009 riots, players are tasked with firing at “inciters,” the leaders of the reformist camp who headed the protest movement** (Shargh, April 12, 2016).

Criticism of the Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) and Hostility toward the United States and Saudi Arabia

► Close to the signing of the JCPOA between Iran and the superpowers in the summer of 2015, **the Owj Organization took part in activities intended to voice criticism of the agreement emerging at the time**. The dissatisfaction with the agreement, which reflected

the position of critics of the government on the radical Right, was based on the perception that the Rouhani government adopted an appeasement policy toward the West, which essentially produced an agreement of surrender, under which Iran agreed to make painful concessions without receiving anything in return. In July 2015, one of the best-known music videos produced with Owj's assistance, starring the popular Iranian rapper, Amir Tataloo, was uploaded to the web. The Iranian Armed Forces were involved in the production of the video as well, which showed Tataloo aboard a gunship rapping about Iran's right to nuclear energy. The music video caused a controversy, in particular due to the involvement of the Iranian military in its production. Those critiquing the video argued that its purpose was to assist the president's political opponents in their struggle against Rouhani and his policies.



Amir Tataloo in the music video “nuclear energy”
 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HcPel7OFqo>, July 15, 2015)

► In addition to the upload of the music video, **Owj produced an animation video**, aired on the kid's channel of Iran's national broadcasting authority. The animation was intended to depict **the changes in Iran's nuclear policy through a children's story:**

- ◆ The video shows a family headed by the father (Agha Joon), whose character represents that of Supreme Leader Khamenei. The father has three sons, uncle Mohammad, who represents the reformist President, Mohammad Khatami; uncle Mahmoud, who represents President Ahmadinejad; and uncle Hassan, who represents President Rouhani. Another character in the series is Mr. Sam, who represents the United States.

- ◆ Mr. Sam, who is portrayed as a villain, arrives to the island where the family lives, and tries to confiscate the lands of the family through deceit and trickery and to turn the family into his serfs. The father of the family is unwilling to succumb to the demands of Mr. Sam, and in response, Mr. Sam ratchets up the pressure on the family and the residents of the island, going as far as to take over most water wells on the island (a metaphor of the international sanctions imposed on Iran due to its nuclear program).
 - ◆ The video portrays uncle Mohammad (Khatami) as a coward, while uncle Mahmoud (Ahmadinejad) is depicted as a brave man who is willing to confront Mr. Sam and his family (the United States and its allies), while uncle Hassan (Rouhani), is ridiculed, as one who tries to negotiate with Mr. Sam despite his father’s warning not to trust the promises made by Mr. Sam.
 - ◆ This animation, similarly to the music video with Amir Tataloo, caused a firestorm among government supporters. Following the airing of the animation, the reformist daily Shargh accused Owj of waging psychological warfare against the government (Shargh, April 12, 2016).
- **The hostility toward the United States**, a central pillar in the worldview of the Iranian regime, **is clearly reflected in other activities of the organization.** In 2013, **Owj was one of the financiers of the competition “Death to America” held in Tehran.** The competition included presentations of photos, posters, caricatures, documentary movies, music videos, blog posts and articles on various subjects all evincing hostility toward the United States (Tasnim, October 23, 2013).



A poster from the “Death to America” competition, organized by Owj (Tasnim, October 23, 2013)

- In May 2018, the organization distributed a documentary video titled “Warlords,” which relied in part on footage of U.S. aerial photography drones. The 25-minute video intended to prove that the United States is providing military, logistic and intelligence support for ISIS (yjc.ir, May 10, 2018).



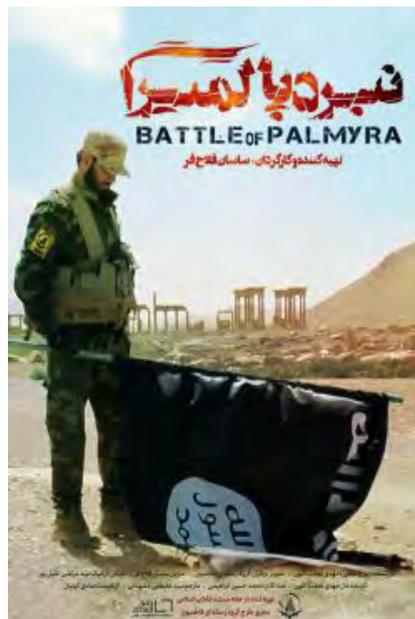
Screenshot from the documentary “Warlords”
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AdgkvvCGbY>)

