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Soldiers of the Revolution
A Brief History of Iran's IRGC
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In August, news emerged that Russia had begun to use Iran's Shahid Nojeh Air Base ^[2] to stage bombing raids on northern Syria. For those familiar with the region, this was a shocking reversal of long-standing Iranian policy—signaling the first time since the 1979 Islamic Revolution ^[3] that foreign troops had been allowed to use Iranian bases.

The significance was not lost on Iranians. In protest, one member of parliament quoted ^[4] the revolutionary slogan “Neither East nor West,” which had symbolized Iran's quest for self-determination and rejection of American and Russian imperialism. National security officials defended the agreement, but within days, Iran's defense minister, Brigadier General Hossein Dehghan, announced that Russia's use of the base had ended ^[5]. Dehghan explained that Russia's access had been based on shared strategic interests in Syria and could occur again, but also blamed Russia for “showing off” by publicizing the partnership to begin with. Whatever Dehghan's intentions, his explanation highlighted the fact that the Syrian conflict had compelled Iran to rethink one of the ideological cornerstones of the Islamic Revolution.

Dehghan's position was also ironic. In addition to being a government official, Dehghan is a senior officer in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—Iran's foremost military institution and one famous for its hard-line politics against foreign influence in Iran. That the agreement with Moscow was said to have been personally arranged by Major General Qassem Soleimani, Iran's most revered IRGC commander, only added to the apparent contradiction.

But to base one's view of the IRGC purely on its outward reputation is to misread it. The IRGC is at once both a champion of Iran's revolutionary ethos and a pragmatic organization, with an approach to strategic affairs that comes closer to realpolitik than Islamism. Understanding the IRGC is essential to understanding Iranian politics; the organization's history is in many ways a microcosm of the Islamic Republic's, from the struggle to carve an independent path to its controversial rise as a regional power.

ISLAMIC ASPIRATIONS

In 1979, the goal of ending American and foreign influence in Iran unified the diverse revolutionary movement that toppled the government of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. As the revolution developed and the rival factions began to compete with one another, supporters of the hard-line cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini gradually erased that diversity, establishing in its stead a theocratic system of government that gave Khomeini unchecked authority as Iran's first supreme leader.

In the midst of this postrevolutionary power struggle, the IRGC was established as an umbrella group uniting numerous pro-Khomeini militias and gangs. By bringing these groups together under Khomeini's banner, the IRGC became the central node of armed Islamism in Iran. Their use of violence and coercion, moreover, was instrumental in the Khomeinist faction's monopolization of power.

In its early days, the IRGC was more a collection of ideas and aspirations than a true organization. Above all, the corps saw itself as the guardian of the revolution. Service to Khomeini and to Iran's Islamic system were matters of religious faith rather than simply acts of patriotism. The IRGC adopted trappings from Islamic history to link itself to the broader Shiite tradition, and pledged to support liberation movements throughout the Muslim world. More pan-Islamic than nationalist, the IRGC established like-minded armed groups outside of Iran, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, and provided ongoing support to Palestinian militants.

Iraq's 1980 invasion of Iran forever altered the course of the revolution and of the IRGC. The IRGC entered the war as a ragtag militia that lacked adequate weaponry and training, and the Iranian political leadership initially entrusted the country's defense to Iran's demoralized regular military, which had recently had much of its Shah-era command and officer corps purged by the revolutionaries.

The IRGC performed well in the disastrous early stages of the war, when Iran was hampered by political infighting and logistical problems. Once the Khomeinists fully consolidated power following the 1981 impeachment of President Abolhasan Banisadr, the IRGC, which enjoyed the backing of the clergy, became Iran's favored armed force in the war. Later that year, as Tehran began a series of offenses aimed at pushing Iraqi forces back across the border, the IRGC began to deploy its famed human wave attacks, to some initial success. These attacks, which became a trademark of IRGC operations throughout the war, featured successive waves of thousands of Iranian soldiers—mostly teenagers recruited into the IRGC's Basij militias—charging headlong into enemy positions and overwhelming them through sheer numbers and will. By the end of the war, Iran's casualties stood in the hundreds of thousands, the majority of which came from the Basij and IRGC.

Unsurprisingly, the Iran-Iraq War contributed to Iran and the IRGC's paranoid view of the outside world. Iran's belligerent rhetoric and counter-invasion of Iraq had alienated it from other regional and foreign powers. Fearing that Iran's revolutionaries would dominate the region were Saddam to fall, the Arab sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf eagerly bankrolled the Iraqi war effort. France, Russia, and the United States sold Saddam advanced weaponry, and the U.S. Navy entered the Persian Gulf to help protect Arab oil shipments. The only country to side with Iran was Syria. Alienated and alone, Iran came to see the war as a vast international conspiracy designed to destroy its revolution.

MOMENT OF ARRIVAL

The war's conclusion in 1988 ^[6] was shortly followed by the death of Khomeini ^[7], in 1989. His successor as supreme leader, former President Ali Khamenei ^[8], lacked the standing and support base of the revolution's founder, and power in Iran seemed to be shifting to the presidency, occupied by the more politically astute Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. The IRGC, worried about its failure to defeat Saddam and acrimony with Rafsanjani, which had intensified over disagreements in war planning, decided to support Khamenei in his turf battles, thereby helping to forge a tighter bond between the IRGC and the supreme leader. The IRGC offered Khamenei fierce loyalty, and in return, Khamenei secured the IRGC's prominence and favored its positions.

