



A Model of Values-Based Strategic Leadership: An Analysis of the Testaments of Sacred Defense Commanders

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to construct an indigenous model of values-based strategic leadership derived from the testaments of commanders of the Sacred Defense. It addresses the core analytical question of how spiritual, ideological, operational, and social values function as strategic mechanisms in leadership under crisis. The study evaluates whether values act merely as ethical guidelines or constitute a comprehensive, action-oriented operating system for leadership.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Employing a qualitative design grounded in Thematic Analysis, 30 authenticated testaments of IRGC and Army commanders were examined. Through an inductive multi-stage coding process—including open coding, thematic clustering, and synthesis—90 conceptual codes, 34 basic themes, 12 organizing themes, and 4 overarching thematic dimensions were identified.

Findings: The findings demonstrate that values in this context are not background moral elements, but strategic drivers shaping leadership cognition, decision-making, mobilization, and organizational alignment. The resulting model comprises four dimensions: (1) Ontological-Spiritual Foundation (God-centricity, sincerity, Ashura-based meaning-making); (2) Political-Revolutionary Logic (loyalty to Velayat-e Faqih, preserving the Islamic Revolution, anti-arrogance logic); (3) Operational-Strategic Functions (duty-orientation, sacrifice, risk-taking, foresight, mission continuity); and (4) Human-Social Dimension (ethical guidance, family alignment, socio-moral responsibility). These values collectively redefine key strategic concepts such as victory, legitimacy, and resilience.

Practical Implications: The study highlights three implications: (1) sustainable crisis leadership requires embedding values throughout strategic and operational processes; (2) leaders must navigate tensions between operational demands and ideological commitments; (3) value integration enhances societal cohesion, mobilization capacity, and intergenerational mission continuity.

Originality/Value: By deriving a leadership model directly from firsthand wartime documents, this research introduces a culturally grounded, empirically informed framework. It challenges Western-centric leadership paradigms and positions values as a strategic advantage rather than purely moral attributes, contributing to leadership studies, crisis management, and Islamic management theory.

Keywords

Strategic Leadership, Values-Based Leadership, Sacred Defense, Commanders' Testaments, Thematic Analysis, Indigenous Model.

Introduction

In turbulent and uncertain environments where traditional management styles are no longer effective (Javadian et al., 2023), strategic leadership is effective when it can create a sustainable link between external threats and opportunities and the organization's internal purpose and meaning. This role extends beyond planning to include meaning-making, alignment, and guiding decisions in complex situations (Ireland & Hitt, 2005). In recent years, the paradigm of organizational performance evaluation has moved beyond a singular focus on financial metrics, bringing values to the core of strategic leadership discourse (Carter & Greer, 2013). Accordingly, a growing body of research has shown that "values-based leadership" can enhance these functions through normative alignment, clarification of expectations, and the internalization of values among followers. Evidence also shows that ethical and values-based leadership styles are associated with improving responsible actions and reducing destructive behaviors in the workplace (Cao, Li, van der Wal, & Taris, 2023; Zheng, Epitropaki, Graham, & Caveney, 2022). This shift toward a values-based approach is a response to new challenges such as ethical scandals and the erosion of values, which demonstrated that laws alone are insufficient to guarantee ethical behavior (Rafiei et al., 2013; Shatalebi & Yarmohammadian, 2011). In this new paradigm, the leader's role transcends that of a mere manager, acting as the "guardian of values and architect of culture" for the organization (Rzemieniak, 2018).

Despite this, a significant portion of management literature has been developed within Western contexts, often emphasizing values such as individualism (Wang et al., 2012). Furthermore, many of these theories are based on philosophies such as utilitarianism, which may not fully align with an Islamic worldview (Rafiei et al., 2013). Consequently, an indigenous gap persists. In Iran's historical experience, the eight-year era of the Sacred Defense, which is not merely a military event but a major cultural phenomenon (Foroughzadeh & Soltani, 2018), serves as a prominent example of integrating values with strategic leadership. This period, in the words of the Supreme Leader, is "a great treasure from which our nation can benefit... extract, and invest" (Khamenei, 2009), an emphasis that signifies the necessity of transforming memorials and value-based knowledge into tangible mechanisms for advancing today's missions.

In this context, the testaments of the Sacred Defense commanders, as primary and firsthand documents, provide a unique platform to observe this translation of value into action (Ansari, 2024; Bahramian, 2021). These "heartfelt writings," which transcend personal advice to function as a "values-based covenant" (Sahragard et al., 2024), demonstrate how religious

and ethical beliefs are converted into the logic of decision-making and patterns of mobilization and coordination at the strategic level (Abedini et al., 2019). The analysis of these documents, whose authenticity has been verified in academic research (Bahramian, 2021), offers a rich source for understanding the ideological and value system of the leaders of that era.

Therefore, addressing values-based strategic leadership by relying on these authentic documents is not only theoretically necessary but can also provide an indigenous and practical model for today's organizations. Consequently, the present study aims to design an indigenous model of values-based strategic leadership derived from the testaments of the Sacred Defense commanders, using the method of Thematic Analysis. This model seeks to illustrate how values are translated into the logic of decision-making, human resource mobilization, organizational alignment, and mission continuity in a real-world context. Hence, the primary research question is: "What is the model of values-based strategic leadership derived from the testaments of the Sacred Defense commanders, and what are its core components and themes?".

