

Reports

Iran's Revolutionary Guard: A Strong Family of Four Generations

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Iran's Revolutionary Guard [Reuters]

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard has seized an oil tanker carrying 700,000 liters of "smuggled fuel" in the Gulf late July 2019, according to Iranian state media. The tanker was identified to be "Iraqi" and was seized in a northern part of the strait of Hormuz with a cargo of 700,000 litres of oil bound for neighbouring Arab states. This incident showcases a further escalation of tensions between Tehran and Washington and its regional allies after Trump's White House decided to sanction Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani ridiculed the decision in his statement: "They (Americans) are resorting to childish behaviour ... they were claiming every day: 'we want to talk, with no preconditions' ... and then they sanction the foreign minister."

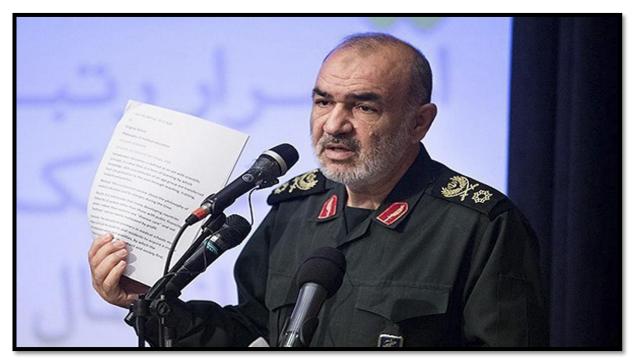
Earlier in July, the Iranians seized a British vessel came after Britain's seizure of an Iranian oil tanker near the Strait of Gibraltar. Retired admiral of Britain's Royal Navy Alan West expressed serious concerns as "some powerful groups in Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United States want war and think a precision strike against key parts of Iran's military capability would lead to regime change."

Earlier, the head of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard said the United States is also worried about the prospect of war with Iran and has instead pursued an economic conflict. Major-General Hossein Salami said Iran had "completely closed the path for the enemy" in the military sphere. "In the current situation it is the enemies who are worried about the outbreak of war and this worry is apparent in their physical and tactical behaviour... At the current crossroads, economic war is the main field for the enemy to confront us," he said.

This frequency of escalatory moves remind Tobias Schneider, a research fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin, of the so-called "Tanker Wars" of the 1980s. During the calamitous Iran-Iraq War, Iran and certain Western countries began targeting the shipping interests of their rival and its allies, eventually drawing Gulf countries and then the U.S. Navy into the conflict. As Schneider told the Atlantic late July, "There is historical precedent for Iranian brinkmanship. In the first Tanker Wars in the late '80s, the [Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy] consistently escalated, even in the face of U.S.-led international convoys, up to the point where they went after the naval escorts."

This growing role of the Revolutionary Guard has followed the announcement of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, of the appointment of Hossein Salami (59) as the new commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the institution has entered a new, more combative phase, particularly as regards relations between Washington and Tehran. Salami succeeds Mohammed Ali Jafari and was appointed after the US designated the IRGC a terrorist organization. According to the appointment decree, the decision came in response to Jafari himself and his demand for "change in the leadership of the guard." Other signs suggest he was removed by Khamenei, whose understanding of the realities of the external threat prompted him to speed up these changes.

In this paper translated from Arabic, Dr. Fatima Alsmadi, senior fellow at Aljazeera Centre for Studies (AJCS) assesses the main shift in the Revolutionary Guard as a powerful institution with a duo role in shaping both security of the Iranian regime and its geo-strategic options. She also probes into the emergence of the Revolutionary Guard and what is behind its rise, and the phases of its development to the present day.



Hussein Salami new leader of the Revolutionary Guard [Getty

Introduction

Given the nature and status of the Revolutionary Guard as an influential institution within the Iranian state, the significance and impact of the change of its leadership cannot be underestimated. The IRGC is active in Iranian political and security realms, protected by a constitutional provision that assigns it the function of defending the Islamic revolution and its achievements. Article 150 of the constitution states, "The Islamic Revolution Guard Corps, organized in the early days of the triumph of the Revolution, is to be maintained so that it may continue in its role of guarding the Revolution and its achievements." (1)

Formative Phase: Conflict and Competing Narratives

The IRGC was created on April 2, 1979 by order of Ayatollah Khomeini. Before the final victory of the revolution, it consisted of youth and popular revolutionary bands that protected and secured neighborhoods against the Shah's forces. These groups assumed responsibility for Imam Khomeini's security and needs after he settled in the Alawiya School. (2) There are conflicting narratives about the early era in which the guard was created, but its first founding committee likely consisted of 12 people.