During the 1990s, the IRGC became the standard-bearer of hard-line politics in Iran. All forms of social and political reform, and any hint of warming relations with the United States, were anathema and ran counter to what the IRGC believed its soldiers had fought and died for during the war. Yet this was a time when Iranian society was headed in the other direction, culminating in the 1997

election of the reformist Mohammad Khatami as president. With a network of activists on the ground and the support of the supreme leader and other conservative clergy, the IRGC led much of the opposition to Khatami during his two terms in office (1997–2005).

It was in 1999, in the heat of opposition protests against Khatami, that the IRGC finally signaled its arrival as a power player in Iranian politics. That year, increased pressure by the IRGC and other regime institutions on reformism, including the forced closure of a leading reformist newspaper, had sparked a series of student protests. Tensions grew as hard-line pressure groups and Basij militants battled students on university campuses across Iran. The unrest provoked the IRGC's top officers to send Khatami an ultimatum: either he could end the protests, or the IRGC would bypass his authority and do it themselves. Khatami relented, and the IRGC led a violent crackdown on the protesters—a role it reprised in 2009, when massive demonstrations contesting the reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad were similarly crushed.

GOING ABROAD

Having consolidated its role in domestic politics, the IRGC was given an opportunity to expand its international influence by the United States' wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although the IRGC had interests in seeing both Saddam Hussein and the Taliban toppled, U.S. President George W. Bush's famous "axis of evil" line in the 2002 State of the Union convinced Iranian hard-liners that the Afghan and Iraqi wars were aimed at encircling Iran. The IRGC therefore pursued strategies in both countries to deter U.S. aggression.

The IRGC does not formally set Iran's foreign policy—that job falls to the elected government and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), Iran's top decision-making body, composed of leading government officials, military chiefs, and representatives of the supreme leader. However, the IRGC has enough influence on the SNSC, and with the supreme leader himself, that its foreign activities generally proceed without much resistance or oversight from the government. These activities can effectively drive Iran's foreign policy, particularly in states such as Lebanon and Syria where the IRGC has substantial investments. This was the case in post-Saddam Iraq, where the IRGC became the main conduit of Iran's influence in the country.

Iraq was a factory for IRGC experimentation and success. The IRGC benefited from its long-standing ties to Iraqi expatriate groups, especially the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which had been founded by pro-Khomeini Shiite activists in Iran during the 1980s, and the council's military wing, the Badr Corps, which operated as part of the IRGC during the Iran-Iraq War. Members of these groups and others friendly with Iran began to occupy influential positions in Iraq's political and military establishments, expanding the reach of the IRGC. The organization also began developing a new cadre of more extreme, more outwardly pro-Iranian allies among Iraq's Shiite militants, which were regularly used to target and harass U.S. forces.

By the time the Obama administration withdrew U.S. troops in late 2011, Iran had become the dominant outside player in Iraq. The IRGC's close links to militants enabled Iran to influence politics from below, and its close relationships to Shiite politicians provided similar influence at the top. The IRGC had already developed important strategic assets through Hezbollah in Lebanon and Palestinian groups, and it now benefited from an even more formidable network in Iraq.

At the same time, Iran initially hailed the Arab Spring as a new wave of Islamic revolutions. But when unrest began to take hold in Syria, Iran's closest state ally and the lifeblood of its support to Hezbollah, the IRGC quickly moved to defend the Bashar al-Assad regime. With its Arab rivals and Western enemies throwing their support behind the largely Sunni rebellion, the IRGC determined that if Assad were to fall his replacement would pose an existential threat to Iran.

The task of defending Assad fell to Qassem Soleimani, head of the IRGC's foreign operations, who was crafting a reputation as Iran's most effective military leader. Under Soleimani, Iran sent aid, materiel, and scores of advisers to Syria. Soleimani brought Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias to the fight, and organized battalions composed of Afghan refugees and Pakistani Shiites to serve on the front lines. Soleimani was also reportedly the one that convinced Moscow to intervene in the war on behalf of the Assad regime in September 2015. As Iran's involvement escalated, so too did its death toll, which officially stands at around 400 ^[9], including dozens of senior and mid-ranking IRGC officers.

The rise of ISIS and its invasion of northern Iraq led Soleimani to oversee a similar effort to aid the Iraqi government. Beyond sending materiel and advisers, Soleimani himself began appearing on the front lines of the war. Soleimani was accompanied by the commanders of the pro-Iranian Shiite militias he had helped establish, and his presence in the field symbolized Iran's commitment to its allies and its emerging status as a regional heavyweight. Outside of Iraq and Syria, the Houthi rebels who toppled the Yemeni government in early 2015—and provoked a military response from Saudi Arabia—are also known allies of the IRGC.

FUTURE OF THE REVOLUTION

The 2015 nuclear deal between the P5+1 and Iran ^[10] occurred in the middle of the IRGC's regional military expansion. As much as the deal symbolized a desire by the government of president Hassan Rouhani to open up Iran to engagement with the West, it also caused consternation in Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf Arab states ^[11]. From their perspective, the deal normalized Iran's involvement in the Middle East and effectively ended America's leverage against it. Without the threat of sanctions, Iran's behavior would be as unchecked as its ambitions. Gulf states, feeling abandoned, have moved to counter Iran more directly on their own.

The wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen bear the imprint of Iran's cold war with Saudi Arabia. Because the IRGC is the author of Iran's regional and strategic activities, understanding it and its motivations is more vital now than ever. Beyond its role in Iran, the IRGC has had a pronounced impact on the Middle East through its cultivation of transnational, non-state networks. As conflict and sectarianism continue to persist in the region, the political importance of non-state forces allied with IRGC and those backed by rival governments will increase. The more academics and policy-makers grapple with the factors promoting such growth, and the more attention given to the endogenous factors propelling war in the Middle East, the more informed and effective future policy can be.

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