1. Theoretical Foundations and Research Background

1-1. Strategic Leadership

In the complex and dynamic global landscape, organizations face unprecedented challenges that tie their survival to the ability to adapt and anticipate (Wang, Waldman, & Zhang, 2012). In such conditions, traditional management styles have lost their efficacy, and the need for strategic leadership has become a necessity for organizational durability and success. As a field of study, this type of leadership emerged from Upper Echelons Theory (Kurzahls, Graf-Vlachy, & König, 2020), which is based on the premise that organizations are a reflection of the values and personalities of their top executives, and these characteristics strongly influence their interpretation of situations and, consequently, their strategic choices (Hambrick, 2007, as cited in Carter & Greer, 2013).

Despite the concept's complexity and multidimensional nature, numerous definitions have been proposed. Strategic leadership is the ability to influence others to make decisions that ensure the long-term viability of the organization while simultaneously maintaining its short-term success. This role extends beyond mere planning to include meaning-making, alignment, and guiding decisions under uncertainty (Ireland & Hitt, 2005). Strategic leaders, including the CEO, top management team, and board of directors, are responsible for setting the vision, providing strategic direction, and managing the organization's resources (Boal & Schultz, 2007; Carter & Greer, 2013).

In recent decades, particularly following major ethical scandals around the world, it became clear that regulations alone are insufficient to guarantee ethical behavior and that leadership plays the primary role (Rafiei et al., 2013). This paradigm shift necessitated a transition from mere strategic leadership toward "Values-Based Strategic Leadership." This approach, which emerged in response to environmental instability and the inadequacy of "goals" as the sole motivating factor, is founded on the principle that in today's changing world, "it is values that work miracles" (Ghalavandi et al., 2019). In this paradigm, values function as the "organization's DNA," shaping its culture, identity, and mission (Rzemieniak, 2018). Similarly, in the Islamic management paradigm, which is based on human dignity and spiritual transcendence, ethics, as an innate matter, is considered the best foundation for theorizing (Rafiei et al., 2013). In this view, politics is subordinate to ethics, and ethics is practically defined as "respecting the rights of all stakeholders" (Refat, 2021; Rafiei et al., 2013).

1-2. Values-Based Leadership

In today's complex and dynamic world, traditional leadership paradigms based on control and rigid structures have lost their effectiveness in facing new challenges such as the erosion of values and cultural diversity (Faith, 2013; Snyder et al., 2017; Shatalebi & Yarmohammadian, 2011). In such an environment, the need for leaders who can unite employees around a shared vision and set of common values, beyond short-term goals, is felt more than ever (Rzemieniak, 2018). In response to this need, "Values-Based Leadership" (VBL) has emerged as a modern and effective approach (Shatalebi & Yarmohammadian, 2011).

This management approach shapes the relationship between leaders and followers based on "core values," wherein a coherent value system becomes the primary reference point for all organizational activities and decisions (Rzemieniak, 2018). In this paradigm, values act as the "organization's DNA," shaping its culture, identity, and mission (Rzemieniak, 2018). The role of the leader in this model transcends that of a mere manager; they are known as the "guardian of values and architect of culture," whose main task is to define, communicate, and, most importantly, embody the core values of the organization (Faith, 2013; Rzemieniak, 2018). To develop this leadership style, it is essential to create a balance between three key dimensions: "structure" (rules and procedures), "identity" (the leader's understanding of their role), and "culture" (shared values and beliefs), as an overemphasis on structure is the reason for the failure of many organizational transformation initiatives (Snyder et al., 2017; Snyder et al., 2018).

Despite the richness of ethical leadership literature in the West, many of these theories may not be fully compatible with Islamic culture and worldview (Rafiei et al., 2013). This gap highlights the necessity of developing indigenous models derived from Islamic principles. The "Islamic management paradigm" is based on the understanding of the human being and attention to their material and spiritual dimensions, with the transcendence of the human spirit as its axis. In this paradigm, ethics, as an innate matter, is considered the best foundation for theorizing (Rafiei et al., 2013).

Contrary to politicized views, in the Islamic model, politics is subordinate to ethics, and the foundation of leadership is built on intrinsic human dignity (Refat, 2021). Based on this, ethics is practically defined as "respecting the rights of all stakeholders," and consequently, the primary duty of an ethical leader is to identify and prioritize these rights based on divine teachings (Rafiei et al., 2013). This approach influences followers through specific psychological mechanisms. Domestic research shows that ethical leaders, by creating an environment based on fairness and trust, directly enhance employees' intrinsic motivation (Pâdâsh & Golparvar, 2010). This increase in intrinsic motivation, in turn, acts as a mediator leading to desirable organizational outcomes such as increased creativity (Pâdâsh & Golparvar, 2010) and a strengthened work conscience (Ghalavandi et al., 2019).