As Javad Mansouri recalls in his memoirs of the first commander of the IRGC after its formal creation, there was some back and forth between the Islamic-oriented revolutionary groups and groups subordinate to Mehdi Bazargan's government, during which a proposal was made to create a force, known as the National Guard, that would confront domestic conspiracies and chaos. Mansouri says that although the Revolution Council did not officially oppose the suggestion, it did meet with some opposition from prominent revolutionary figures, including Mohammed Montazeri. (3)

Mohammed Tavasoli, a leader of the Freedom Movement, reports that he made such a proposal to then-Prime Minister Bazargan and Imam Khomeini, who issued a decree tasking Hojat al-Islam Lahouti with forming the institution. Mansouri offers another story as well. According to him, the objective of the interim Bazargan government in creating a national guard was to implement government decrees and dissolve the various committees, but Imam Khomeini saw the necessity of popular paramilitary formations that believed in the revolution, as well as the regular army, which should continue to exist but be "purged" of supporters of the Shah. (4)

Some sources point to a meeting of the members of the revolutionary groups on March 28, 1979 at the Abbasabad base. Prominent attendees included Abbas Agha-Zamani (Abu Sherif), Mohsen Rafighdoost, Morteza Alviri, Ali Mohammed Besharati, Mohammed Gharazi, Hassan Jafari, Ali Farzin, Darabi, Hashem Sabbaghian, and Ali Danesh Monfared. The attendees agreed to select Danesh

Monfared as the commander of the guard forces, which would make him the first commander of the Revolutionary Guard prior to the enactment of its statute.

According to the memoirs of former Revolutionary Guard Minister Mohsen Rafighdoost, Danesh Ashtiani was selected by the group as the commander, Gholam Ali Afrouz as the head of human resources, Ali Mohammed Besharati as the head of intelligence, and Morteza Alviri as the head of public relations. (5)



The 'Birth certificate' of Iranian Revolutionary Guard

Caption: Document showing the first formation of the Revolutionary Guard in 1979. Among the names listed is Javad Mansouri, the first official commander of the IRGC. Source: Javad Mansouri's memoirs, p. 542.

There were three groups of revolutionary forces active in Tehran: the so-called Guardians of the Revolution, deployed at the Jamshidiya base under Abbas Agha-Zamani; the University Guardians

under Mohammed Montazeri; and the armed forces of the Islamic Revolution Mujahideen under Mohammed Boroujerdi. After the meeting, it was decided to speak with two additional groups to join the IRGC, based on directives from Ayatollah Khomeini, and the 12-member Central Command Council was formed. Rafighdoost says that the idea to form the guard came from Mohammed Montazeri and was blessed by Khomeini; others say the idea was Khomeini's.

In the meeting the draft the IRGC statute, attended by 12 people, it was decided that it would operate under the supervision of the Revolutionary Council and its commander would be appointed by Imam Khomeini. The Revolutionary Guard Council had 12 members, whose names were listed in the statute: Abbas Agha-Zamani, Javad Mansouri, Abbas Duzduzani, Mohammed Montazeri, Yousef Kolahdouz, Mohammed Kazem Mousavi Bojnourdi, Morteza Alviri, Mohammed Boroujerdi, Mohsen Rezaee, Mohsen Rafighdoost, and Ali Danesh Monfared; Hashemi Rafsanjani is listed as well, as the representative of the Revolution Council.

After the IRGC statute was drafted, Javad Mansouri was appointed the first commander of the official body. On May 1, 1979, Mansouri issued a statement declaring the eight articles regulating the operation of the IRGC. Mansouri led the guard until February 1980. When Banisadr assumed the presidency, Mansouri resigned to work in the Foreign Ministry, in protest at Banisadr's appointment as deputy commander of the armed forces. In his memoirs, speaking of the reasons for his resignation, Mansouri says it was "in opposition to the appointment of Banisadr and my belief that he was a spy. I was not prepared to work with him." (6)

Leadership of the IRGC passed to Abbas Duzduzani, who resigned three months later due to disagreements with Banisadri. He was replaced by Abbas Agha-Zamani, known as Abu Sherif, in May 1980, who also resigned just one month later. On July 13, 1980, Banisadr issued a decree appointing Morteza Rezaee commander of the IRGC. After initially refusing the position, he assumed it on the order of Ayatollah Khomeini, but he soon resigned as well due to conflict with Banisadr. The current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, assumed command until the appointment of Mohsen Rezaee following Banisadr's impeachment in September 1981.



A speedboat of Iran's Revolutionary Guard moving around the British-flagged oil tanker Stena Impero, July 21, 2019 in Bandar Abbas port [VOA News]

The memoirs of Mansouri and other IRGC officials demonstrate a distrust of Banisadr. Commenting on some people's attempts to dissuade him from resigning, Mansouri said, "I told them, I am not bound to obey a person I consider a traitor. In a meeting of guard officials, I said that based on my knowledge of Banisadr, within a year people will rebel against him and he will flee to Paris." (7) In 1981, the IRGC Command Council nominated three people, part of the original seven candidates, to lead the guard: Mohammed Boroujerdi, Yousef Kolahdouz, and Mohsen Rezaee; Rezaee was selected.

