IJHS, e-ISSN 2597-4718, p-ISSN 2597-470X, Vol. 7, No. 2, March 2024, pp. 230-248

International Journal of Humanity Studies
http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/IJHS
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

YOUNG PEOPLE AND FASCISM PROPAGANDA IN IRAN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ANTHEM 'HAIL COMMANDER'

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https://doi.org/10.24071/ijhs.v7i2.7283
received 27 September 2023; accepted 26 March 2024

Abstract
Since its inception in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has enormously capitalized on exploiting youths, from the recruitment of child soldiers during the Iran-Iraq war to deployments of underage boys and girls for political socialization. Political socialization, in this sense, has involved reinforcing Shia/Revolutionary ideologies through mobilizing young people for various cultural activities and propaganda campaigns. As part of these efforts, and in line with IRI's mounting domestic and international struggles, since March 2022, the government has heavily invested in propagating 'Hail Commander', an anthem produced and broadcast by the state-run media. Exclusively performed by 7-14 years old children in uniforms, the content of this anthem (lyrics and visual features) bears a close resemblance to the lyrics of *Giovinezza* (Juvenility) of fascist Italy (1924-1943) and the political ideals promoted by *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth) in Nazi Germany (1926-1945). By drawing on theories of fascism, propaganda, and political socialization, and using comparative critical analysis, this study reveals the underlying propagandist messages in Hail Commander and its relations to the fascist/Nazi praxis and ideologies. It is further argued that the creation of Hail Commander should be seen as the revival of the child soldier phenomenon, albeit in the form of media representation.

Keywords: child soldier, fascism, Iranian youth, political socialization, propaganda

Introduction
In the dictator-ruled system of governments, the leader who often relies on violence to suppress critics and oppositional groups has indubitably less trouble ruling if the beliefs and worldviews of the people are more aligned with the state's ideologies. Recognizing the importance of the formative years in shaping one's belief system that is carried on during adulthood, totalitarian regimes throughout history have typically kept a sharp and watchful eye on the younger segment of their population. Indeed, the emphasis on youthfulness was one of the consistent themes throughout the convoluted path of fascist ideology (Ledeen,1969), while Hitler's oft-repeated phrases in this regard were "Whoever has the youth has the future" (Kunzer, 1938). Following this view, the physical and mental training of German youth became one of the Nazi party's greatest priorities, and much

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importance was placed on childhood activities and education. Similar beliefs also led to the establishment of a fascist student youth organization in the 1920s by Benito Mussolini's National Fascist Party, as part of a revolutionary cultural movement that saw impressing physical courage and patriotic values in youth's minds as an imperative catalyst for fascism.

These trends by no means have been limited to Fascist Italy, Nazis Germany, or Communist USSR; over this century several unitary one-party republics or states have emerged around the world that followed the footsteps of these long-gone totalitarian regimes in terms of exploiting youth for nation building and advancing their ideologies (Stanley, 2020). Among these, is the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) which despite its efforts to portray itself as a democratic country, has been internationally known to be moving from theocratic authoritarianism towards a more totalitarian form of government (Parchami, 2022). As such, while election is the only justification for publicizing democracy in Iran, there have been several reasons for categorizing the country as a totalitarian nation. These include violating human rights and freedom of speech, supporting terrorism, as well as the cleric absolutism headed by the Supreme Leader who is the most powerful political authority in the country. Here, what seems to be remarkable is that the Iranian election itself is a complete sham; the Guardian Council which has the authority to allow/block candidates from entering parliamentary, presidency, and the Assembly of Experts elections, are all appointed by the Supreme Leader himself (Saikal, 2021).

Extending for more than four decades, the cleric leadership in Iran has been paying specific attention to the youth as a valuable asset, both in terms of manpower supply and also cultural resources. In the former sense, throughout the Iran-Iraq war which began in 1980, a year after the Islamic Revolution and lasted for eight years, the authorities have actively recruited young soldiers to be sent to the frontlines. It is, however, in this latter sense that the state has mostly focused and invested on, particularly in the post-war era; winning the hearts and minds of the new generation and ensuring their allegiance before coming of age (Bajoghli, 2019). Indeed, heavily politicized cultural activities promoted in top-level cultural policy in the past three decades or so reflect the determination of the IRI's cultural elite to garner the support of Iran's youthful population (Powell & Cwick, 2017). This has taken the form of inculcating Shi'ite and Revolutionary ethos and values through altering the education system and mobilizing the mass media and other social institutions to adapt the youth to the dominant ideologies. And exploiting the youth for symbolic representation, on the other hand. Symbolic representations, in this way, take many cultural forms, mostly through means of mass media where underage people are used for evoking particular meanings and emotions among the public about the Islamic regime's ideological or political priorities at the time (Wojcieszak et al., 2019).

One of IRI's latest undertakings in this regard was the making of the 'Hail Commander', an anthem produced and broadcast by the state-run media where a large group of underage boys and girls are shown in uniforms as they praise and declare loyalty to the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. As expected, soon after airing the original video on national television, several other remakes of the anthem sprang up across various television channels and other state-sponsored communication platforms. These government-funded video productions featured

young people and schoolchildren, not only in different locations in Iran but also around the world and in cities like Beirut and Houston, Texas (McCarthy, 2022).

Nevertheless, soon after its sudden appearance, Hail Commander created a wide range of reactions among the general public as well as various oppositional groups outside Iran who either sneered at this anthem or made a burlesque of it. Along with these, there were also several controversies and prognoses; some surmised that the anthem's sudden appearance was a pretentious gesture by the regime as it boasted of having the youth's support, particularly at the time when nationwide dissidence seemed to reach an all-time high. Others construed it as a timely and strategic move to distract public attention from the deterioration of mullahs' power which has recently become more obvious due to the increasing international sanctions against Iran (Berman, 2020). Apart from the likely circumstances that had led to the decisions behind the making of Hail Commander, what seems to be remarkable is that the content of this anthem is rife with symbols and messages that are reminiscent of the praxis and political ideals promoted by youth organizations in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany between 1920s-1940s.