Owj’s Involvement in the Hearts and Minds Campaign in Syria, Iraq, the Shi’ite World and Saudi Arabia

Although most of Owj’s activities target audiences inside Iran, the organization also plays a role in the regional hearts and minds campaign waged by Iran in Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and among Shi’ite communities. This campaign **is part and parcel of Iran’s efforts to use “soft power” with the aim of securing its interests in those countries** and entrench its hold over the region **through economic, religious and cultural activities.** These activities are concentrated in Syria and Iraq and include, among other things, participation in the economic reconstruction of those countries, promoting Iran’s religious influence in Syria and Iraq, and in particular in sites and cities considered holy by the Shi’ite community, and furthering initiatives in the educational section (such as establishing branches of Iranian universities in Syria and Iraq)

Syria

► In recent years, the Owj Organization has played a role in the Iranian regime’s propaganda effort that aims to mobilizing Iranian public opinion to support Iran’s ongoing military involvement in Syria and Iraq and forestall potential criticism of these interventions. The propaganda efforts include emphasizing religious Shi’ite symbols, championing the value of sacrifice for the purpose of defending Shi’ite holy places in Syria, alongside showcasing the suffering of Syria’s citizens and ISIS’ brutality, all in an effort to justify Iran’s military intervention in Syria.



The poster of the documentary “Battle of Palmyra,” which focuses on the fighting of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, an Afghan Shi’ite militia operating in Syria under Iranian guidance (ISNA, November 23, 2017)

- Below are several notable movies and series produced by Owj Organization as part of the propaganda campaign intended to justify Iran’s involvement in Syria:
- ◆ **The movie “Damascus Time”** details the story of two Iranian pilots charged with transporting humanitarian assistance to Syria, who work to save the residents of the city of Palmyra from ISIS by transporting them to Damascus. While on mission, they fall in the hands of ISIS. **The estimated production cost of the movie is about two million dollars** (icinema.ir, August 7, 2017).



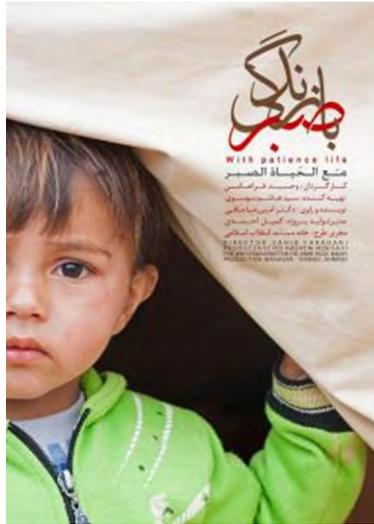
“Damascus Time” (Tasnim, April 11, 2018)

- ◆ The fifth season of the television series “Capital City 5” was aired on Iranian television during the break on the occasion of the Iranian New Year (Nowrooz) in the spring of 2018. The season depicted the story of a family from northern Iran, which happens to encounter ISIS terrorists after a crash of a hot-air balloon in Syria.



The TV show “Capital City 5” (ISNA, April 10, 2018)

- ◆ Other movies produced by Owj are intended to highlight the suffering of Syria’s civilians, for example, the documentary “**With Patience Life,**” which depicted the suffering of Syrian children in the shadow of Syria’s civil war.



**The poster of the movie “With Patience Life”
(Website of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, May 28, 2017)**

► **The Owj Organization is also involved in the commemoration of Iranian combatants killed in the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields.** In August 2017, the organization held an event involving poets and artists to commemorate the IRGC fighter, Mohsen Hojaji, who was taken hostage and executed by ISIS near the Syria-Iraq border in August 2017 (borna.news, August 21, 2017). In early 2018, the organization announced that it had produced a music album in memoriam of Iranian fighters killed in the Iran-Iraq War and the campaigns in Syria and Iraq. The album includes songs and poetry readings about the fallen fighters (Mehr, March 7, 2018).



**An event commemorating Mohsen Hojaji
(Owj website, August 21, 2017)**

► In June 2018, the governor of Aleppo, Hussein Ahmad Diab, praised the **cultural services provided by the organization to Syrian children**. The governor mentioned the activities of the organization during a visit to a festival organized by Owj in the Saadallah al-Jabiri Square in Aleppo on Eid al-Fitr. In a report concerning the event, published in the newspaper Tehran Times (June 18, 2018), it was reported that the organization had founded **a cultural center for children in Aleppo**, which hosts festivals involving poets and storytellers, as well as other cultural activities.