1-3. The Testaments of Martyrs

The eight-year era of the Sacred Defense is a major cultural phenomenon that has left a valuable treasury of concepts and values (Foroughzadeh & Soltani, 2018). Among this heritage, the testaments of the martyrs hold a special place. These documents are not merely legal or personal recommendations; they are texts that express the beliefs, ideals, and messages of the martyr to society (Abedini et al., 2019). These "heartfelt writings," which, in the words of Imam Khomeini, "shake and awaken a person," are a mirror to the ideological framework of the combatants (Khosravi Zargaz & Bakhshi, 2017; Ansari, 2024) and are considered the most important firsthand documents for a deep understanding of the Sacred Defense phenomenon (Foroughzadeh & Soltani, 2018).

Doubts have been raised regarding the uniformity and lack of authenticity of these testaments. However, scientific research has shown that although thematic similarities exist due to a "dominant discourse," analyses have proven that the emphasis on concepts is unique in each testament. Therefore, these documents are considered authentic and can be reliably used as a source of research data (Bahramian, 2021).

The fundamental basis of these testaments is a coherent and profound value system that originates directly from religious sources and a monotheistic worldview; research confirms the martyrs' conscious and deliberate influence from the verses of the Holy Quran (Eslami & Hosseini Mirsafti, 2023). Analyses show that the motivations of the combatants are divided into three categories: religious, revolutionary, and national, with the religious motive being the most powerful factor (Khosravi Zargaz & Bakhshi, 2017). Furthermore, discourse analyses indicate that these values are organized around a "central signifier": "Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) and the leadership of Imam Khomeini," with concepts such as "the event of Karbala" and "anti-arrogance" (Estekbar-Setizi) acquiring their meaning in relation to this axis (Rabiei & Tamannaie, 2014).

2. Literature Review

In this section, a review of relevant domestic and international research is first presented in a table and then analyzed textually. Based on this review, the research gap and the innovation of the present study are explained.

Table 20: Literature Review

No.	Research Title	Year	Researchers	Research Findings
1	Value-based leadership – a key to sustainable and competitive advantage	2018	Rzemieniak, M. W.	VBL is vital for building a sustainable competitive advantage. The leader acts as a "guardian of values" and "architect of culture."
2	Storytelling: a co-creative process to support value-based leadership	2017	Snyder et al.	Developing VBL requires balancing "structure," "identity," and "culture." Storytelling helps leaders foster innovation and sustainable quality.
3	Strategic Leadership: Values, Styles, and Organizational Performance	2013	Carter & Greer	A conceptual continuum of leadership styles exists, corresponding to an expanding scope of stakeholder attention and performance criteria.
4	The role of values-based leadership in sustaining a culture of caring	2013	Faith, K. E.	To preserve a "culture of caring" against external pressures, organizations must be led by VBL. The study emphasizes the need to support values-based

No.	Research Title	Year	Researchers	Research Findings
				leaders.
5	Strategic leadership across cultures	2012	Wang et al.	Culture impacts five key aspects of strategic leadership, and the paper calls for more indigenous, multilevel research.
6	Value based leadership paradigm	2011	Shatalebi, B., & Yarmohammadian, M. H.	Traditional leadership paradigms are inefficient. VBL helps achieve sustainable success by creating consensus around shared values.
7	Is ethical leadership and strategic leadership a dilemma?	2011	Tutar et al.	The results show a perceived conflict between ethical and strategic leadership among managers, although they should be complementary.
8	Religion in Strategic Leadership	2005	Worden	This paper argues for a meta-theoretic framework to resolve conflicts arising from the use of religion in leadership.
9	The Role of Integrity as a Mediator in Strategic Leadership	2003	Worden	"Integrity" mediates the inherent tension between strategic planning (profit-focused) and leadership vision (value-focused).
10	Analysis of the Testaments of Tehran's Martyr Commanders	1403 (2024)	Sahragard et al.	Analyzing 100 testaments, a five-dimensional model (knowledge, values, duty, attitude, behavior) was presented, with behavioral and attitudinal aspects being most prominent.
11	Strategic Leadership Capabilities of Public Managers in Political Positions	1402 (2023)	Seyed Naghavi et al.	Using a qualitative method, 9 overarching capabilities, including a "spiritual" capability, were identified for Iranian public sector leaders.
12	Developing a Value-Based Leadership Model in Iranian	1401 (2022)	Rostamaneh Najafabadi et al.	Based on macro-level policy documents, two distinct models for VBL in the Iranian education