This close resemblance, in turn, opens up the possibility for an argument that not only criticizes the Iranian authorities for following in the footsteps of fascist and Nazi regimes in exploiting the young people for propagating their political ideologies but also questions the nature of the IRI's governing system as a republic where the power is supposed to be held by the people and their elected representatives. In this view, and to substantiate the aforementioned argument, the present study, critically analyses Hail Commander's content and compares it to the similar symbolic elements found in the politicized cultural activities of the fascist and Nazi youth organizations.

Youth and political socialization

Around the world and in different societies individuals learn and often internalize a political stance through a process of political socialization. This is where people acquire most of their knowledge about the arrangement of power in their society and learn about themselves and their place in the networks of power. This process, as Tracy H. Koon pointed out, effectively takes place during the formative years of individuals, shaping their "attitudes, values, and beliefs about their political system or the way they absorb a certain political orientation from their environment" (1985, p. 15). She suggested that understanding political socialization in a given society was only possible through studying the cultural transmission in the local context. The goal of political socialization, in her view, was to direct the young people's behavior into conforming forms of political and social activities, so that they become useful members of their society. Since it is through the socialization process that the political culture can be altered or preserved, transformed, or maintained, the study of political socialization can elucidate the phenomenon of political change or stability.

The political socialization of the young people is not a new phenomenon, as in the course of history almost every society has somehow engaged in undertaking this form of nation-building project (Guidi, 2022). Throughout the past century, however, such a process has taken on new and sometimes alarming overtones due to the influences of the First and Second World Wars, East-West ideological tensions, and the advancements in mass communication technologies. That being

said, the process of political socialization also varies in tone and intensity from nation to nation, depending on whether a totalitarian or a more pluralistic system of government is at work in a given society. In totalitarian regimes, such as the one in Iran, a whole array of socialization agents is worked on or mobilized to help young people gain an understanding of the political world. Among these agents are the family, the education system, the mass media, and other social institutions that the government uses to serve its agenda (Peters et al., 2022). Furthermore, some studies such as the one done by Greenstein (2017) suggested that the children's first conception of political authority is more based on emotion than cognition. He also found that children's emotional response to political leaders is remarkably more positive than adults' (Greenstein, 2017). This points to the vulnerability of the children and their less cynical state of mind, unlike adults who form their political beliefs through the process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought and experience.

Basic concepts of fascism and Nazism

Fascism as an ideology has a long history and draws from a variety of sources. The origin of fascism was linked to the ideals of Plato (with some differences) and was inspired by the Spartans of ancient Greece who believed in the rule of elites and emphasized racial purity (Griffin, 2018). However, it was during the rule of Mussolini in Italy and between 1919 and 1945 that fascism got its full glare of publicity. Besides Italy, other nations such as Germany, Austria, and Japan which comprised the Axis during WWI and WWII followed the same form of nationalist and totalitarian system of government.

Fascists believe in the obsolescence of liberal democracy or any form of the parliamentary system and instead emphasize the necessity of mobilizing the society under a one-party totalitarian state, getting the nation ready to respond to any economic predicament or armed conflict. Neumann (1936) summarized some of the core features of fascism: 1) authoritarian-based leadership; 2) highly inspired by nationalism; 3) dictatorial form of capitalism; and 4) militarism (the use of war, imperialism, and terrorism). Christian Fuchs (2022), however, added another characteristic to these, that is (5) "fascism uses the friend-enemy scheme for creating imagined enemies and scapegoats to distract from social problem's foundations in class inequality and power asymmetries" (p. 17).

Similar to Fascism, was German Nazism, albeit with a more extreme form of ideologies and practices. Nazism emerged with the rise of Adolf Hitler and gained a place in the public eye between 1933 to 1945. Although both Fascism and Nazism strongly believed in nationalism, violence, and militarism, the latter had an additional element of racism in their doctrine (Passmore, 2014). Hitler called himself an Aryan (Central Asian race) descendant, therefore, his main motive was the glorification of Aryanism (or Germanic race). In contrast, fascists preserved the class system, regardless of the person's race, religion, and culture. For them, the 'state' was of utmost importance, and nationalism was a blend of all races and cultures (Martins, 2020).

Neumann regarded Nazi Germany as a racist state where the Leader has the authority to make or break a law at will. Hitler and his cabinet passed laws per the decree, and since the judiciary did not act independently, the judges were the absolute servants of the law, or in other words the Leader. Neumann also argued

that the policies of Nazism represented an irrational and lawless system because of the independent and yet symbiotic operations of Germany's four power centers; the Nazi party, the German state bureaucracy, the armed forces, and big business. For Neumann, both the inherent power and vulnerability of Nazi Germany came from the conspiratorial nature of these four self-interested groups, each of which strived for the expansion of Germany and its might without surrendering status or authority to any of the other parties.

Youth in Nazi and fascist regimes

Since the beginning of nationalism in the early 19th century, there have been numerous youth movements that, to some extent, have attempted to pour youth into a national mould. It was not, however, until the early twentieth century that the first official movements embracing the whole youth of a nation, emerged in countries like Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union. *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth) was an organization set up by Adolf Hitler in 1933 for educating and training male youth in Nazi principles. *Hitlerjugend* was under the leadership of Baldur von Schirach, one of the most important Nazi officials in the Reich and the head of all German youth programs, and included almost 60 percent of German boys by 1935. Later, on the first of July 1936, it became a state agency, expecting all young Aryan Germans to join. By 1945 *Hitlerjugend* had almost all German boys in the Reich, while another similar organization, *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (League of German Girls), recruited hundreds of thousands of German girls. Deutscher *Mädel* trained girls ages 10 to 18 for comradeship, domestic duties, and motherhood (Ponzio, 2015).

