

# Iran's Educational Diplomacy in the Muslim World: Activities of Al-Mustafa International University in Malaysia and Afghanistan

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**ABSTRACT** *Ayatollah Khomeini after the 1979 Revolution contemplated the promotion of Shia core doctrinal values in the Muslim world. A strategy to instill these values in young minds and academic community in the largely Sunni majority Muslim states was needed. Khomeini used 'exporting revolution' instead of 'exporting Shia core values' to avoid resistance in the Sunni dominant communities. The Islamic Republic of Iran founded al-Mustafa International University (MIU) with branches across the Muslim world. The MIU's strategy and activities in Malaysia and Afghanistan suggest that it is engaged in proselytizing followers of Sunni theology and recruiting Sunni academia as propagandists and sympathizers of Shiism. In Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic also aims to penetrate policy-making circles.*

## Introduction

**T**he Islamic Republic of Iran, in the name of exporting the 1979 Revolution, aims to propagate Shia core doctrinal values. The founding fathers of the 1979 Revolution believed that for the country to attain its objective, it needed to occupy a space in the educational sector of the Muslim world. Hence, the Islamic Republic outlined the strategy of educational diplomacy that is sponsoring a host of educational initiatives, such as the establishment of Jāmi'ah al-Muṣṭafā al-Ālamīyyah or al-Mustafa International University (MIU) with branches across the Muslim world promoting its activities. This paper discusses the role of the MIU in the conduct of the Islamic Republic's educational diplomacy in Malaysia and Afghanistan in line with Iran's aim of promoting Shia core doctrinal values of 'succession' (*imamate*), and its corollaries of 'waiting' (*intizār*), 'representation' (*vilāyat*), 'rule of jurisconsult' (*vilāyat e faqīh*), and 'dissimulation' (*taqīyyah*); as well as this country's quest for soft power and greater influence in the politics of the Muslim world. This paper is composed of two parts. First, it discusses the theoretical basis of public diplomacy and the role of the MIU in the Islamic Republic of Iran's policy of

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promoting the Shia core doctrinal values in the Muslim world. Second, it examines the strategies and activities of the MIU for creating Shia propagandists and sympathizers in Malaysia and Afghanistan. A word of caution is in order. Throughout this paper, the terms 'Irano-Islamic' or 'Islamic' in the country's official documents and Iranian literature refers to the Shia version of Islam

and the declared official ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These official documents and literature are based on the view that Shia core doctrinal values and political norms constitute 'true' and 'pure' teachings of Islam.

### Educational Diplomacy: Theoretical Consideration

The changing international environment and the advancement of information and communication technology have facilitated the entrance of ordinary citizens into the heart of the political arena. This has put classical foreign policy under extensive pressure to go beyond its traditional state-to-state interaction.<sup>1</sup> States have begun to use 'public diplomacy' as an important and effective element of diplomatic practices. In McDowell's words public diplomacy is the "actions of a government to inform and influence foreign publics."<sup>2</sup> In McDowell's view public diplomacy includes state and non-state "activities that inevitably if not purposefully have an impact on the foreign policy, national security and national interests"<sup>3</sup> of other states. Paul Sharp joins McDowell and argues that public diplomacy is the "process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interest and extend the values of those being represented."<sup>4</sup> McDowell and Sharp's arguments suggest that states employ public diplomacy beyond government to government contacts, and attempt to directly interact with the people of other states.

Joseph Nye in his popular analysis of power divides national power into two types: (1) 'hard power' and (2) 'soft power.' He views hard power in terms of material factors such as military, population, economic resources, etc. However, he associates soft power with intangible factors such as culture, ideas, skills, and attraction. Nye asserts that the "proof of power lies not in resources but in the ability to change the behavior of states."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, he argues, in soft power, the nature of power is co-optive rather than coercive. It may not be misplaced to argue that Nye's analysis of soft power resembles Carr's view of power as "power over opinion"<sup>6</sup> or what Morgenthau referred as control over the minds of others. According to Morgenthau, 'power' may comprise

anything from “physical violence to most subtle psychological ties” through which a man establishes control over other men.<sup>7</sup> Nye argues that ‘soft power’ as an instrument of foreign policy is a strategic choice and an alternative to the “costly exercise of hard power.”<sup>8</sup> States use ‘public diplomacy’ as an important instrument in the quest of attaining national interests and therefore, he concludes that public diplomacy in pursuit of national interest is an important element of power in a nation’s foreign policy formulation.

According to R. S. Zaharna, states in the exercise of public diplomacy follow a two-fold approach: (1) informational approach and (2) relational approach. The informational approach focuses on the ways public diplomacy messages are designed and transmitted to the public of the target state. The informational approach perceives communication as “a linear process of transferring information, often with the goal of persuasion or control”<sup>9</sup> in the target state. The relational approach, on the other hand, focuses on “relationship building and construction of social structure(s)”<sup>10</sup> with the public in target states. The aim is to “find commonalities or mutual interests between publics (in the target state) and then ways to link those publics (in the target state) via some form of direct interpersonal communication”<sup>11</sup> with the agents or representative of the message-sending state. The relationship-building technique of the relational approach focuses on building long-term relations, through seeking mutual interests between the message-sending state and the target audience in the target state.<sup>12</sup> In Zaharna’s view the relational initiatives of the relationship-building technique include building relations and establishing contacts with students, teachers, academics, and intellectuals. Such initiatives broadly called educational diplomacy initiatives may range from exchange of students and academics, signing memoranda of understanding with other educational institutions to conducting seminars, workshops and symposiums.<sup>13</sup>

Nye argues that educational initiatives in a public diplomacy toolkit are a very important element of ‘soft power’ employed by states in pursuit of their interests in the target state. Nye argues that Colin Powell, former U.S. Secretary of State, informed his audience that “I can think of no more valuable assets to our country than friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Nye contends that the Soviet Union Politburo member Alexander Yakovlev’s stay at *Columbia University* in the 1950s helped him champion socio-political and economic reforms in the Soviet Union under Michael Gorbachev’s leadership. Therefore, Nye writes, “exchanges affect elites; one or two key contacts may have major political effects.”<sup>15</sup>

Indeed education has also been used by colonial powers arguably to safeguard their long-term interests in the colonies. In the most cited ‘Minute on Education,’ the famous 18<sup>th</sup> century British educationist, Lord Macaulay (1800-1859), in favor of introducing English Language to the Indian sub-continent, argued

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that “we must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”<sup>16</sup> What Macaulay advised in 1835, albeit the difference in styles and methods is being practiced with the same vigor by states in contemporary times. States with global and regional ambitions strive

to enhance their influence through educational diplomacy. President Harry S. Truman in August 1946 signed the famous Fulbright Educational Exchange Program Bill under which, up until 2013, the U.S. government facilitated 202,600 students from 155 countries to pursue higher education at American universities.<sup>17</sup> The British Chevening Scholarships Program initiated in 1984, and the European Union Erasmus Mundus Program initiated in 2009 are other examples of the exercise of educational diplomacy.