Sabzevar Rezaee (he later took the name Mohsen) studied mechanical engineering prior to the revolution and was involved in Mansouroun, an armed rebel group that engaged in guerilla warfare against the Shah's forces. After Ayatollah Khomeini appointed him as commander of the IRGC, what might be termed the institutionalization of the force began. For the 16 years he led the IRGC, Rezaee sought to make the corps into a cohesive, institutional structure. During the Iraq-Iran war, he had tense relations with Hassan Rouhani and Hashemi Rafsanjani, both of whom sought to end the war; the IRGC opposed it. Rafsanjani's memoirs reveal a long-standing conflict and competition between Rouhani and the IRGC and its leadership, going back to the time when Rezaee was the general commander. (8) He then again expresses his rejection of this on another occasion. (9) Rafsanjani writes that Rouhani was opposed to making Rezaee deputy chief of staff of the armed forces when it was reconstituted in 1986, expressing his concern about the IRGC's aspiration to expand and extend its influence. (10)

As the ideological nature of the IRGC was maintained under Rezaee, Iran saw the emergence of several institutions and agencies subordinate to the corps, such as the Intelligence Protection Forces, Imam Hussein University, Baqiyatallah University of Medical Sciences, the Command College, and the Seal of the Prophets Academy, which later became the most important of the IRGC's economic institutions. This period also saw the founding of the Quds Force.

After Rezaee resigned and was appointed the secretary-general of the Guardian Council of the Constitution, Rahim Safavi assumed command of the IRGC in 1997 by order of Ayatollah Khamenei. With a doctorate in political geography, Safavi had held many positions within the institution, including the head of operations and commander of the infantry forces. In Safavi's decade of command, Iran experienced several major incidents, most importantly protests at Tehran University. During this period Safavi devoted more interest to the Basij, the Mobilization Force, increasing its numbers and capacities. The most significant milestone under Safavi, however, was his decision to support the IRGC's missile capabilities. The US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq were signal events during his tenure. Domestically, the IRGC had a tense relationship with President Mohammed Khatami, with 24 commanders of the corps sending a missive to Khatami in July 1999 warning him that their "patience was nearly exhausted."

Mohammed Ali Jafari, known as Aziz, was appointed commander of the IRGC in 2007, having held numerous positions within the institution, including chief of the joint operations command and deputy commander of the IRGC infantry forces for 13 years. For the last five years prior to his appointment, he was also the commander of the Tharollah military camp in Tehran, and in 2005, he founded and headed the Center for Strategic Studies, part of the IRGC institution. Jafari's leadership of the corps was characterized by several key features, most significantly changes in the structure of the corps in the provinces, a massive build-up of the corps' cyberforce, a confrontation with what the IRGC calls "the soft threat," the assumption of responsibility for Gulf security, and a build-up of the corps' airpower.

The IRGC faced substantial criticism for its role in confronting the Green Movement; the corps viewed its actions as a response to the security threat created by the 2009 demonstrations protesting Ahmadinejad's reelection. The IRGC is well known for stressing the idea of the "soft war," and it saw the Green Movement as a channel for this war. In an analysis of post-election events, the head of political affairs in the IRGC, Brig. Gen. Yadollah Javani, said that Iran had in fact entered a soft war,(11) citing "flagrant US and Israeli support for Mir-Hossein Mousavi following the crisis of results." Javani linked this to the attack on the IRGC and the Basij in the run-up to elections, when they were accused of interfering on behalf of Ahmadinejad. In his analysis, he said, "The goal of the escalating malfeasance before the elections was to eject the Revolutionary Guard from the field and ensure the

success of the rioters, but they must realize that the Revolutionary Guard will not permit any current and group to overstep the principles of the revolution." (12)

The IRGC viewed the post-election situation in Iran as a confrontation in the soft war arena. The corps' leadership found the origin of this threat in previous periods: "The soft threat was not born today. The enemy has operationalized its threats, and its efforts in the events that followed the elections came to softly remove the regime." (13)

IRGC leaders cite US and Western support of the Green Movement as evidence of a soft confrontation, and "this clear support indicates that the enemy was assured of the outcome of its efforts over the past years." (14) The IRGC uses the term "strife" to describe the events: "If in the era of reforms we confronted strife, today, as the leader of the revolution says, we are facing profound strife." (15) The clash with Ahmadinejad during his second presidential term, in connection with the economic role of the IRGC, is another significant feature of this era, and the same is true of the relationship between the corps and Hassan Rouhani.