One of the Nazi party's greatest priorities was the physical and mental training of German youth and much attention was paid to activities and education of the children. Within the system of military exercises, educational programs, marches, camping, and community service that comprised the *Hitlerjugend*'s activities, much importance was placed on music, in particular group singing. At the age of ten, German boys were registered and investigated particularly for 'racial purity' and, if they were qualified, they were given a position in the *Deutsches Jungvolk* (German Young People). At the age of 13, these young people became eligible for the Hitler Youth, from which they graduated as they reached 18. Throughout these years they learned dedication, fellowship, and conformity to the Nazi, generally with little parental guidance. From the age of 18, they became Nazi Party members and served in the state labor service and the armed forces for three years.

Unlike *Hiterjugend* which was a part of its party's machinery for the foundation of a new regime, *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (the Italian youth movement) in Mussolini's Italy was established by law as an institution under the control of the Ministry of National Education in 1926. The law initially did not require young people's membership; however, a later enactment made it compulsory for boys aged 6-18 and girls 8-14 years old. 10 years later, another organization (*pre-Balilla*) was set up for training all the Fascist boys under 6 years of age, and only in the city of Milan ten thousand of these little soldiers were enrolled in this form of militarized nursery school. After 2 years of physical training these young warriors entered the scouts and at the age of 12, they joined *Balilla Riflemen* where they completed their training and later at the age of 14-16 accepted into *Avanguardisti* (Advance Guard).

Right after their service in the *Avanguardisti*, these young people became Young Fascists, and if they desired to continue a three-year preparatory training service, they were eligible for party membership. Therefore, it seems that the true mission of the Italian youth movement was to prepare the young generation for both military and political matters so that they were physically and mentally ready to defend Fascist Italy.

Method

This study employed a comparative critical analysis to examine the underlying ideological basis of the Hail Commander and its relations to fascist/Nazi ideals and practices. In media studies, critical analysis is an all-encompassing term for describing concepts that despite their diversity, "are united by their skeptical attitude, humanistic approach, political assessment, and commitment to social justice" (Ott & Mack, 2020, p. 15). Performing its analysis within such theoretical perspective, this study began with investigating several shots (or frames) extracted from the original video of the anthem, selected precisely for their relevance to the focus of the study, and then continues with an analysis of the lyrics in their entirety. From a theoretic perspective, the process of analysis involves establishing what is obtrusively manifest in the anthem at the level of denotation and then extracting what is more latently there among the connotative levels of meaning. Hence, exploring the implications of the codes and conventions employed in the lyrics and the selected images also includes comparing these textual items with fascist/Nazi principals and praxis, ultimately allowing to develop some form of critical analysis of the role of the Hail Commander in contemporary political culture in Iran.

Therefore, as the first step of the analysis, the visual aspect of the original footage was examined where after a general description of the video, selected frames of it are juxtaposed with some archived photos of militarized formations and youth organizations during fascist/Nazi rules. Next, after transcribing the lyrics (and translating them into English) each verse was described as they appear before they are interpreted and made explanations within the context of their production and circulation. Lastly, by juxtaposing the lyrics of *Giuvinezza* to Hail Commander, further revelations were made on the relationship between fascist Italy and IRI regarding the involvement of youth in propaganda.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of 'Hail Commander'

At the beginning of the analysis, it is useful to have a general introduction to Hail Commander, its production, and also the circulation of it in Iran and purportedly around the world. Released on Iranian national television on March 20, 2022, right after Khamenei's yearly Nowruz (Persian New Year) message, 'Hail Commander' emerged as an ideological and pro-regime anthem that was well received by many religious families. Soon, a great deal of media hype surrounded the release of the anthem both within domestic and international arenas, mostly through social media sites and platforms. Within two months after its release, a series of promotional and religious campaigns began around the country, particularly in large cities such as Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan, Hamadan, and Bandar Abbas, bringing together and mobilizing children and teenagers to perform this anthem in the squares and streets (Azar, 2022). At the same time, the state-run

media extensively engaged in advertising the anthem with a high coverage through a handful of its satellite channels that reportedly reached beyond the national borders in some countries at the heart of Europe as well as North Africa and even the US and Canada.

Initially, some of the fans and those who were involved in the production of Hail Commander believed that this anthem was a response to the widespread popularity of some of the recent hit songs of Sassy Mankan (formerly underground and currently exiled Iranian hip-hop singer) among Iranian youth (Koo, 2020). Of course, such conjectures were raised as the result, and in the aftermath of the sudden wave of the uploaded videos going viral and showing young boys or girls dancing to Sassy's songs in school and other public or private places. Yet, others, mostly anti-government groups, saw this as not a hasty response to Sassy's song, but a reaction of the regime to the recent uprisings in the country that signaled the frustration of the youth and their disinterest in the Supreme Leader and his dictatorial decrees and obsolete worldview.

The controversies surrounding this anthem abound; there have been criticisms about the quality of the hymn, including the fact that its profound and serious content is not suitable for the age and understanding of children at this age (Sinaee, 2022). At about the same time, photos of past and present world leaders such as Khamenei, Mubarak, Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein, Mussolini, Hitler, and Kim Jong-un appeared on social networks. The common title of the photos was 'Hail Commander'. From these online content creators' views, the title of the anthem was merely an excuse or irony to impart a censorious message: the bitter fate that these dictators suffered from or awaiting them. Among some other arguments was also the one that tried to mollify the fanatism implied in the lyrics by claiming that 'Commander' here refers to 'Mahdi', not the Supreme Leader, so to make the anthem look less extremist (Iranian children in Azadi, 2022).