No.	Research Title	Year	Researchers	Research Findings
	Education			system were presented, based on concepts like theocentric naturalism and five key elements.
13	A Behavioral Analysis of Imam Ali's (AS) Ethical Leadership in the Battle of Jamal	1400 (2021)	Refat, M.	This research presents Imam Ali's (AS) leadership as an ethics-centric model where ethics precede politics, comprising elements like human dignity and tolerance.
14	Analysis of Spirituality and Ethics in the Testaments of Cultural Martyrs	1400 (2021)	Mahdi Mirzaei	Analyzing testaments, 15 spiritual and ethical components were identified, with "faith and trust in God" and "sincerity" being the most frequent.
15	Re-examining the Semantic Position of Social Values in Testaments	1400 (2021)	Abedi Kushalshah et al.	A five-fold classification of values was presented, confirming a strong similarity in the value systems of martyrs from different eras.
16	Predicting Work Conscience based on Components of Value-Based Leadership	1398 (2019)	Ghalavandi, H. et al.	The components of VBL are strong predictors of employees' work conscience and enhance their intrinsic commitment and responsibility.
17	Designing a Model of Social Capital Based on Commanders' Testaments	1398 (2019)	Abedini et al.	Using grounded theory, a model for "social capital" was designed, with "voluntary public participation" as its core phenomenon.
18	Designing an Islamic Strategic Leadership Model Based on the Covenant of Malik al-Ashtar	1398 (2019)	Zarei et al.	Through qualitative content analysis, a comprehensive model of Islamic strategic leadership was presented, emphasizing role modeling, justice, and adherence to divine values.

No.	Research Title	Year	Researchers	Research Findings
19	Identifying Strategic Leadership Competencies with a Stakeholder Satisfaction Approach	1398 (2019)	Mohammad Beigi et al.	A four-faceted competency model with an "individual (ethical and value-based)" dimension was presented for the Iranian airline industry.
20	Motivation Analysis of Combatants in the Sacred Defense	1396 (2017)	Khosravi Zargaz & Bakhshi	Analysis revealed that religious motivation (63.5%) was the most powerful factor, followed by revolutionary (33.5%) and national (3%) motives.
21	Ethical Leadership: The Fruit of the Islamic Management Paradigm	1392 (2013)	Rafiei, M. et al.	This paper introduces the theory of "Ethical Leadership" as an indigenous model based on the Islamic management paradigm and respecting stakeholder rights.
22	A Discourse Analysis of the Testaments of the Holy Defense Martyrs	1393 (2014)	Rabiei & Tamannaie	Discourse analysis revealed that the central signifier (semantic core) of the testaments is "Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) and the leadership of Imam Khomeini."
23	The Relationship Between Ethical Leadership and Intrinsic Motivation for Employee Innovation	1389 (2010)	Pâdâsh, F. & Golparvar, M.	Ethical leadership, by positively influencing intrinsic motivation, indirectly strengthens and increases creativity in the workplace.

The international literature emphasizes that traditional leadership paradigms are inadequate in addressing modern challenges such as the erosion of values and cultural diversity. Accordingly,

Values-Based Leadership (VBL) has been introduced as a solution for achieving sustainable success by establishing consensus on shared values. This approach is considered vital for building a sustainable competitive

advantage, wherein the leader assumes the dual role of a "guardian of values" and an "architect of culture". Researchers have proposed various tools to operationalize this leadership style; for instance, storytelling is presented as a co-creative tool that helps leaders balance the three key dimensions of "structure," "identity," and "culture".

A key theme in this field is the link between values and strategy. Worden (2003) demonstrated that "integrity" can mediate the inherent tension between strategic goals (profit-oriented) and leadership vision (value-oriented). However, a perceived conflict between ethical and strategic leadership persists in the minds of managers. Furthermore, research highlights the importance of context; Wang et al. (2012) concluded that culture profoundly impacts key aspects of leadership and called for indigenous research to better understand this phenomenon.

Research in Iran has also extensively explored this area, often under the titles of "Ethical Leadership" or "Values-Based Leadership." These studies have focused on both the impacts of this leadership style and the design of indigenous models aligned with Iranian-Islamic culture.

In the area of indigenous model-building, researchers have developed models tailored to Iran's value systems. Rafiei et al. (2013) introduced the theory of "Ethical Leadership" as an indigenous model based on the Islamic management paradigm, centered on "respecting stakeholder rights". Refat (2021) analyzed the conduct of Imam Ali (AS), presenting his leadership as an ethics-centric model where ethics precede politics. Similarly, Rostamaneh Najafabadi et al. (2022) developed an operational model for values-based leadership within the Iranian education system.

Regarding its impacts, studies have shown that components of values-based leadership are strong predictors of employees' work conscience. It has also been found that ethical leadership indirectly enhances creativity in the workplace by positively influencing intrinsic motivation. These value systems are clearly observed in the analysis of martyrs' testaments. Discourse analysis of these documents reveals that "Velayat-e Faqih" (Guardianship of the Jurist) is their central signifier, and content analysis identifies "religious motivation" as the most powerful factor for their presence on the battlefield. Other studies have also used these testaments to design models for concepts like "social capital".

2-1. Research Gap and Innovation

The literature review clarifies the existing research gap and the innovation of this study. On one hand, international literature explicitly calls for

indigenous and culture-sensitive research to deepen the understanding of strategic leadership, a call this study directly answers by focusing on the unique context of Iran's Sacred Defense. On the other hand, while domestic studies have presented valuable models of ethical leadership, they have predominantly derived them from foundational religious texts and macro-level policy documents.