### Educational Diplomacy in the Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy

The so-called 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran has indeed been an opportunity for Ayatollah Khomeini and the Shia religious establishment to promote Shia core doctrinal values in the Muslim world under the name of Islam. While many in the Sunni majority Muslim states supported the ideals of the so-called Iranian Islamic Revolution, the religious establishment in the Islamic Republic under the leadership of Khomeini was silently contemplating a strategy to export the revolution and effectively instill Shia core doctrinal values in young minds and within the academic community in the largely Sunni majority Muslim states. The Islamic Republic's religious sectarian establishment's strategy of exporting revolution focused on two fundamental issues. First, it focused on the use of educational diplomacy, that is the formulation of a host of educational initiatives and establishment of institutional apparatus i.e. al-Mustafa International University with branches across the Muslim world necessary for exporting the Shia core doctrinal values. Second, perhaps more important for Khomeini and the Iranian religious establishment, the strategy focused on the reform of the secular system of education in line with the Shia core doctrinal values. Development of a Shia oriented educational system was more important as it was what should be exported through the use of educational diplomacy and the MIU.

Khomeini in 1979 issued a decree to establish the Islamic Republic's Cultural Revolution Headquarters (Sitâd e Inqilâb e Farhangî; CRH). However, Kho-



Iranian President Rouhani met with the Malaysian Prime Minister Razak in Kuala Lumpur, in October 2016.  
AA PHOTO

meini in 1984 through another decree institutionalized CRH into the Supreme Cultural Revolutionary Council (Shurāy e ʿālī e Inqilāb e Farhangī; SCRC).<sup>18</sup> The SCRC has a gargantuan apparatus with 17 units, including councils and boards. It has been assigned to redesign the country's education system to match its Shia political and ideological goals and objectives envisioned by Khomeini and his successor, Ayatollah Khamenei and spelled (U.S.) out in the Islamic Republic's Constitution.

The CRH/SCRC was tasked to: (i) purge the Islamic Republic's education sector, particularly the higher education institutions, of non-conformist students and academics; (ii) "design different disciplines, chalking out future action plans for universities on the basis of the Islamic (Shia) culture, selection and training of competent, committed, and aware teachers, and other affairs related to the Islamic (Shia-oriented) educational revolution."<sup>19</sup> The CRH reforms led to an open-ended shutdown of almost all higher educational institutions, and the dismissal of students and teachers believed to be either 'leftist' or 'westoxicated.' Importantly, Khomeini ordered CRH/SCRC to publish new textbooks reflecting the Islamic Republic's official Shia ideology, narrow down the gulf between the Shia religious seminaries and the universities and ensure that universities curricula is Islamized in line with the Shia core doctrinal values. The Islamic Republic's intellectual history is still reeling under the impact of Khomeini's three-decade-long 'cultural revolution.'

The two main initiatives that the SCRC is following warrant discussion: (i) the May 14, 2011 National Master Plan for Science and Education and (ii)

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spreading the idea of (Imam Mahdi's) universal government, and materializing a global community filled with justice and unity, under the governance of the Perfect Man (Imam Mahdi).<sup>20</sup> Hence, the Master Plan advocated among others: (i) increase the enrollment of foreign students particularly from the Muslim world into Iranian educational institutions; (ii) offer of support for Persian language courses in universities worldwide; (iii) capitalize on international opportunities through an established network at home and abroad; (iv) establish international research centers, particularly in the Muslim world; (v) organize regional and international seminars and translation of Irano-Islamic works into foreign languages; (vi) pave the ground for placing Iranian scholars at top global academic institutions; (vii) introduce a system of cooperation in the area of post-graduate studies between Iranian universities and universities in the Muslim world; (viii) supply libraries and centers with translated Irano-Islamic reading materials, Persian reference works, and theoretical works of the country's scholars; and (ix) organize exchange of university teachers and students and joint educational courses on priority subjects.<sup>21</sup>

However, the Action Plan provided operational depth for the implementation of the provisions of the Master Plan. The Action Plan, notwithstanding cautioning practitioners of the Islamic Republic's educational diplomacy not to lose sight of core principles of the state's official Shia ideology, suggested what was required of them in implementing the Master Plan. The second chapter of the document, "Underlying Values," emphasizes that the Islamic Republic's education system should be based on the "teachings of Qur'an, the spiritual, exemplary, directorial and educational characters of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Fatima (Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) daughter), the infallible *imams* (divinely-appointed or religiously sanctioned political leaders) particularly *imame-zamān* [in Persian/vali-al-asr in Arabic (Imam of the Age, Muhammad ibn Hassan al Mahdi)], and *vilāyat* (political representation) in all spheres of life."<sup>22</sup> The chapter on "Grand Strategies" of the document advocates expansion of the Islamic Republic's educational and training modalities to international and regional arenas for the purpose of achieving the country's educational goals and mission enshrined in its Constitution. It also advocates propagation of the Supreme Leader's teachings and policies in Iran and abroad, and formulation of the Republic's five-year plan.<sup>23</sup> In the chapter on "Operational Strategies and Methods" it recommends a long list of operational strategies and calls for ac-

the February 2012 Education Action Plan known as the Document for Foundational Transformation of the Education and Training Sector. The Master Plan provided a vision for the Islamic Republic's educational diplomacy. It advocated the "promotion of divine thinking,

tive participation in international educational activities to promote the Islamic Republic's educational agenda and successful experience among international audiences and academic centers with specific emphasis on the Muslim world.<sup>24</sup>