From the economic and financial perspective, however, there have been some other lines of reasoning that questioned the government's expenditure on propaganda and systematic spread of the state's ideologies. Many of these critics called the huge budget allocated to these organizations, a big wastage of the money of *Bait-al-Mal* (financial institution responsible for the administration of taxes in Islamic states) which could be otherwise used for developing the country and improving the lives of the people. Some pro-regime groups also argued that various ministries and propaganda organizations in Iran have been established to defend the cultural policies and ideology of the government, and yet, in the past years, these organizations have not been able to produce an influential video at this level. So, for this group of critics, the production and broadcasting of Hail Commander questions the performance and efficiency of many costly establishments such as cultural affairs, Islamic propaganda organization, Iran's state television, and their subsidiary departments and other related operational divisions.

In a situation where, for many years, the regime's propaganda machine did not seem to succeed in attracting people, the sudden and possibly made-up success of the Hail Commander has provided these politically motivated media and cultural institutions with a reason to justify their extensive efforts and budget allocations. To prove the popularity of the anthem and the loyalty of the new generation to the revolution and Khamenei's leadership, they came up with several strategies, such as creating many more remakes of the Hail Commander in different venues both

inside and outside Iran. Dressed in various military or other organizational uniforms, the children and teenagers were featured in different countries as far as the Lebanon and US as they chanted in foreign languages like Arabic and English. Despite these efforts, the shady success of the anthem and the true purpose of making and promoting it remains highly dubious, especially considering the countless responses from Iranians on social media who either criticized or made mockeries of the anthem.

Analysis of the images

Besides the spoken language (lyrics), the visual aspect of 'Hail Commander' (the original version) constitutes another imperative aspect of this anthem in terms of the construction of the meaning. Although the visual aspect of this version of the anthem is comprised of a wide array of film features and imageries which opens up a range of possibilities for semiotic and other forms of textual investigation, here, the focus is only on those signs and symbols that are closely akin to fascist/Nazi praxis. The original video which lasts about 8 minutes features an adult man (the lead singer) and a large number of children divided into girl-boy groups who are standing in columns in some type of military formation. Figure 1 is one of the arial shots showing a view from above where we can see the girls on the left, boys on the right, and the lead singer in the middle of the picture.

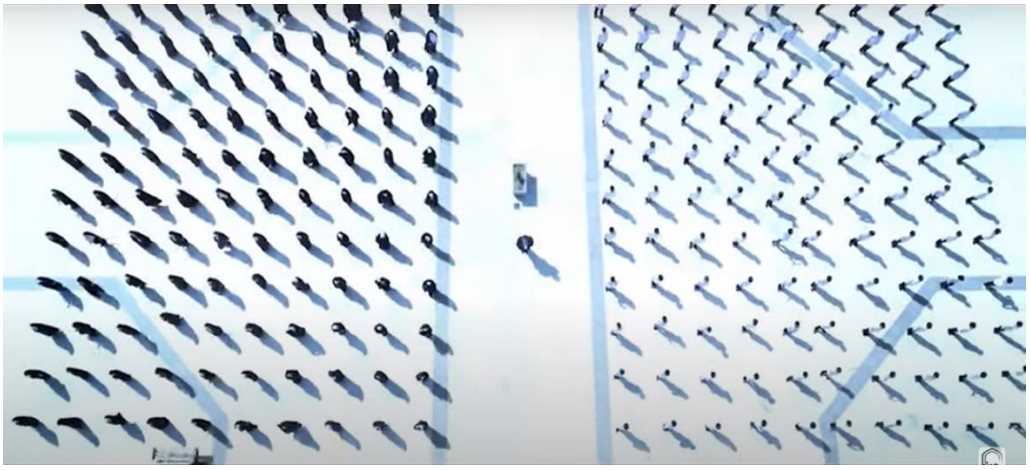


Figure 1. An aerial view shot of original video

This type of youth military formation, though denser in terms of participants, was a common sight during fascist and Nazi reigns. There are many archived photos accessible today showing youth's large gatherings in these regimes, albeit from a lower angle due to the unavailability of drones and limited photographic technologies of the time. Figure 2 is one of these photos, showing German youth at Nuremberg. Here, the German Nazi leader Adolf Hitler (center, right) is seen reviewing Hitler Youth formations at a Nuremberg Rally in 1935. Immediately behind Hitler are Rudolf Hess (1894-1987), the nearest one to the camera, and Hitler Youth leader Baldur von Schirach (1907-1974) next to him.

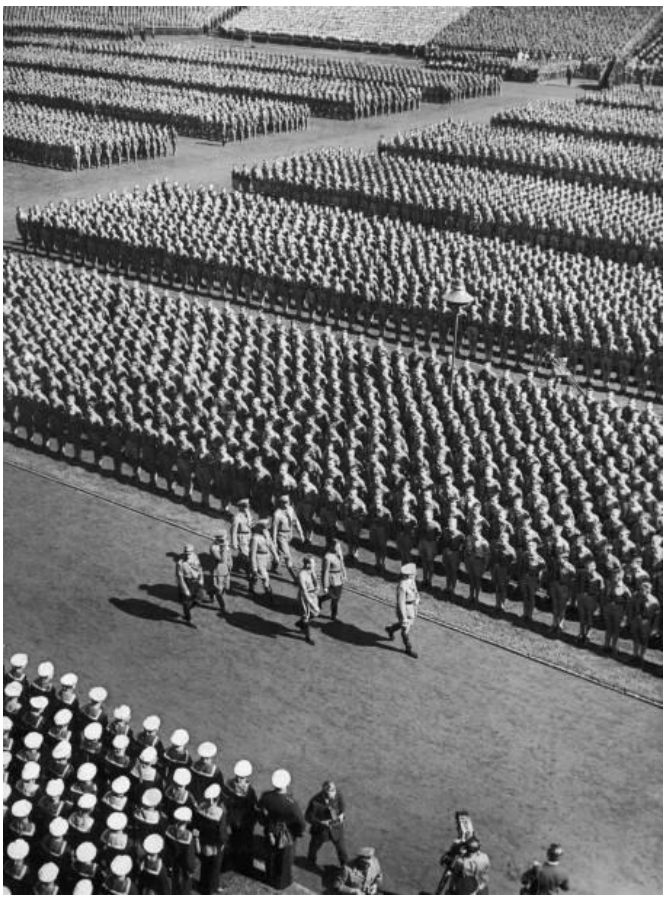


Figure 2. Youth at Nuremberg (https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/german-nazi-leader-adolf-hitler-reviews-hitler-youth-news-photo/82947096?adppopup=true)