Iraq and the Shi'ite World

► In Iraq too, the organization is carrying out cultural and propaganda activities that include **erecting billboards in Najaf, Karbala and Baghdad** (Tasnim, August 7, 2017) and activities targeting Iranian pilgrims who visit holy Shi'ite sites in Iraq. In November 2017, the organization opened a special studio in the city of Karbala in Iraq and broadcast special programming on the occasion of Arbaeen, the Shi'ite hold day commemorating the 40th day following the 'Ashura fast (Mehr, November 13, 2017)

► The productions of the organizations also reflect Iran's goal of achieving regional hegemony, **and in particular, a leadership position at the helm of the Shi'ite world**. Among the movies produced by the organization are several dedicated to central religious Shi'ite figures across the Muslims world, for example: a movie about the life and disappearance of Musa Sadr, the spiritual leader of the Shi'ites in Lebanon who disappeared in 1978 in Libya; a movie about Sheikh Issa Qassem, a Bahraini Shi'ite cleric whom Bahraini authorities stripped of his citizenship in June 2016, after accusing him of exploiting his citizenship to serve foreign interests and preach for separatism and violence.

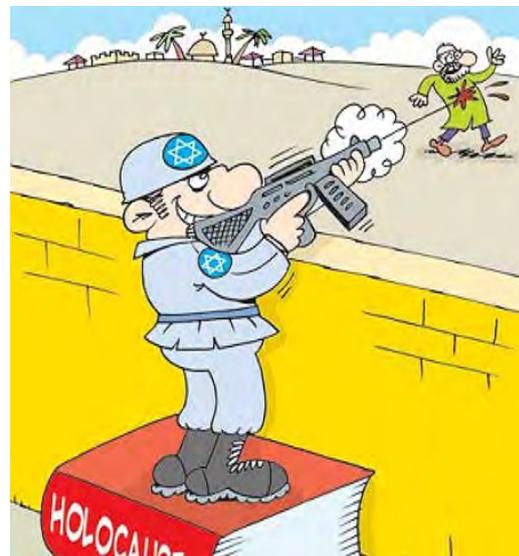
Saudi Arabia

► In light of the deterioration in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in recent years, **some of the productions of the organizations also target the Saudi royal family**. A documentary Owj produced in 2017 depicts the pilgrimage disaster in the Mina Valley near Mecca in September 2015, in which hundreds of Iranian pilgrims lost their lives. **The documentary lambasts the Saudi royal family** and details not only its alleged involvement in the death of the Iranian worshippers, but also in fostering Islamic radicalism and terrorism (Mashregh News, July 2, 2017).

Anti-Israel Activity and Holocaust Denial

Hostility towards Israel continues to constitute an important component in the worldview of the Iranian regime. It is therefore no surprise that **the Owj Organization is involved in creating and producing anti-Israel, anti-Zionist and even anti-Semitic content**, which is used to delegitimize Israel and deny its right to exist.

► As part of the organization’s anti-Israel and anti-Zionist activity, **the organization was involved in Holocaust denial events routinely held in Iran.** In 2015, Owj was one of the financiers of the second competition of caricatures about the Holocaust, which was held by the “House of Caricature” and the organization “Sarcheshmeh”, which operates under the auspices of the Islamic Propagation Organization. On the eve of the competition, Owj announced an increase in the value of the prizes for the first three places to \$10,000, \$16,000 and \$24,000 (Mashregh News, February 25, 2015).



Caricatures presented in the second competition of caricatures about the Holocaust (2015), which Owj Organization took part in financing. (Tasnim, January 19, 2015; Difaa Fars, January 19, 2015)

► The anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic worldview of the organization is also apparent in the movies it produces. 2017 saw the premiere of an animated movie produced by Owj titled “The Holy List” (distributed in English under the title “Holy Cast”). The movie, which won in the best animated film category in the 34th annual Fajr film festival, describes the “massacre” that according to Muslim sources was perpetrated by Jews against Christians in the pre-Islamic era in an area that is today Najran, Yemen. In the report about the movie, published on the official Owj website, the “massacre” was called “the first Holocaust,”

perpetrated by the “forefathers of the criminal sons of Zion against the Christians” (Owj website, February 3, 2016).