Research that systematically links "strategic leadership" with "values-based leadership" and extracts a comprehensive model directly from the lived experiences and firsthand documents of commanders as field leaders in a crisis environment is scarce. Therefore, the primary innovation of this research is the design of an indigenous, values-based strategic leadership model derived from the qualitative data of the ideological and practical framework of the Sacred Defense commanders. This fills the gap between general leadership theories and the need for practical, context-based models..

3. Materials & Methods

Adopting a qualitative paradigm, this research is fundamental-applied in its objectives. It utilizes the methodological framework of Thematic Analysis to construct a model of values-based strategic leadership from the testaments of Sacred Defense commanders. Thematic Analysis serves as a robust and adaptable approach for systematically identifying, organizing, and reporting patterns of meaning within a textual dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method facilitates a nuanced and profound exploration of the phenomenon, as it allows the researcher to become fully immersed in the data. As noted by Boyatzis (1998), its utility lies in conducting in-depth analyses of texts, systematically processing qualitative information, and ultimately transforming that data into a coherent conceptual model.

The empirical foundation of this study is the collected testaments of martyr commanders from the Sacred Defense era. The research population includes all authenticated testaments from commanders of the IRGC and the Army during this period. From this population, a sample of 30 key documents was selected using a purposive sampling strategy. This approach ensured the inclusion of testaments with the greatest relevance and richness concerning leadership principles. Data was gathered through a document mining approach, utilizing credible archival and library sources. The profile of the analyzed documents is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: List of Analyzed Testaments in the Research

No.	Code	Full Name	No.	Code	Full Name
1	W-001	Mehdi Bakeri	16	W-016	Abbas Karimi
2	W-002	Ali Sayad Shirazi	17	W-017	Esmail Daghayeghi
3	W-003	Abbas Babaei	18	W-018	Hassan Abshnasan
4	W-004	Hassan Bagheri	19	W-019	Valiollah Fallahi
5	W-005	Mehdi Zeinoddin	20	W-020	Yousef Kolahdouz
6	W-006	Mahmoud Kaveh	21	W-021	Mohammadreza Dastvareh
7	W-007	Mohammad Ebrahim Hemmat	22	W-022	Mohsen Vezvaei
8	W-008	Hossein Kharrazi	23	W-023	Reza Cheraghi
9	W-009	Mohammad Boroujerdi	24	W-024	Ali Chitsazian
10	W-010	Abdolhossein Borounsi	25	W-025	Seyed Ali Hashemi
11	W-011	Mohammad Ali Jahanara	26	W-026	Mostafa Chamran
12	W-012	Hossein Elmolhoda	27	W-027	Gholamali Pichak
13	W-013	Asghar Vesali	28	W-028	Hassan Haghnegahdar
14	W-014	Abdollah Meysami	29	W-029	Kazem Najafi Rastegar
15	W-015	Naser Kazemi	30	W-030	Ali Tajallaei

An inductive data analysis protocol was implemented for this study, which unfolded across three distinct, sequential phases:

- 1) **Open Coding (Text Decomposition):** The initial phase involved a thorough immersion in each testament, from which salient concepts related to leadership (e.g., values, decision-making, mobilization) were systematically extracted. These extractions were cataloged as 'Open Codes,' serving as primary descriptive tags that remained close to the source text.
- 2) **Developing Organizing Themes (Description and Interpretation):** Subsequently, the open codes were collated and categorized into broader conceptual clusters according to their semantic relationships. This clustering process resulted in the development of 'Organizing Themes,' with each theme representing a core dimension of the emergent leadership model.
- 3) **Designing the Final Model (Text Integration):** In the final phase, the organizing themes were synthesized, and their logical interconnections were mapped. This integrative analysis culminated in the emergence of a singular 'Global Theme,' titled the "Values-Based Strategic Leadership Model," which constitutes the conceptual core of the final framework.

To enhance the analytical rigor and ensure reliability, the entire coding and theme development process was independently reviewed by a second researcher to establish inter-coder consensus.

4. Research Findings

In this section, the concepts derived from the analysis of the testaments of the Sacred Defense commanders are presented in an integrated manner. Following the open coding process of the 30 testaments, 90 unique conceptual codes were extracted. These codes reflect the governing logic of the leaders' strategic actions under crisis conditions. Samples of these conceptual codes, along with key phrases from the text, are provided in the table below.

Table 3: Sample of the Open Coding Process

Code	Key Phrase from Text	Semantic Phrase
W-003	"Let all deeds be for God; worldliness is an obstacle to victory."	Divine Intention
W-011	"Defense is a religious duty; the outcome is in God's hands."	Duty-Orientation
W-019	"Do not forget justice and the rights of others."	Justice-Centricity
W-022	"Consider Karbala the model of sacrifice and victory."	Ashura-Based Modeling
W-027	"Victory means fulfilling the duty, not the apparent result."	Redefining Victory
W-008	"The enemy's rumors are meant to weaken faith."	Resistance to Psychological Warfare
W-014	"Obedience to a unified command is the secret to victory."	Professional Obedience
W-015	"Consider the Army and IRGC united and do not create discord."	Unity of Forces
W-021	"Do not abandon military order and discipline."	Operational Discipline
W-002	"Invite the youth to the front lines."	Voluntary Mobilization
W-009	"Raise your children to be followers of the path of Islam."	Faith-Based Succession Planning
W-018	"Support the families of martyrs and combatants."	Rear Front Support
W-004	"Be patient in hardships; God's promise is true."	Strategic Patience
W-012	"Do not fear death; martyrdom is not the end of the road."	Belief in Martyrdom
W-025	"Do not cease striving until the goal is reached."	Mission Continuity