Despite differences between these two photos, in terms of composition (e.g., camera angle, lighting, etc.), density, uniforms, and other elements which are not the concern of this study, what we should note here is the presence of a 'leader figure' (an adult lead singer with an implied authority in the former photo taking the role of Hitler in the latter) next to the large number of people in uniform who stand in military formations. Although, this kind of event and military arrangement were fairly common practices that involved German and Italian youth in the early twentieth century, emulating them in another form of dictatorship almost a century later struck a chord.

The next frame to discuss here is a Medium Wide Camera Shot chosen from another moment of the original video, showing a number of the young participants in Hail Commander who lined up in military formation giving salute; the right hand's palm facing forward and fingers slightly touching the right side of the forehead (Figure 3). They are dressed in black pants and untucked white shirts buttoned up to the neck, an ensemble popularized by extremist pro-regime groups right after the Islamic Revolution. Alongside this, were also some shots that featured the young girl counterparts dressed in a white veil and black chador (a dark traditional garment worn in public by Muslims that covers almost all of the head and body). In post-revolution Iran, dressing in this ensemble for women, particularly the young ones, indicates their support for the Islamic regime, which

automatically sets them apart from other women who wear mantua, at least superficially.



Figure 3. Young boys in original video of Hail Commander anthem

Although this is not an identical gesture to what was known as Nazi salute (or Fascist salute) in which the right arm was fully extended, facing forward, with palm down (Figure 4), yet, what we should pay attention to is the essence of the act itself and the age of the performers. This means that when an act of military salute, regardless of its form, is performed by a group of children in a strictly organised manner, the real meaning of such event transcends the mere idea of war or defence; it becomes a political gesture that is unique to dictatorial regimes.



Figure 4. Members of the Hitler Youth in Berlin performing the Nazi salute at a rally in 1933 (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/03/Bundesarchiv_Bild_147-0510%2C_Berlin%2C_Lustgarten%2C_Kundgebung_der_HJ.jpg)

Analysis of the lyrics

Perhaps the most outstanding segment of the lyric is its title 'Hail Commander' which is also repeated several times throughout the anthem. The 'Commander' here refers to the formal role and title of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as commander-in-chief, since he was appointed as the Supreme Leader by the Assembly of Experts on 4 June 1989, right after Ruhollah Khomeini (the founder of the Islamic Republic and Iran's first Supreme Leader) death. With absolute authority, the supreme leader as the commander-in-chief exercises supreme command and control over the armed forces and all military branches of Iran. In comparison to the Nazi leadership system, Khamenei's absolute role as the commander-in-chief is largely in synch with Adolf Hitler's, who after rising to power in 1933 began one of his most overt and audacious moves by establishing the *Wehrmacht* (defense force), a modern offensively-capable armed force which formed the heart of Germany's politico-military power. Now, the intention behind the use of the term 'Hail Commander' becomes more obvious if we look at the Nazi salute (*Hitlergruß*), or the *Sieg Heil* salute, a gesture that was used as a greeting in Nazi Germany and was performed by extending the right arm from the shoulder into the air with a straightened hand while the person offering the salute would say "*Heil Hitler!*" (lit. 'Hail Hitler!).

Table 1. Lyrics of Hail Commander (English and Farsi)

	Hail Commander	سلام فرمانده
1.	love of my life, my *Imam Zaman*, world is meaningless without you	عشق جانم، امام زمانم، دنیا بدون تو معنایی نداره
2.	love of a lifetime, when you're there, our world is like the springtime	عشق روزگارم وقتی که تو باشی دنیامون بهاره
3.	Hail commander, a hail from this zealous new generation	سلام فرمانده، سلام از این نسل غیور جامانده
4.	Hail commander, Seyed Ali has called up his 90s generation	سلام فرمانده، سیدعلی دهه‌ی نودی هاشو فراخوانده
5.	Hail commander, please come forth so that I become your supporter	سلام فرمانده بیا جون من بیا بیا یارت میشم
6.	I become your fan, become your Ali ibn Mahzir	هوادارت میشم گرفتارت میشم علی بن مهزیارت میشم
7.	regardless of my small stature, I become your military officer	با همین قد کوچیکم خودم سردارت میشم
8.	don't look at my small stature, when the time comes, I'll rise for you	نبین قدم کوچیکه پاش بیفته من برات قیام میکنم
9.	don't look at my small stature, I'll execute the duty just like Mirza Kuchak	نَبین قدم کوچیکه مثل میرزا کوچک کارو تموم میکنم
10.	don't look at my small stature, I hail you from row 313	نبین قدم کوچیکه از صف 313 تا بهت سلام میکنم
11.	don't look at my small stature, you just call me and watch what I can do for you	نبین کمه سنم تو فقط صدام بزن ببین چیکار برات میکنم
12.	don't look at my age, I will pray for you with my small hands	نبین کمه سنم با همین دستای کوچیکم همش دعات میکنم
13.	don't look at my age, I swear to sacrifice everything including the lives of my father and mother	نبین کمه سنم بأبی انت و أمی همه رو فدات میکنم