## MIU: The Institutional Setup of the Islamic Republic's Educational Diplomacy

The MIU was the Islamic Republic's religious sectarian establishment's strategy of exporting revolution and Shia core doctrinal values. Though the MIU was officially founded in 2008, its functions and activities since 1979 were carried out by its predecessor institutions. The MIU authorities attribute the original idea behind the establishment of the MIU to Ayatollah Murtadha Mutah'hari (1919-1979), an influential ideologue of the 1979 revolution and Grand Ayatollah Syed Hussain Broujerdi (1875-1961), a founder of Qom Seminary, who had desired the establishment of institutions with branches across the Muslim world for training and dispatching propagandists to disseminate Shia revolutionary ideas. Mutah'hari and Broujerdi's ideas were later materialized in the establishment of the Global Center for Islamic Knowledge (Markaze Jahānī Ulūm- e Islāmī; GCIK) and the Organization of Overseas Religious Seminaries (Sāzmān-e Hozih-hāye 'ilmi'yih wa Madāris-e Khārij az Kishwar; OORS).<sup>25</sup> On January 18, 2008, the SCRC was instructed by the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei to merge the two organizations and form the MIU with a new statute.

The MIU's statute (Article 5) asserts that the conduct of cultural and educational activities of the Islamic Republic for expatriates and the wider world exclusively falls under the authority of the MIU, and conduct of any activity in the name of the Islamic Republic without the knowledge of the MIU is prohibited. Yet, the same article states that "the MIU can delegate the conduct of such activities, by reserving the right of supervision, to other legal and real persons." The goals of the MIU (Article 9) are: (i) training of pious and devoted jurists, clergy, researchers, experts, trainers, propagandists, translators, tutors, and managers and (ii) the promotion and propagation of 'pure Mohammedan Islam' based on the knowledge from Qur'an and *ahl-ul-bayt* (descendants of Prophet Muhammad from the line of his daughter, the wife of Ali).

In pursuit of the above-stated goals, the MIU's responsibilities (Article 10) are to: (i) establish, manage, support and expand seminaries, universities, Qur'anic institutes, and educational, research and cultural institutions both within the Islamic Republic and abroad; (ii) manage the affairs of non-Iranian students and alumni of the seminaries within the Islamic Republic and abroad; (iii) design and introduce academic disciplines, co-curriculum syllabi, and Persian Language courses; (iv) discover, attract, train and support the elites and celebrities

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acquire membership in international academic-cultural institutions, and award honorary degrees and membership to political and academic personalities from the Muslim world; (iv) create academic and educational chairs, preferably Islamic and Shia or Persian studies chairs at universities and academic centers; and (v) provide legal protection and administrative support and welfare services for students, their spouses, and children in the Islamic Republic and abroad.

Three important arguments may highlight the strategic significance and role of the MIU in the Islamic Republic's educational diplomacy and their foreign policy goal of promoting Shia core doctrinal values in the Muslim world: First, the MIU is under the purview of the Office of the Supreme Leader, who is the highest authority within the MIU. He ratifies the statute, selects its members of the trustees' committee, appoints and removes its president and advises the MIU and has the power to dissolve it (Article 11). According to the same article, the Supreme Leader appoints the following influential religious figures as members of the MIU's trustees' committee for a five year term: (i) the president of the MIU, (ii) the representative of the Supreme Council of Seminaries, (iii) deputy president for international relations, Office of the Supreme Leader, (iv) the president of Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, (v) the General Secretary of *ahl-ul-bayt* World Assembly, (vi) the general secretary of the World Assembly for Proximity of Islamic Sects, and (vii) three to five persons from the Shia religious establishment (*ulamā*) and jurist-consult familiar with international issues.

Second, the MIU was established in Qom, the center of Shia intellectual and political dynamism. The MIU under the close supervision of the Qom Seminary ought to ensure that its activities have the approval of the Shia conservative religious establishment and they reflect the core conservative Shia ideals and principles. Given the dynamic nature of Qom Seminary in disseminating Shia core doctrinal values around the globe and the Muslim world, within a short span

of the Muslim world; (v) formulate a comprehensive plan for a balanced training and spiritual upgrading of students, their families and children; and (vi) publish scholarly and cultural materials promoting the Islamic Republic's official ideology. Moreover, the MIU is tasked to: (i) initiate, manage, and support media activities in line with its goals; (ii) expand academic and cultural relationship and cooperation with educational, cultural and research centers across the Muslim world; (iii)



of time the MIU became a mammoth institution with several sub-institutions, all engaged in public diplomacy in line with the political and ideological goals of the Islamic Republic of Iran. To date, the MIU has 60 overseas branches. The Islamic College of London, the Islamic College of Indonesia, and the Islamic University of Ghana are worth mentioning. The MIU's alumni newsletter states that it has around 2,500 academic staff teaching in 150 disciplines such as Shia Studies, Education, Islamic History, and even Propaganda.<sup>26</sup> The MIU offers online educational services<sup>27</sup> for those who cannot travel to Iran.

Third, the MIU's source of finance and material resources may also highlight its strategic role and place within the Islamic Republic's political apparatus and the trust religious elites place in the MIU in promoting the Islamic Republic's official ideology abroad. According to the MIU statute, its sources of funds are (i) the Office of the Supreme Leader (Article 29) and (ii) specific allocation in public budget (Article 30). In the fiscal year 2012-2013, the MIU received 1,215,048 million Iranian *Rials* (\$101,254,000) from the public fund. This budget allocation is equivalent to the budget of the Islamic Republic's major universities known as 'mother universities.' It must be stated that this amount does not include budget allocated to its affiliated religious seminaries and the development budget, from which the MIU gets its due share.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the MIU's budget for the fiscal year 2013-2014 was increased to 1,620,257 million Iranian *rials* (\$135,022,000).<sup>29</sup>

## MIU's Activities and Achievements

According to many Qom Seminary clerics such as Ayatollah Arafi, President of the MIU, Ayatollah Jafar Subhani and Ayatollah Makarem Shirzai, the MIU has materialized the Islamic Republic's duty of exporting Shia core doctrinal values and disseminating of Islamic and *ahl-ul-bayt* knowledge. They argue that the fund through the MIU has achieved its objectives of attracting students from the Muslim world and disseminating knowledge of 'pure' Islam i.e. Shia doctrinal teachings. They argue that MIU should even attract students from places where it has no presence.<sup>30</sup> This suggests that the Qom Seminary clerics are advising the Islamic Republic to increase the MIU's budget allocation.