Subsequently, through a process of constant comparison and upon reaching data saturation, these conceptual codes were first grouped into 34 basic themes. In the next stage, the basic themes were categorized into 12 organizing themes. Finally, these organizing themes were integrated into 4 global themes (main themes), which constitute the primary dimensions and components of the "Values-Based Strategic Leadership Model" derived from the testaments of the Sacred Defense commanders. The following table displays this final structure.

Table 4: Network of Themes Extracted from Documents

Global Theme (Main)	Organizing Theme	Basic Theme	Code Freq.
Ontological & Spiritual Foundation	God-Centricity & Trust	Submission to Divine Will	3
		Strategic Trust in God	2
		Monotheistic Self-Awareness	1
	Sincerity in Intention & Action	Monotheistic Intention	1
		Individual & Organizational Piety	3
	Inspiration from Ashura & Martyrdom	Ashura-Based Meaning-Making	5
		Idealization of Martyrdom	8
Political & Revolutionary Logic	Loyalty to Velayat & Obedience	Centrality of Velayat	6
		Strategic Obedience	2
		Absolute Loyalty	2
	Preserving the Revolution & Anti-Arrogance	Safeguarding the Revolution	3
		Value-Based Framing of the Conflict	2
		Global Vision	2
	National Unity & Cohesion	National & Ethnic Cohesion	2
		Organizational & Unit Cohesion	2
Operational &	Duty-Orientation &	Prioritizing Duty	4

Global Theme (Main)	Organizing Theme	Basic Theme	Code Freq.
Strategic Functions	Responsibility	Comprehensive Responsibility	3
	Self-Sacrifice & Pioneering	Readiness for Sacrifice	3
		Risk & Meaning Management	2
	Insight & Mission Continuity	Foresight & Succession Planning	4
		Narrative-Building & Messaging	4
		Ensuring Path Continuity	3
		Social & Scientific Mobilization	2
Human & Social Dimension	Advising Patience & Perseverance	Managing Family Grief	4
		Spiritual Consolation	2
		Strategic Perseverance	1
	Familial Love & Gratitude	Guidance within the Family	1
		Aligning Family with the Mission	2
		Raising the Next Generation	1
	Upholding Socio-Ethical Values	The Greater Jihad & Self-Purification	3
		Ethics-Based Professionalism	2
		Warning & Setting Boundaries	2
		Social Activism	1
		Preserving Identity & Norms	2
Total Codes		90	

4-1. Explanation of the Dimensions of the Values-Based Strategic Leadership Model

1) First Dimension: The Ontological and Spiritual Foundation (The Foundational Dimension)

This global theme, which accounts for 24.5% of all conceptual codes (23 codes), constitutes the most fundamental layer of the model and addresses the worldview and belief system of the commanders. This foundation acts as a mental operating system that shapes the logic of all their strategic actions and is composed of three main components:

- **God-Centricity and Trust (6 codes):** This component focuses on absolute reliance on the divine will in conditions of uncertainty. The data shows that commanders view themselves and their abilities as a trust from God (W-010). This perspective shifts the responsibility for the final outcome from the leader to a higher power, allowing them to make bold decisions without being paralyzed by the fear of failure. This delegation of authority is a primary source of psychological resilience, as stated in the testament of Martyr Sayad Shirazi: "O Lord! To depart is in Your hands... Place me in the service of the Imam of our time, so that I may attain the grace of martyrdom..." (W-002).
- **Sincerity in Intention and Action (4 codes):** This component refers to the role of purifying motivation in legitimizing leadership. The data analysis reveals that "making the objective God-centric" (W-016) is a key mechanism for preventing strategic actions from deviating toward worldly goals (such as gaining power). Sincerity transcends being a mere individual virtue and becomes a governing principle of organizational action that earns the trust of the forces and strengthens internal cohesion. This principle is explicitly emphasized in the testament of Martyr Abdollah Meysami: "O brothers of the IRGC! Make piety and sincerity your capital..." (W-014).
- **Inspiration from the Ashura Model and Martyrdom-Seeking (13 codes):** This component, having the highest frequency in this dimension, indicates the central role of the Karbala model as a strategic framework. The commanders view the Sacred Defense as a historical extension of the Ashura movement and use it to give meaning to sacrifice and to redefine the concept of "victory." In this logic, martyrdom is not a failure but the pinnacle of success. This model transforms operational risk-taking into a religious virtue and raises the organization's tolerance threshold for casualties. This perspective is introduced as a fundamental prerequisite in the

testament of Martyr Zeinoddin: "The first necessary condition for safeguarding Islam is to believe in Imam Hussein (AS)..." (W-005).