	Hail Commander	سلام فرمانده
14.	Hail commander, hail from this zealous new generation	سلام فرمانده سلام از این نسل غیور جامانده
15.	Hail commander, Seyed Ali has called up his 90s generation	سلام فرمانده سیدعلی دهه‌ی نودی ها شو فراخوانده
16.	I promise, one day I'll be of use for you, I promise, I'll be your Haj Qasem	عهد میبندم روزی لازمت بشم عـهد میبندم حاج قاسمت بشم
17.	I promise to be at your service just Behjat and your anonymous soldiers	عـهد میبندم مثل بهجت و مثل سربازای گمنام خادمت بشم
18.	I promise that I remain loyal to this government	عهد میبندم که میمونم پای کار این نظام
19.	I wish I could seem worthy in your eyes just like Haj Qasem	کاشکی مثل حاج قاسم من به چشم تو بیام
20.	For more than one thousand and one hundred years the whole world has been waiting for the emergence of Mahdi	هزارو صد و اندی ساله همه عالم دنبال مهدی اند
21.	Don't worry about soldiers, my sire, your soldiers are 1400s	غصه سربازو نخور آقا سربازات هزارو چهارصدی اند

Line (1) reads 'Love of my life, my *Imam Zaman*, world is meaningless without you' which indicates the highest form of affection to *Imam Zaman* (also known as 'Mahdi' by the Twelver branch of Shiism). In Twelver Shia belief, during the major Occultation which began in 941 and is thought to continue until a time decided by God, Mahdi will reappear to bring absolute justice to the world (Litvak, 2020). The *Imam Zaman* is fundamental to the concept of *Velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist) which is a system of governance that has underpinned the way Iran operates since the country's 1979 Islamic Revolution. Similarly, *Velayat-e faqih* is at the crux of Shia Islamism and is central to understanding not only how the Iranian system works but also how the Islamic regime can influence religious and political Shia networks beyond its borders (Arabi, 2019). Line (2) also extends this exaggerated affection to both the Supreme Leader and equates him to Mahdi, by saying 'love of lifetime, when you're there, our world is like the springtime'. Lines (3, 4, and 5) respectively read 'Hail commander, a hail from this zealous new generation', 'Hail commander, Seyed Ali has called up his 1390s generation (Islamic Iranian calendar equal to late 2000s-2010s)', and 'Hail commander, please come forth so that I become your supporter', all of which represent fanaticism among young Iranians (around the age of 7 to14 years old). In this view, these young people express their enthusiasm to be enlisted in the army willing to do the ultimate sacrifice under the command of the Supreme Leader.

Such fanatic sentiments continue in lines 6-13, albeit with a constant emphasis on this generation's youthfulness and physical immaturity. A few names also appear in lines 6 and 9 as well as the number 313. Here, the first name is Ali ibn Mahzir, who is believed to be one of the few blessed followers of Mahdi who had a chance to pay a visit to him before minor Occultation. The second name is Mirza Kuchak Khan (1880 – December 2, 1921) who was an Iranian twentieth-century revolutionary leader and the president of the Persian Socialist Soviet Republic. He was the founder of a revolutionary movement based in the forests of Gilan in northern Iran that became known as The Jungle Movement (*Nehzat-e*

Jangal). This uprising started in 1914 and remained active against internal and foreign enemies until 1921 when the movement was completely abandoned after the demise of Mirza Kuchak Khan (Matin-Asgari, 2009). The number 313, however, refers to a Shia myth which holds that there will be only 313 true Muslims in existence before the arrival of Mahdi. These 313 will form Mahdi's army in the fight against injustice. Embedded in the aforementioned lines, therefore, lies a strong association of the reciters with Twelver Shia fundamentalism while highlighting their fighting spirit against opponents of the Islamic regime. Alongside these ideologies are powerful the reciters' determination to make sacrifice at highest level which typically reminds us of enlistment of child soldiers during Iran-Iraq war and the ways these young people were brainwashed to give up their lives to keep Islamic regime alive (Figure 5).



Figure 5. An Iranian child soldier in the Iran-Iraq war
(https://i.redd.it/xuvru5kl8wm61.jpg)

In the lines 16 and 17, after skipping two choruses (14 and 15), we can see two distinguished names from recent times that the reciters aspire to be: Haj Qasem and Behjat. The first name refers to Iranian general Qasem Soleimani who was killed by an American drone attack in Iraq on the third of January 2020. Soleimani was the commander of the Quds Force, an IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) division primarily responsible for extraterritorial and covert military operations. In his later years, he was considered by some analysts to be the Supreme Leader's right-hand man, and the second-most powerful person in Iran (Tajbakhsh, 2021). The second name refers to Grand Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Bahjat Foumani (24 August 1916 – 17 May 2009) who was an Iranian Twelver Shia *Marja* that is authority given by a *hawzah* (a seminary where Shi'a Muslim scholars are educated) to make legal decisions within the confines of Islamic law for followers and lower-ranking clerics (Ridgeon, 2022). Ayatollah Behjat was known to be in contact with *Imam Zaman*. Here, the former name, Haj Qasem, represents symbol of Jihad, a campaign waged by Muslims in defense of their faith against people, organizations, or countries regarded as hostile to Islam. The latter name, Behjat, can

be seen as the symbol of connection to Mahdi and receiving orders from the unseen divine world where this long-awaited savior resides. It also is an indication of youth's hope for a future when, according to the Shia mythologies, Mahdi arrives on a white horse with a sword to kill the infidels rid the world from evil and injustice. Similar themes can be seen in Nazi propaganda messages, particularly regarding Hitler Youth. Indeed, from the 1920s onwards, the Nazi Party targeted German youth as a special audience for its propaganda messages. These messages emphasized that the Party was a movement of youth: dynamic, resilient, forward-looking, and hopeful.