The MIU offers scholarships, runs an international research center, translation activities, issue-based publications of periodicals (i.e. journals and magazines) and public libraries and builds relationships with educational, research and cultural institutions around the world. The MIU since its establishment has offered admission to 40,000 students from 120 countries. It has over 20,000 alumni around the globe with more than 3,000 female students studying at its Bint-ul-huda Higher Education Female Complex.<sup>31</sup> The MIU's international research center translates literature on Shia core doctrinal values into nine language

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categories namely: Aryan, Indian, East Asian, Turkish, Latin, Balkan and Slav, German, African and Arabic.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the MIU is also translating Persian Shia literature in English mainly through its London branch. According to the MIU's Deputy President for Research Affairs, Muhammad Jafar Alami, in addition to other researchers, the MIU has recruited 2,746 of its own students as researchers and up till 2012 has produced 18,365 research works in different languages. It has published over 500 textbooks. It currently publishes, Alami said, a total of 70 academic journals and 35 magazines related to culture, general knowledge and family issues. The nine libraries in Qom with an aggregated volume of 500,000 books are serving the MIU's students and researchers.<sup>33</sup>

The MIU also organizes camping programs, scientific research workshops, training and cultural programs, and Qur'an and sport Olympiads such as the prestigious Tuba Biannual Festivals and Shaikh Tusi International Scientific and Specialized Annual Congress. The MIU has formed over 30 academic associations and over 100 students' cultural associations. Its education centers for short courses have organized 300 programs inviting political elites and cultural activists from different parts of the world. The MIU's Family Affairs Division offers academic and social programs for its current students' families and children. Finally, the MIU has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with over 50 educational, research and cultural institutions around the world, including the Morocco-based Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World, an offshoot of Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO).<sup>34</sup> The MoUs focus on academic and student exchange programs, providing scholarships, joint-conferences and workshops, and exchange of official delegations.

### **MIU's Proselytization and Sympathizer Creating Strategy**

The Islamic Republic's educational diplomacy program at the MIU aims to proselytize Sunni academics and students from around the world and recruit them for expansion of Shia core doctrinal values and principles. The MIU at best would like to induce the young minds and academics to adopt Shia doctrinal belief. Otherwise, it prefers to train them as sympathizers and propagandists of the expansion of the Shia version of 'pure' Islam. In Mahdavi Mehr's view, the Shia sympathizers and propagandists would serve as the reserve army



of the twelfth Imam Muhammad Hassan al Mahdi who lives in occultation.<sup>35</sup> They will prepare the ground for his reappearance. According to Ayatollah Jafar Subhani, an influential Qom cleric, Imam Jafar al Sadiq ibn Muhammad (702-765), the sixth Shia imam, refers to adherents of Sunni doctrinal belief who are susceptible to proselytizing by Shiism or becoming propagandists for and sympathizers of Shia doctrinal values as ‘impressionable people.’ Subhani argues that Imam Jafar al Sadiq has emphasized Shia propaganda targeting the impressionable Sunnis for the propagation of Shia core doctrinal values. Therefore, he considers it as the Islamic Republic’s duty at the MIU to “approach those people who are impressionable to change, because (Sunni) ... religious and community leaders ... are not changeable.”<sup>36</sup> It is essential to note that the MIU targets the youth and educated class.

Ironically, the governments of many Sunni dominated states due to difficult socio-economic conditions and political instability are unable to meet the rising demands for higher education opportunities. Therefore, scholarships and fellowships which the MIU offers for the so-called impressionable students, academics and researchers from the dominant Sunni Muslim world are rare opportunities of which they want to take advantage. It is the duty of the Iranian diplomats and cultural representatives in the MIU’s overseas branches or through other programs and events organized by the MIU to identify and attract these students and academics.

At the MIU these students undergo extensive ideological and religious indoctrination to either proselytize or serve as active Shia sympathizers and political

Religious scholars of the Qom Seminary, Iran’s largest seminary school and supervisor of the MIU activities, study in small traditional classes at Qom’s Grand Mosque.

Corbis via GETTY IMAGES / MOHSEN SHANDIZ

agents in their respective societies. Therefore, upon successful indoctrination, it is assumed that when these students return to their native state, they will be Sunni by name, but Shia by belief and political ideology. The Iranian religious authorities, within their own internal circles, would refer to such people as '*mustabsir*,' a person whose heart has been exposed to the truth. These *mustabsirs*, are formally registered with a separate office called the 'Department of New Shias' (*idārih- mustabsirin*), which functions under another Iranian public diplomacy institution called Ahl-ul-bayt World Assembly (ABWA) (Majma<sup>c</sup>-e Jahāni-e Ahl-e bayt). These students and academics *mustabsirs* are indoctrinated in special propaganda training workshops designed for non-Iranian propagandists. The propaganda skills used in these workshops are developed in tandem with and reflect the socio-political realities of the students' home country. The MIU's propaganda techniques targeting the young and dynamic revolutionary generation in the Muslim world include: face-to-face contact, tutorials, writings and translation of books and articles, establishment of schools, mosques, libraries, congregation halls for Shia religious rituals (*hussainia*), cultural, scientific, research and educational centers, creating religious and cultural associations, launching internet databases, organizing conferences, seminars, scientific and research workshops, cultural training camps, cultural, religious and social cooperation with local governments, and addressing religious, denominational, economic, social and political issues.<sup>37</sup> Obviously, the success of recruiting propagandists very much depends on engaging its alumni, the MIU authorities and the ruling clergy stay in contact with the MIU alumni through conferences, events, and other means.