2) Second Dimension: The Political and Revolutionary Logic (The Directional Dimension)

This global theme, comprising 22.3% of all codes (21 codes), explains the governing political and ideological framework of leadership action. This dimension shows that the leader in the field considers himself an executor of a grand national strategy within the framework of the Islamic Republic.

- Loyalty to Velayat and Obedience to the Imam (10 codes): This component, with its high frequency in the data, is the most central principle of this political logic. Adherence to the Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) acts as the final arbiter and a unifying factor in all decision-making. This obedience is not merely an organizational duty but an ontological belief that legitimizes military actions and ensures strategic cohesion by creating a unified command. Martyr Mehdi Bakeri expresses this principle as a heartfelt covenant: "Be a supporter and, from the bottom of your heart, a follower of the Imam..." (W-001).
- Preserving the Revolution and Anti-Arrogance (7 codes): This component shows that the commanders do not see the war as a purely defensive, border-limited phenomenon, but as an arena for safeguarding the macro-level achievements of the Islamic Revolution and combating global arrogance. This view expands the strategic horizon of the battle from the national to the international level and imbues it with a global mission. This approach is clearly articulated in the testament of Martyr Hassan Bagheri: "For now, our revolution has become like a poisoned arrow for all the arrogant powers..." (W-004).
- National Unity and Cohesion (4 codes): This component focuses on the commanders' emphasis on internal integrity as a strategic necessity. The data shows that leaders were aware of the dangers posed by ethnic divides (in regions like Kurdistan) or organizational rifts (between the Army and IRGC) and actively worked to counter them. This view considers national security a product of the internal cohesion of society, as Martyr Naser Kazemi addresses the people of Kurdistan: "...Do not let the enemies destroy our unity..." (W-015).

3) Third Dimension: Operational and Strategic Functions (The Action-Oriented Dimension)

This global theme, accounting for 26.6% of all codes (25 codes), is the most prominent dimension of the model and addresses the tangible and

practical manifestations of values on the battlefield and the "how-to" of command.

- **Duty-Orientation and Responsibility (7 codes):** This component is one of the key logics governing the commanders' decision-making. Duty-orientation means focusing on the correct performance of a task, regardless of its short-term outcome. This approach makes the organization resilient to potential failures and removes the psychological pressure of "achieving results at any cost" from the commander. This principle acts as a strategic anchor for maintaining stability in uncertain conditions, as stated in the words of Martyr Seyed Ali Hashemi: "We are commissioned to [fulfill our] duty, not [to guarantee the] result..." (W-025).
- **Self-Sacrifice and Pioneering in Devotion (5 codes):** This component focuses on leading by example. The data shows that commanders derive their legitimacy not from their rank, but from their pioneering in accepting risk and their readiness to sacrifice. This behavior creates deep trust among the troops and increases their motivation to participate in high-risk missions. This logic plays a key role in the psychological preparation of the forces, as stated in the testament of Martyr Kazem Najafi Rastegar: "...An operation is ahead in which we might all be sacrificed. But Ashura is our path..." (W-029).
- **Insight and Ensuring the Continuity of the Mission (13 codes):** This component, having the highest frequency in this dimension, focuses on the commanders' forward-looking perspective to preserve the path. Leadership in this model is not limited to victory in an operation but also includes the duty of providing insight and ensuring succession. This view makes the organization resilient to the loss of key leaders and guarantees that the mission will not stop with the departure of individuals. This forward-looking mission is expressed in the testament of Martyr Ali Chitsazian: "My wife! ...After me, continue the mission of the martyrs' blood with your pen..." (W-024).

4) Fourth Dimension: The Human and Social Dimension (The Sustaining Dimension)

This global theme, also comprising 26.6% of the codes (25 codes), transcends the strategic level to address the human and social aspects of leadership. This dimension shows that the commander is an ethical mentor and a member of a larger family and community.

- **Advising Patience and Perseverance (7 codes):** This is the most frequent recommendation in the human dimension. Aware of the

suffering their martyrdom will impose on their families, the commanders strive to strengthen the psychological capacity of their survivors by giving meaning to the loss and recalling the model of patience in the event of Karbala. This consoling function is an ethical responsibility that the leader does not forget even on the verge of death, as stated in the testament of Martyr Valiollah Fallahi: "...You, be patient like the wives of the martyrs of Karbala..." (W-019).

- **Familial Love and Gratitude (4 codes):** This component displays a human and tangible face of the leader. Contrary to the stereotypical image of a warrior detached from the world, the testaments are filled with affectionate expressions and gratitude for their families. The data shows that commanders considered their families as partners and supporters of their mission and rooted their spiritual strength in these healthy emotional bonds, such as the advice of Martyr Abbas Babaei to his wife: "...Being a Muslim is not only about praying and fasting; you must also be kind to people..." (W-003).
- **Upholding Socio-Ethical Values (10 codes):** This component focuses on extending the leader's concerns from the battlefield to the social and cultural spheres. The commanders see themselves as responsible for safeguarding societal norms and values, emphasizing concepts such as the "Greater Jihad" (the struggle against the self) and Hijab. This view indicates that military victory is not sustainable without the moral health of society, as stated in the testament of Martyr Mohammadreza Dastvareh: "...The greater war is within our hearts... My sisters should have the Hijab of Zahra..." (W-021).