Also, in line 17 we can see the term 'unknown soldiers' who are part of the IRGC Intelligence Organization and have full authority to do whatever they like, including torture, murder and interference in sentencing. The group was formed by direct order of Khomeini in May 1983 and more specifically has been referred to as Unknown Soldiers of *Imam Zaman*. This reminds us of both OVRA (Organization for Vigilance and Repression of Anti-Fascism) in Mussolini's Italy and *Gestapo* in Nazi Germany. Being the precursor of the German *Gestapo*, OVRA was Mussolini's secret police and was assigned to stop any anti-fascist activity or sentiment. it is estimated that OVRA with 50,000 agents headed by Arturo Bocchini infiltrated most aspects of domestic life in Italy (Alexander, 2004). In Nazi Germany, however, *Gestapo* which was founded by Hermann Göring in 1933 functioned as the official secret police (Carnaghi, 2021). Employing underhanded and terrorist methods against individuals suspected of disloyalty *Gestapo* ruthlessly eliminated opposition to the Nazis within Germany and its occupied territories and, in partnership with the *Sicherheitsdienst* (Security Service), was responsible for the roundup of Jews throughout Europe for deportation to extermination camps.

In the line 18, the young reciters of the Hail Commander express their full allegiance to the theocratic regime and presumably everything within its fundamentalist doctrine. The ideology-driven attitude of absolute devotion to a head of the state (Khamenei), together with the notion of 'unknown soldiers' resurrect the Nazi and Fascist political ideals and system of operation. Finally, the last three lines (19, 20, and 21) respectively praise Qasem Soleimani once again, immortalize Mahdi, and cheer the Supreme Leader up by assuring him of having an army of very young soldiers. All of these concluding verses reaffirm the Nazi/fascist ideologies, albeit in the guise of Islam's righteousness. Here, instead of nationalism which was fundamental to Nazi/fascist doctrines, Jihadism is promoted. Rooted in political Islam, Jihadism is understood as a holy militant Islamic movement that is existentially threatening to the West.

Hail Commander and Giovinezza

At this point, it is helpful to put Hail Commander and *Giovinezza* side by side for comparison in order to realise their interconnectedness at ideological level. Such juxtaposition is relevant because they both belong to the same genre and format, and that they are purposefully created as means of political and ideological propaganda to win over minds of the masses in dictatorship regimes. *Giovinezza*, (literary means "Youth") was the official hymn of the Italian National Fascist Party, regime, and army, and was an unofficial national anthem of the Kingdom of Italy between 1924 and 1943. It was written by Italian playwright, screenwriter, and film director Nino Oxilia (1889-1917). The hymn in *Giovinezza* underlines youth as a

theme of the fascist movement, but other themes are in accord with Hail Commander, too.

To begin with, as one could expect, there are numerous indicative words and concepts in *Giovinezza* that point to the centrality of nationalism in the fascist narrative. These are simply expressed through the use of the word 'Fatherland' in lines (2), (15), and (24) as well as 'Italian borders' in line (17), emphasizing both the country's physical boundaries and the ancestral heritage, that are now handed down to the young generation. In this respect, the youth hail the fatherland's immortality to not only express their beliefs in the continuity of the nation but to pledge their allegiance to their forefathers. Other aspects of nationalism, namely 'people' and 'heroism' as in line (1), 'flag' in line (31), as well as 'Italian pride' in line (27). Adding to these sentiments of nationalism, are 'poets and artisans' (25), as powerful elements of national identity derived from historically distinctive individuals that have made substantial contributions to the nation through producing culture, literature, and art; and also 'lords and countrymen' (26) as an indication of the conformity to the deeply-rooted 'class' hierarchy in the social system of the fascism.

At this point, it seems to be fair to say that, while *Giovinezza* is rife with distinct elements of nationalism, there is no indication of such ideals in Hail Commander, whatsoever. Although, this might mark a notable point of disparity between the two anthems, but it is misleading if we only focus on the strict meaning of nationalism without taking into consideration the history and context that shape this collective form of belongingness to nation. In this case, it can be argued that what drives the nationalistic sentiments in authoritarian Islamic countries like Iran, is the religion, and loyalty to the '*ummah*' (the community of the believers) or to the nation-state (Ataman, 2003). In this way, a social boundary that influences the identity of Muslims is largely taken as a geographical boundary, associating or dividing '*us*' from the '*others*'. Hence, we could say that, unlike its Italian equivalent in which nationalistic ideals are manifested in the form of land, class, history, and people, Hail Commander takes on Shia mythologies and revolutionary values such as martyrdom and valor in order to project an exclusive form of nationalism.

Moving on from nationalism, we can locate another striking aspect of fascism equally embodied in *Giovinezza* and its Iranian counterpart: the idea of the 'leader'; an untouchable, all-powerful head of the state who has the absolute authority to decide on the lives of its people and the fate of its nation. Such ideas are at times more explicitly placed in both anthems, as the actual name of Iran's Supreme Leader (Seyed Ali) appears twice in Hail Commander, while repeatedly referring to him as a rather divine and political leader. Here, the Supreme Leader is taken as an ultimate source of power and divinity, the only status worthy of his followers' sacrifice and dedication. Similarly, in Italian version, the leader's name 'Mussolini' distinctly appears in (13) and (28), albeit in a dramatic manner whereby strong fealty is sworn upon his name, suggesting the youth's determination to follow his orders and submit to his will.