## MIU's Activities in Malaysia

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and a multi-religious state. 61.3 percent of its 26.4 million populace are Muslims of mainly Malay ethnic background.<sup>38</sup> Malaysia's Chinese, Indian, Sikh, Kadazan Dusun, Malanau, etc. ethnic groups are the adherents of world's major religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Sikhism. However, the Malay Muslims in Malaysia are adherents of Sunni theology and predominantly followers of the Shafiite School of Islamic Law and Jurisprudence. Malaysia is a fast developing moderate Sunni Muslim state and is projected as a role model by many in the Muslim world and around the globe. Furthermore, Malaysia is one of the few countries in the Muslim world that is significantly investing in education and higher education. The number of public and private universities offering a variety of educational programs has recently increased. Malaysia has become an educational hub, attracting students from all over the Muslim world with its universities regularly being ranked by the Times Higher Education (THE) for quality and international standards of teaching, research and delivery. The higher education sector of Malaysia is also well connected to the Muslim world given the significant number of international stu-

dents pursuing their higher education in Malaysia.

Malaysia's unique position in the Muslim world and around the globe is perceived by the Iranian leadership both as a challenge and an opportunity. While Malaysia has emerged as a political rival, undermining the Islamic Republic's claim for Leadership of the Muslim world, the Islamic Republic believes that Malaysia has become a rare opportunity for propagation of Shi'ism that must not be missed. Therefore, Malaysia is an attractive place for the MIU for two reasons: first to establish a relationship with the higher education sector of Malaysia, and second, to establish contact with local and international students and academics of these institutions.

The MIU's activities in Malaysia have mainly focused on 'research and propaganda' under the guise of the Kuala Lumpur-based Amin Research Center (ARC). This Center in the MIU's official portal is referred to as 'MIU's Representation Office in Malaysia. The MIU as a 'soft power' instrument of the Islamic Republic in the predominantly Sunni Muslim world, designs its strategy after analyzing the socio-political environment of the host or receiving state. It then, according to Hakim-Elahi, the MIU's Deputy President for Relations and International Affairs, adopts individually or collectively the strategy of (i) training of preachers, (ii) conducting research to produce and deepen pure knowledge of the Shia version of Islam or (iii) undertaking propaganda that is publication and dissemination of 'pure Islamic knowledge of the Shia version of Islam.'<sup>39</sup>

The Head of the Amin Research Center, Sayed Muhsin Miri, is, concurrently, the Head of MIU's Research Center for Producing Textbooks on Islam and West. Muhsin Miri is a cleric by training and his name in the Iranian media bears the prefix 'Hujjat-ul-Islam,' a title conferred on clerical authority, and yet he always appears in European style suit in public functions in Malaysia. Given the increasing sensitivity within the public and political circles towards propagation of Shiism in Malaysia, Muhsin Miri practices dissimulation (*taqiyyah*) that is he does not disclose his real intention and faith. Thus he appears as a research scholar instead of a 'cleric' in public functions in Malaysia.

The Amin Research Center has been promoting (i) research and publications of textbooks and translation of Shia original works and (ii) building relationships with prestigious research and academic institutions and academics in Malaysia. It is important to note here that wherever, the Center cannot openly conduct its

## **The MIU as a 'soft power' instrument of the Islamic Republic in the predominant Sunni Muslim world designs its strategy after analyzing the socio-political environment of the host or receiving state**

activities it carries them under the shadow of Cultural Attaché of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic in Kuala Lumpur. The Center has published books such as *Anthropology for Muslim Students*, *Introduction to Islamic (Shia) Philosophy*, *Sociology for Muslim Students* and *Training and Education in (Shia) Islam*. However, the most important work it has translated and distributed in Malaysia is *Theory of Knowledge* by Ayatollah Mutāhhari, who is widely considered as one of the ideologues of the Islamic Republic. Moreover, as noted earlier, he was one of the founding fathers of the MIU. According to Salih, the MIU's Deputy President for Education and Development, Mutahhari has been the main source of the MIU's curriculum and it is the MIU's responsibility to propagate his ideas throughout the globe under its 'Mutahhar Research Project.' A special committee with the presence of Deputy Cultural Affairs of the MIU each year designs a strategy for the implementation of the 'Mutahhar Research Project.' The strategy focuses on promoting Mutah'hari's ideas in accordance to audience's level of education under the guise of reading competitions.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the Amin Research Center in Kuala Lumpur promotes Mutah'hari's ideas through translating his work into Bahasa Malaysia. However, the Center carries its relationship building activities with educational and academic institutions and scholars in Malaysia through the Office of the Cultural Attaché of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic in Kuala Lumpur. For instance the Center's relations with Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM), Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS), etc. were conducted on a formal diplomatic basis by the Office of the Cultural Attaché of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic in Kuala Lumpur. The reason for the Center's shadowy role has been somewhat legal and technical as it is only registered as a publication center and is not registered in Malaysia for the kind of activities it has been conducting. Ali Akbar Ziae, an ISTAC graduate and Iran's Cultural Attaché in its Kuala Lumpur Embassy, in an interview with the *Iran Daily* on July 22, 2012 described cooperation with JAKIM, ISTAC, and IAIS in the promoting the Islamic Republic's global agenda as satisfactory. According to him, "there is a good cooperation between the Iranian organizations and universities with the ISTAC and IAIS. There is no single month, in which these institutions are not hosting one Iranian delegation."<sup>41</sup> Ziae holds a master's degree from the Imam Sadiq University, an ideological higher education institution founded by Ayatollah Mahdavi Kani, its lifetime President and Head of the Assembly of Experts until his death. The University's main mission is to train ideologically and politically committed human resource for the Islamic Republic's top sensitive institutions. Ziae studied at the ISTAC despite its degree not being recognized by the Higher Education Ministry and during his stay in ISTAC had declared himself as a follower of the Shafite School of Sunni Theology and Jurisprudence.