The poster of the movie “The Holy Cast”
(Tasnim, December 31, 2017)

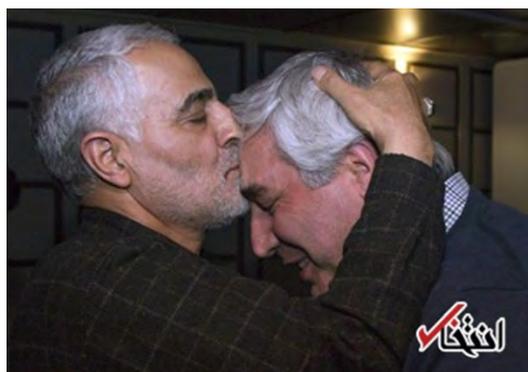
► In the summer of 2017, the organization announced the production of a **new anti-Zionist TV show called “Hakeria 2040.”** The series hosts “expert” guests and deals with Israel and Zionism. The year 2040 was purposefully selected to refer to a speech given by Iran’s Supreme Leader Khamenei in September 2015, in which he proclaimed that Israel will not exist within 25 years (meaning, by 2040) (Mashregh News, June 10, 2017).

Owj’s Ties to the IRGC

► **In recent years, Iranian and Western media connected the Owj Organization to the IRGC.** In November 2014, the **Spokesman of the IRGC, Ramazan Sharif, declared that the activities of Owj since its founding,** in spheres related to the Islamic Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War and the “Islamic Uprising” (the name used in Iran to label the events of the “Arab Spring,”) **are in congruence with the activities of the IRGC.** Sharif mentioned that **without close cooperation and support by institutions, such as the IRGC and the Iranian armed forces, the work of the organization would not be effective** (Mehr, November 10, 2014). He did clarify that the productions of the organization should not be seen as official releases by the IRGC, **but his statement was interpreted as a clear indication of support or at least direct ties and active cooperation between the IRGC and the Owj Organization.**

Further and more unequivocal evidence of the IRGC's support for Owj became public in February 2018, by the **director of the organization himself, Ehsan Mohammad Hassani**, who declared at a press conference during the Fajr film festival that **he is proud that his organization receives financial support for its activities from the IRGC and not foreign embassies that support ISIS** (Iran Online, February 17, 2018). Hassani was probably alluding to the film director Asghar Farhadi, whose Academy Award-winning movie, "The Agent" was partially financed by a film festival held in Doha, Qatar. **This was the first time that the director of Owj admitted to securing the financial backing of the IRGC**, after in September 2013 he was only willing to disclose that his **organization receives assistance from "governmental and non-governmental organizations"** and is not bound to any of the organizations supporting it (ILNA, September 8, 2013). We do not possess information about the extent of the financial support the IRGC provides to Owj and how exactly it is distributed.

► Another reflection of the ties between the IRGC and Owj was the statement, issued by the Commander of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari, in February 218, which congratulated the director Ebrahim Hatamikia of winning the best director category at the 36th international Fajr festival for his film "Damascus Time." In the statement issued by Jafari he praised Hatamikia, stating that **the IRGC has an obligation to provide assistance to any effort to connect those fighting for jihad and martyrdom and the activists in the spheres of arts and culture** (ISNA, February 13, 2018). The film "**Damascus Times**" earned **lavish praise from senior Iranian officials, among them the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani**, who stated that the movie brought him to tears, and thanked the director of the movie "on behalf of the fighters" in Syria (Tasnim, February 9, 2018).



Qasem Soleimani, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, kissing the forehead of Hatamikia, the director of "Damascus Time" (Entekhab, February 9, 2018)

- ▶ The support offered by the IRGC to the organization also manifests in **logistical support for Owj's activities**, for example by granting of permits to Owj to film movies on sites used by the IRGC. Thus, for example, the website of the organization published in July 2017 the photo of the Commander of the IRGC Ground Forces, Mohammad Pakpour, during the filming of a movie about the Iran-Iraq War, which the organization was carrying out in the headquarters of 20th Armored Brigade of the IRGC.

The IRGC's support for the Owj Organization provides this military force with another mean to influence the Iranian public in the spheres of media, culture and through direct involvement in the distribution of content to the general public. It should be mentioned that the IRGC is involved in the media sphere through other means as well, for example, through news agencies affiliated with it, such as Fars and Tasnim.

Owj's ties to the IRGC have **aroused criticism in Iran**, due to opposition to the intervention of a military-security body in the film and television industries. One example of such criticism was a commentary published in early 2018 by Iranian journalist and media personality, Ali Fatavi, who served in a senior position at the Ministry of Oil during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and is affiliated with the conservative camp in Iran. In his article, Fatavi lambasted the cooperation between the Iranian film director Ebrahim Hatamikia and the Owj Organization, arguing that the presence of a "prominent military force" (meaning, the IRGC) is clearly evident in most of the television productions of the organization **and this creates an opening for corruption and spending of public funds without oversight** (Khabar Online, February 14, 2018)