As for the next prominent fascism theme in *Giovinezza* we can point to the expressions of war and heroism, particularly reflected in lines (5) and (20) where respectively 'warriors' valor' and 'tomorrow's war' accentuate the bravery and warring spirit of the Italian youth. Likewise, the violent and militant aspect of

fascism are ubiquitous in Hail Commander, and as demonstrated earlier, they take discursive forms. For example, in lines (9), (10), and (16), references are made respectively to a) Mirza Kuchak, a twentieth-century rebellious leader of the Persian resistance fighters, b) the number 313 that stands for the elite soldiers of Mahdi, the messianic savior in Shi'ism, and c) Haj Qasem, an Iranian commander. To mention other forms of expression in the category of war, we can point to the great zeal among youth to be fanatical soldiers to fight at the Supreme Leader's command, which is reflected in lines (17) and (21). Adding to these, are also some other elements that in one way or another articulate the idea of war, devotion, and sacrifice, throughout the lyrics by using words such as 'zealous new generation', 'sacrifice everything', and so on.

Table 2. Lyrics of *Giovinezza* (English and Italian)

Giovinezza	Juvenility
1. Hail, people of heroes,	Salve o popolo d'eroi
2. Hail, immortal Fatherland,	Salve o patria immortale
3. Your sons were born again	Son rinati i figli tuoi
4. With the faith and the Ideal.	Con la fede e l'ideale
5. Your warriors' valor,	Il valor dei tuoi guerrieri,
6. Your pioneers' virtue,	La virtù dei tuoi pionieri
7. Alighieri's vision,	La vision dell'Alighieri
8. Today shines in every heart	Oggi brilla in tutti i cuor
9. Youth, Youth,	Giovinezza, giovinezza,
10. Spring of beauty,	Primavera di bellezza
11. In the hardship of life	Per la vita, nell'asprezza
12. Your song rings and goes!	Il tuo canto squilla e va!
13. And for Benito Mussolini,	E per Benito Mussolini,
14. Eja eja alalà	Eja eja alalà
15. And for our beautiful Fatherland,	E per la nostra Patria bella,
16. Eja eja alalà	Eja eja alalà
17. In the Italian borders,	Dell'Italia nei confini
18. Italians have been remade	Son rifatti gli italiani
19. Mussolini has remade them	Li ha rifatti Mussolini
20. For tomorrow's war,	Per la guerra di domani
21. For labour's glory,	Per la gloria del lavoro
22. For peace and for the laurel,	Per la pace e per l'alloro,
23. For the shame of those	Per la gogna di coloro
24. Who repudiated our Fatherland	Che la patria rinnegar.
25. The poets and the artisans,	I poeti e gli artigiani
26. The lords and the countrymen,	I signori e i contadini
27. With an Italian's pride	Con orgoglio d'italiani
28. Swear fealty to Mussolini	Giuran fede a Mussolini.
29. No poor neighbourhood exists	Non v'è povero quartiere
30. That doesn't send its hordes	Che non mandi le sue schiere
31. That doesn't unfurl the flags	Che non spieghi le bandiere
32. Of redeeming Fascism	Del fascismo redentor.

Nonetheless, to summarize the analysis performed in this section, it can be said that the comparison of Hail Commander and *Giovinezza* reveals a great deal of similarities regarding the principles and ideals of fascism (as well as Nazism). What came into light in here was some of the prominent themes that define the fascism;

namely, extreme forms of nationalism, the existence of godlike, absolutist leader, fanatism and devotion of the masses, and their readiness for war, soldiery, and sacrifice. Moreover, these common characteristics are encapsulated in a larger theme of youth and juvenility, making both anthems remarkable representations of fascism and the centrality of young generation to its dogmatic fundamentals. These are ultimately suggestive of an organised and systematic recruitment of youth in militarised activities and political socialisation under the rule of the clerics in IRI, the rebirth of the same ideologies once held by Fascist and Nazi regimes more than eighty years ago.

Conclusion

During the war with Iraq, the Iranian government used propaganda to advance the war effort. By relying on their propaganda division, they routinely spread information to the public. Although as a positive force these propagandas helped the government to mobilize public opinion during the war, later on and after the war, they were labelled negatively by the peace advocates who called them partisan appeal based on half-truth and devious manipulation of communication channels. One of the implications of such mass manipulation was the child soldier phenomenon during the war, where underage children were brainwashed, sometimes with their families' consents, to join *Basij* (Resistance Mobilisation Force), a paramilitary volunteer militia established in 1979 (McNab, 2022). Years later, as the state ideological apparatus continued to function vigorously during the post-war era, the authorities' exploitation of the youth took a slightly different path. As such, they began to invest more and more on deployment of underage boys and girls for political socialization and various propagandist campaigns. One of the concrete expressions of these campaigns was the production of Hail Commander, an anthem presumably created for children but heavily loaded with the religious and political charges that echoed the ideologies held by fascist/Nazi regimes in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

In response, the current study addressed these outrageous resemblances and the controversies around Hail Commander, by reflecting on its emergence and critically analyzing the lyrics and some of the visual features present in the original video of this anthem. In turn, these analyses provided demonstrable evidence of likeness between some of the representational aspects in this video and the fascist/Nazi ideologies and practices. Thus, for such notorious interrelatedness between these dictatorial regimes, including their histories of recruitment of young into army, it is argued that the emergence of Hail Commander should be viewed as the revival of child soldier phenomenon. Of course, such revival is not about sending young to the frontlines per se, but fostering the same 'idea'; construction of a bold, fanatic and ready-to-war army of youth through discourse and discursive practices, largely carried out by media representations.

Nevertheless, while humanitarian and human rights groups have undertaken a major initiative to end the use of child soldiers since past few decades (Fox, 2021), there seems to be little done against the exploitation of children for the ideological/political objectives of the governments and parastatal groups (Wells, 2021), particularly in modern-day dictatorships where information is often manipulated or suppressed. As a final point, in light of the current youth and student-led uprisings in Iran, it is evident that, for the authorities, the production of

this anthem and the great efforts in promoting it, was a timely scheme to ensure social control, and an opportunity to instill officially prescribed ideologies (Matin, 2022), and thereby, regain their shaken legitimacy.

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