In July-August 2011, the MIU invited a group of academics from Malaysia's premier university, the University of Malaya, to visit the Qom Seminary in the

Islamic Republic. The delegation met with prominent Shia clerics such as Ayatollah Muqtadaee, Marvi, Yousefi, Ghurarvi, and Ayatollah Arafī, the president of the MIU. The delegation also visited the Imam Khomeini Institute for Education and Research, (Mu'ass'sih-e Āmūzishī wa Pujhūhishī-e Imām Khomeini), Ma'cūma [daughter of Seventh Shia imam) Mausoleum, Khomeini's Memorial Home, Qom Higher Education Complex (Mujtama'-e Āmūzish-e 'Āli-e Qom), Imam Sādiq University, Chah e Jamkaran, a religious site believed to be the hub of *imam* Mahdi, and Khomeini's Mausoleum, and were also taken to Tehran for Friday prayer sermon at the VIP lounge, a place primarily reserved for prominent political figures.<sup>42</sup>

In May 2012, the MIU's International Research Institute in collaboration with its Center for Short Courses and Study Opportunities in Qom invited five professors from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) to a workshop entitled Examining Changes in Islamic Economics in Malaysia (bar'rasī taḥawwulāt-e iqtisād-e islami dar Malezi) to the City of Qom.<sup>43</sup> In return, the MIU -President, Ayatollah Arafī, along with a delegation, visited Malaysia in July 2012, and reportedly met with different heads of organizations, university rectors and other officials offering a variety of ways to cooperate.<sup>44</sup> Besides, a delegation from the MIU along with Amin Research Center's personnel in Malaysia reportedly visited Malaysia's Open University in June 2012, and held a working meeting with its officials.<sup>45</sup>

In September 2012, a MoU was signed between the UiTM and MIU. Muhsen Miri, the Head of the Amin Research Center, represented the MIU. The two institutions agreed to work on joint projects related to banking and Islamic finance, endowment, poor due (*zakat*), publication of books and journal articles, and exchange of students and academics. Later, a 12-member delegation of UiTM academics and officials was invited to the 'Third International Conference on Islamic Economics: Experience of Malaysia and Iran' held from September 16-20, 2012 in Qom. The delegation was also taken to meet some grand ayatollahs and visit religious centers.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to building formal relations with academic institutions, the MIU has also established contacts with individual academics and students. The Amin Research Center initiated a series of monthly seminars on the 'Islamization of Knowledge.' Academics from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and other institutions were invited as distinguished speakers and guests.<sup>47</sup> Many Malaysian university professors when interviewed confirmed that they had re-



**The MIU's methods of propagation of Shia doctrinal values in Afghanistan were similar to those employed in Malaysia, but tailored to suit the socio-political dynamics of the Afghan society**

## The role of the MIU alumni go beyond the Islamic Republic's soft power frontiers and may take a leading role in their hard power front

ceived sponsorship offers from the Iranian government to attend conferences in Iran. A Bangladeshi Professor admitted that he was assured of visa on arrival while ordinary Bangladeshi nationals are required to file a visa application at the nearest embassy of the Islamic Republic.

Therefore, it seems quite normal that the Islamic Republic issues visa without difficulty to academics, not following the normal visa application procedures applied to ordinary citizens from such countries. However, it is necessary to note that in August 2010, two academics from IIUM were invited to attend a convocation held by a higher learning institution run by the Sunni community in the Balochistan Province of the Islamic Republic. The Iranian intelligence authorities seized their travel documents in Tehran. Their documents were returned on the condition that they should cancel their trip to Balochistan. Almost all academics who have attended conferences in the Islamic Republic agreed that the organizers were extraordinarily generous in terms of funding, and they had received valuable gifts such as a Gold Coin from the organizers.

### MIU's Activities in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic state. The majority of its citizens are adherents of Sunni theology and followers of the Hanafite School of Islamic Law and Jurisprudence. According to the Pew Center's estimate, Shia Islam is practiced by 10 to 15 percent of Afghanistan's population. Afghan Shias are predominantly the Twelvers, with a minority practicing Ismailite version of Shiism, and mostly belong to the Hazara and Qizilbash ethnic groups. The Shias, traditionally with little political influence, began to emerge in the politics of Afghanistan as a significant resistance group against the 1978 Soviet-backed communist coup and 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Afghan Shias, like Afghanistan's other ethnic groups, are politically divided. However, the political status of the Afghan Shias, arguably due to the U.S.-Iran so-called anti-terror alliance, dramatically changed in post-Taliban Afghanistan. The Islamic Republic's collaboration with the U.S. was based on the belief that it provided it with the historic opportunity to integrate the minority Shia population of Afghanistan into the fabric of the Afghan society and make them part of the deeper Afghan state, indeed an objective Tehran has pursued since 1979.

The U.S. war on terror and invasion of Afghanistan entailed democratization of the Afghan society and creation of a viable civil society. Civic institutions that began to appear on the Afghan political scene were badly in need of a qualified and trained labor force to function. Importantly, the Afghan refu-





An Afghan refugee in Iran writes on a board in a Literacy Movement Class for girls. The situation in Afghanistan provided Iran with the opportunity to penetrate into Afghanistan's education sector and establish a number of educational outlets.

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gees living in neighboring Pakistan and Iran, in the wake of a new hope for stability in Afghanistan and pressure from host countries, began to return to Afghanistan. All of a sudden, a huge demand for higher education developed in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's fragile and weak state institutions were unable to meet the rising demand for education and capacity building of its people. It relied heavily on the political, military, financial, educational and cultural assistance of the international community. The situation as such provided the already politically influential Islamic Republic of Iran in general, and the MIU in particular, with a host of opportunities to penetrate into Afghanistan's education sector, and establish a number of educational outlets there.

The MIU's methods of propagation of Shia doctrinal values in Afghanistan were similar to those employed in Malaysia, but tailored to suit the socio-political dynamics of the Afghan society. The MIU's strategy in Afghanistan also focuses on (i) research and publications of textbooks and translation of Shia original works and (ii) building relationships with prestigious research and academic institutions and academics. However, unlike Malaysia, in Afghanistan, the MIU and the Islamic Republic officials and diplomatic activities were also aimed at 'direct' and 'open' penetration of the decision-making processes of the Afghan State. The Islamic Republic, however, enjoyed an important advantage in Afghanistan in comparison to other Muslim states. The Dari dialect of Persian Language is one of the two official languages of Afghanistan and the main medium of instruction. This linguistic opportunity enabled the Islamic Republic to consolidate its hold on Afghanistan's education sector. Many Iranian

## The Islamic Republic's educational diplomacy agents under the cover of educational programs are striving to penetrate into the educational institutions of Muslim countries to promote their ideological and political interests

authorities were quite sure that neither Tajikistan nor Afghanistan had the capacity to make any significant contribution in producing joint textbooks. Muhammadian made his intentions clear when he said, "The aim of this project is to expand the Persian language education in Afghanistan and Tajikistan... By learning Persian texts, the Afghan and Tajik students would be able to use Persian books and sources"<sup>48</sup> authored by Iranian intellectuals and published in the Islamic Republic. Obviously, the ultimate aim was to influence the Afghan and Tajik students through these reading materials.