The synthesis and integration of these four dimensions form the final "Values-Based Strategic Leadership" model. This model shows that the desired leadership in the view of the Sacred Defense commanders is a multi-layered, integrated system. The ontological and spiritual foundation (the foundational dimension) acts as the central core, providing the philosophical "why" for all actions. This core is manifested in the political and revolutionary logic (the directional dimension), which defines the framework of the leader's loyalty. These two theoretical dimensions are then translated into the "how-to" of command on the battlefield in the operational and strategic functions (the action-oriented dimension). Finally, the human and social dimension (the sustaining dimension) completes this structure, showing that this leader is a responsible human being towards their family and community. Together, these four dimensions define leadership not as a position, but as a comprehensive spiritual, political, operational, and social action.

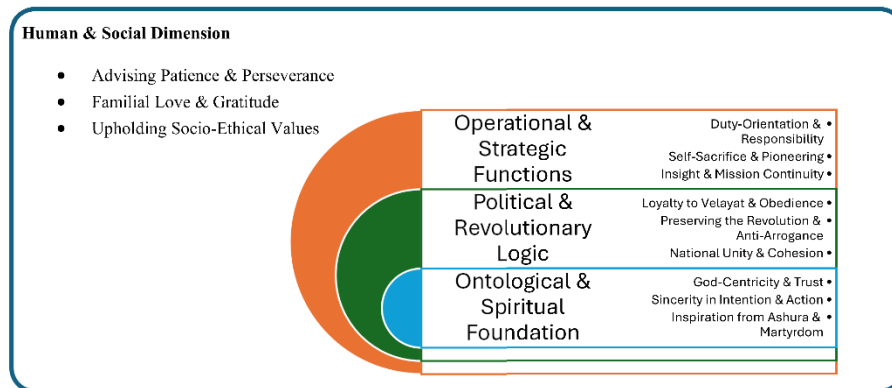


Figure 3. The Values-Based Strategic Leadership Model of Sacred Defense Commanders

5. Discussion & Conclusion

The research findings indicate that Iran's resilience model is a dynamic and hierarchical system that, contrary to passive approaches, is founded on proactive agency. The frequency analysis of the codes revealed that the "Resilience in Strategic Agency" dimension (54.7%) was significantly the most central dimension of the model, built upon the foundation of "Socio-Political Resilience" (25.9%) and supported by "Resilience in Foundational Dimensions" (19.4%). This structure is not merely descriptive but reveals a causal logic that constitutes the primary innovation of this research.

The model that emerged from this research establishes a deep dialogue with theoretical literature, complementing and operationalizing it. At the domestic level, studies such as Gol-Vardi (1396/2017) and Shahmohammadi & Khezri (1401/2022) have correctly emphasized the multi-faceted nature of national resilience. Our findings confirm this multi-dimensionality but go a step further by revealing a causal and hierarchical relationship among these dimensions. While the existing literature presents these dimensions in parallel, our analysis demonstrates that it is the supreme leadership (part of the socio-political dimension) that activates popular cohesion, making this dimension a prerequisite and an enabling foundation for strategic agency.

At the international level, this model also corresponds well with theoretical frameworks. Neumann's (2024) "Rings of Resilience" model becomes effective when a "central core" links and aligns these rings; our findings show that the role of leadership is precisely to perform the function of that central core. Indeed, it is this "strategic leader" who plays the role of the "Master of Uncertainty," as described by Mafisebi et al. (2025) at the

enterprise level, but in this case at the nation-state level, shaping the macro-orientation of the system in the face of geopolitical risks (Kitsing, 2022). Furthermore, the three-tiered model of Hepfer & Lawrence (2022) (functional, operational, and strategic) is clearly observable in our findings; infrastructural resilience (functional level) and military response (operational level) were both guided by macro-level leadership and semantic framing (strategic level). The innovation of our research lies in demonstrating that it is this strategic level (leadership) that directs and enables the other two levels, rather than merely existing alongside them. Finally, the "Semantic Resilience and Psychological Capital" dimension in our model is the practical translation of the concepts of "becoming better than before" (Koronis & Ponis, 2018) and "metamorphosis" (Morais-Storz et al., 2018). Our findings indicate that this "learning" and "post-crisis growth" does not occur automatically; rather, it is the supreme leadership that, by attributing meaning to the crisis (turning a threat into an opportunity), transforms it into a strategic asset for the future.

The key conclusion of this research is that the strategic resilience model of the Islamic Republic of Iran is a dynamic and causal system that is activated and directed by a central strategic actor, namely the Leader of the Islamic Revolution. It is this integrated leadership that provides the foundation for national cohesion and gives legitimacy and direction to strategic agency in its military and diplomatic dimensions. Therefore, resilience in this model is not a static attribute but a dynamic capacity that, in times of crisis, is activated by the supreme leadership and is formed through the constructive interaction of hard power, soft power, and social capital, which are mobilized by this leadership. This model represents a link between realities (agency), ideals (values), and leadership (the linking factor).

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