In early 2009, the MIU Center for Short Courses and Study Opportunities conducted 11 workshops for Afghan propagandists in the Iranian cities of Qom, Mash'had, and Isfahan. The workshops focused on seven thematic areas, including *taqiyyah* (hiding one's real intention and faith), sociology of propaganda, media propaganda, etc. During the training, the participants were taught how to operate in Afghanistan where the majority of the population is Sunnis and follow the Hanafite School of Islamic Law and Jurisprudence. They were specifically urged to observe *taqiyyah* to penetrate into the Afghan society. Ahmadi Mianji, the Academic Director of the Center for Short Courses and Study Opportunities and Advisor to the MIU president, urged the participants to adopt *taqiyyah* as a prime strategy. Mianji believed that:

Compromise with (Afghan) Sunnis is necessary and essential, and if we don't, they would not let us participate in drafting (Afghanistan's) ... constitution, and the decisions of the country, and if Shias are not present in the decision-making circle of Afghanistan, they will become outcast; and because their religion is not recognized, they would have no place in civil laws... (He wrongly argued that) it is mentioned in *hadith* (Prophet Muhammad's tradition) to go and pray at Sunnis mosques, and anyone who does so is like a warrior who has taken his sword out in for God, and is doing Jihad.<sup>49</sup>

Mianji reportedly forewarned the participants and said, "Today the main threat to us is not the presence of foreign troops. The threat is that one billion

textbooks became major sources of reading material in universities and institutions of higher learning in Afghanistan.

In February 2009, Bahram Muhammadian, the Head of Educational Research and Planning, announced that his organization was seeking a trilateral agreement with Afghanistan and Tajikistan to write joint textbooks. In fact, the Iranian au-

Sunnis declare you as non-Muslims.”<sup>50</sup> “See, we cannot fight with one billion Sunnis; therefore the only way for the survival of Shias is to extend the Shia School of thought... Today is the day of opportunity. Today paying attention to proximity is a necessity and Shias should act rationally.”<sup>51</sup>

Ayatollah Arafī, the President of the MIU, visited Afghanistan in 2011, and met with Afghan Higher Education officials and expressed his desire for the establishment of a MIU campus in Afghanistan. Later, a cleric named Muhami with diplomatic assistance from the Iranian embassy in Kabul, followed up the process. The MIU succeeded in getting approval for the establishment of its campus in Kabul, and received a permit for private investment in Afghanistan from Afghanistan Investment Support Agency (AISA).<sup>52</sup>

The MIU's Afghanistan campus was formally launched on 9 October 2011. Its inauguration ceremony was attended by an MIU delegation from the Islamic Republic, their Ambassador to Afghanistan, and some Afghan political figures. The MIU's Afghanistan campus, in its first year of inauguration, offered 11 undergraduate programs and eight post-graduate programs. The disciplines included Islamic Studies, Qur'an and Islamic Law and Jurisprudence, Interpretation of Qur'an, Education, Law, Islamic Knowledge, and Economics for both male and female students. The MIU's Afghanistan campus had already attracted over 1,000 applicants for its first academic year, having held its aptitude test in September 2011 in Afghanistan's three major cities of Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Herat.<sup>53</sup>

According to Muhami, the Head of the MIU's Afghanistan Campus, in addition to formal degree courses, as of February 2012, the MIU has offered six teachers training courses, and has sent 160 teachers to Afghanistan's schools.<sup>54</sup> The campus is also engaged in conducting other missionary programs. For instance, it organized a competition entitled *andish mutah'har* in seven provinces of Afghanistan with 700 participants.<sup>55</sup> As noted earlier, the program is named after the famous Shia ideologue, Ayatollah Mutahhari. According to an informed source from Afghanistan, Mutahhari's works are available in audio-visual form in 16 CDs (Compact Disc). They are being widely distributed in Afghanistan, and also used in a number of educational institutions.

Beside the programs conducted by the MIU's Afghanistan Campus, the main campus is also involved in a host of programs with a focus on Afghanistan. In January 2012, the MIU organized its 17<sup>th</sup> Qur'an Olympiad in Afghanistan, which was inaugurated by Salih, the MIU Deputy President for Education and Cultural Affairs. The topics of the Olympiad were prepared in 12 so-called Qur'anic themes, seven of which were based on oral competition, and five on written competition. While the oral ones were focused on the recitation of different portions of Qur'an, the written ones were centered on *Nahj-ul Balāghah*

and *Sahīfih Sajjādīyah*, two important collections attributed to Ali ibn Abi Talib, and Ali ibn Hussain, the first and the fourth Shia Imams respectively. Importantly, out of 1,700 participants only 300 were oral contenders while 1,400 participants competed for the written topics. Most of the participants were teachers and students of religious seminaries in Afghanistan.<sup>56</sup>

In late 2012, the MIU organized another international Olympiad of Qur'an and Hadith, with 2,150 participants. The oral competitions of recitation of holy Qur'an for both men and women were held on December 13-14, 2012 simultaneously in three provinces of Afghanistan namely Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat. A high-profile delegation from the MIU headed by Hakim Elahi, the MIU Deputy President for International Affairs, also attended the event.<sup>57</sup> The presence of the MIU delegation clearly shows that such events are of utmost importance for its objectives. Organizing two similar events in less than one year, and the surge in the number of participants from 1,700 to 2,150 indicates the effectiveness of such events. This argument should be seen in the light of Salih's view when he argued:

The role of these Olympiads in spreading Qur'anic culture throughout the world has been great. The Olympiad in every round has succeeded to establish contacts with personalities, intellectual, student and families... The most important goal of these events is to identify the Qur'anic personalities and talents, and honor them, and if there is no suitable environment in the direction of Shi'ism for them, we should provide them with sanctuaries.<sup>58</sup>

In June 2012, the MIU established a new campus in Mash'had, a city of the Islamic Republic close to Afghanistan, which was particularly convenient for Afghanistan-related programs. The campus initially offered a short course and training programs to Afghan Islamic studies teachers. As of June 2013, it has organized three rounds of such programs. The convocation ceremony of these teachers was held on June 27, 2013 in Mash'had and was attended by officials from Afghanistan's diplomatic mission in Mash'had and senior MIU officials.<sup>59</sup> The report of one of these programs shows that out of 66 Afghan teachers who had been selected for the short course, only 11 persons were Shia while 55 were Sunnis.<sup>60</sup>

The MIU efforts in Afghanistan are highly appreciated by Afghan Shia clergies and politicians. In February 2012, the MIU organized a conference entitled Religion, Culture and the Duty of Afghanistan's Religious Establishment (*ulama*) in Mash'had and Qom. Fifty prominent Afghan Shia clergy and politicians such as Muhammad Muhaqiq (Leader of Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan) were invited. During the conference, a cleric from Afghanistan, namely Hujjat-ul-Islam Hadi, on behalf of the Afghan Shia clergies, thanked the MIU and its president's efforts for supporting Afghan students and clergies.<sup>61</sup>


The above discussion clearly reveals the volume and nature of the Islamic Republic's educational activities in Afghanistan which cast an air of doubt about the long-term goals and objectives of their educational diplomacy toward Afghanistan. It is particularly true when one comes to know that the Islamic Republic has been the second largest host of Afghan refugees after Pakistan for the last three decades; but based on observation, it rarely allowed an ordinary Afghan child to go to the Iranian schools and universities except for the Afghan Shia mainly from the Hazara community of Afghanistan.

It is interesting to observe that most Afghan refugees, studying at seminaries run by the Sunni community of Iran mainly in the Balochistan Province of the Islamic Republic, were forced out of those institutions. Moreover, in some cases when Afghan students managed to enter into universities, they were dismissed in the middle of their studies while being denied a partial transcript of their studies. According to one Afghan refugee, he had managed to get into the Balochistan University of the Islamic Republic, and study electrical engineering, but he was dismissed in his final year, and his transcripts were also seized. He is now a second-year student again in one of the Malaysian private universities.

Finally, it is necessary to note that there is evidence that sometimes the role of the MIU alumni go beyond the Islamic Republic's soft power frontiers and may take a leading role in their hard power front. Alireza Tawassuli, an Afghan MIU alumnus, served as the chief commander of the Fatimiyun Brigade in Syria, which consisted of Afghan militias dispatched by the Islamic Republic to fight the anti-Bashar Assad forces. Tawassuli was killed in Syria on February 28, 2015 by the forces of al-Nusra Front, a Sunni militant group fighting in Syria.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

Education is one of the key elements in any nations' public diplomacy. The Islamic Republic of Iran uses this instrument of its 'soft power' and public diplomacy in pursuit of its declared objective of exporting Shia core doctrinal values in the Muslim world. The MIU has been the most active institution in the Islamic Republic's educational diplomacy. At first sight, some of the cases discussed above might seem normal practices; however, one should remember that the MIU is not a normal university, but is an ideological institution with a well-defined religious mission. Therefore, what seems to be normal cultural



**Islamic Republic's educational diplomacy in Afghanistan is also geared to directly and openly, through its Shia minority population, penetrate into the decision and policy making circles of Afghanistan**

and academic activities by an academic institution are in fact the MIU ideological efforts under the guise of educational activities.

Analysis of the MIU's mission, structure, and functions and its activities and achievements in Malaysia and Afghanistan reveals that the Islamic Republic's educational diplomacy agents under the cover of educational programs are striving to penetrate into the educational institutions of Muslim countries to promote their ideological and political interests. They aim either to proselytize followers of Sunni theology or recruit Sunni students and academics to serve as propagandists or sympathizers for furthering the Islamic Republic's mission of promoting Shia core doctrinal values in the name of exporting the 1979 revolution. The MIU's activities in Malaysia and Afghanistan denote that the Islamic Republic's political and religious establishments seek to create space in the educational sectors of these two predominantly Sunni Muslim nations to promote the Islamic Republic of Iran's political and ideological objectives. Educational diplomacy has been a very effective foreign policy instrument for promoting Shia core doctrinal values in the Muslim world. Ironically, the Islamic Republic's educational diplomacy in Afghanistan is also geared to directly and openly, through its Shia minority population, penetrate into the decision and policy-making circles of Afghanistan. ■

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53. "Nigāhī bi fa'āliyat-e yik'sālih-e namāyandagī Jami'ah al-Muṣṭafā dar Afghanistan," *Safirān-e Nūr*, p. 7.
54. "Farāham'sāzi zamīnih-e ijthād barāy-e ṭullāb-e musta'idd," *Safirān-e Nūr*, Vol. 6, No. 120 (February 19, 2012), p. 2.
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59. "Jashn-e fārighul-taḥṣīli-e mu'allimān-e dinī Afghanistan barguzār shud," *Safirān-e Nūr*, Vol. 8, No. 146 (August 22, 2013), p. 2.
60. "Guzārishī az rawand-e bar'guzāri-e durih- e fishurdih Mu'allimān-e Afghanistan," *Safirān-e Nūr*, Vol. 8, No. 145, (July 22, 2013), p. 1.
61. "MIU; pishtāz-e marākiz-e ilmī-e Islami-e dunyā," *Safirān-e Nūr*, Vol. 6, No. 120 (February 19, 2012), p. 1; Also see, "Tajlil-e ulimāy-e Afghanistan az ra'yis- MIU, " *Safirān-e Nūr*, Vol. 6, No. 120 (February 19, 2012), p. 6.
62. See, "Shia'yani az Afghanistan wa Pakistan, az jumlih i'zamiyan e Iran bih jang e suriyih [Shias from Afghanistan and Pakistan Are among Those Dispatched by Iran to Syrian War]," *BBC*, (April 23, 2015), retrieved July 8, 2015, from [http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2015/04/150422\\_iran\\_syria\\_pakistan\\_afghan](http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2015/04/150422_iran_syria_pakistan_afghan).