Iranian Revolutionary Guard [Reuters]

Despite all the criticism of the IRGC's economic role, it has in fact become difficult to outperform it economically. According to IRGC officials, "The corps is active in ten major economic sectors in the country, in which 150,000 people are directly employed. More than 1.5 million people are directly and indirectly employed in enterprises managed by the Seal of the Prophets Academy, and the institution owns more than 12,000 pieces of modern machinery and equipment." (16)

The economic issue was clearly a controversial one under the Rouhani government. In December 2013, Gen. Jafari said the IRGC would agree to abandon economic endeavors and leave them to the private sector, which was capable of filling the corps' shoes. (17) Complaints began to be heard within the IRGC that Rouhani's government did not want to cooperate economically with the corps. The IRGC began to suspect that Rouhani wanted to eject them from the economy by making deals with other sectors in Iran, including a multi-billion-dollar deal concluded with the city of Tehran. (18) When the sanctions returned and Western companies withdrew from projects agreed upon with the Rouhani government, the IRGC declared its readiness to step into the role of the departing Western firms.

Under Jafari, the foreign role of the IRGC was also boosted, as it intervened in several arenas. The corps was also affected in the unprecedented, successive rounds of sanctions leveled against Iran that followed the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran and its designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization.

On April 21, 2019, an edict issued by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appointed Hossein Salami commander of the IRGC, replacing Mohammed Ali Jafari, and promoted him to major general. The decision was issued two weeks after the US administration listed the IRGC as a terrorist organization. Salami has held several positions, including the commander of the IRGC air force, a faculty member at the High University for National Defense, and, since 2009, deputy commander of the IRGC.

Abroad: building mechanisms to deal with the threat

Foreign relations were an important factor in all the changes undergone by the IRGC. The shift in the leadership of the IRGC in 2007 and Jafari's appointment as commander was described as the biggest change in the IRGC in a decade. This marked the beginning of the third-generation corps, one of the most important institutions in Iran. The same can be said of Hossein Salami's appointment and the surrounding circumstances, particularly the renewed tension and escalation in Iranian-American relations. Since the corps' founding, the IRGC and its numerous social and political divisions have passed through four distinct ideological generations.

In the early days of the corps, marked by contention and a flurry of successive commanders, the primary responsibility of the IRGC was to preserve the revolution and confront its enemies. When the Iraq-Iran war began, it played an influential role, which bolstered its status in society and within the Iranian state. With the end of the war, the IRGC entered a new phase of its history, during which it was institutionalized under Mohsen Rezaee. (19)

With Rezaee's resignation and the assumption of Rahim Safavi, IRGC efforts were dedicated to war recovery. It took part in rebuilding and planning, by which it gradually eased its way into the economic sphere. In working to strengthen its formal structure, with the Ministry of Defense it drafted plans for defensive armament, gradually transforming under Savafi from an ideological institution to a performance and implementation institution. (20)

With the end of the reformist government, a group of IRGC figures entered politics through elections to the Consultative Council. Today, a not insignificant number of people drawn from the ranks of the IRGC occupy important positions in state institutions and the Consultative Council. In addition to politics, another group entered the economic sphere. Despite these shifts, a broad spectrum of people maintained the primary role for which the IRGC was created: to defend the revolution and protect Iranian territory and independence. At the same time, the corps preserved its independence as an institution directly subordinate to the Supreme Leader and enjoying privileges beyond those granted to the regular army.

The third generation began in concert with US efforts to designate the IRGC a terrorist organizations coupled with increasing Western and European pressure on Iran's nuclear program and threats of sanctions. This makes the third-generation corps similar to the first generation, despite some differences in ideology and revolutionary spirit between the first and third or fourth generations. It should also be recognized that conditions in Iran and the region at the beginning of the revolution are not those of today. Nevertheless, it is not foolish to speak today of a bigger role for the IRGC in Iran's domestic and foreign politics. (21) The Jafari era saw a return of ideology to IRGC discourse and performance, but coupled with efforts to strengthen operations and implementation.

We can pinpoint the beginning of the fourth generation with the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement and the return of sanctions. As Iran began playing a greater role in the foreign arena, the IRGC faced growing challenges, which have become even more serious after its terrorist designation. A new stage has begun with the appointment of Gen. Hossein Salami as IRGC commander, replacing Mohammed Ali Jafari, who was named head of the Bagiyatallah Institution.

Salami's appointment: what's next?

• The IRGC statute and laws regulating the corps contain no provision setting term limits on IRGC commanders. As is clear from the review above, some commanders lasted 16 years and some no more than a month. But it has been said that Ayatollah Khamenei has a <u>policy</u> of appointing political and military officials for a maximum ten-year period. Jafari's tenure should have theoretically ended then in 2017, but he said that the Supreme Leader extended his term by three years. The new appointment came before this extension expired, indicating there was some cause

to hasten the end. In Ayatollah Khamenei's edict appointing Salami, it is clearly stated that it came in response to a request from Jafari for "the need to change the corps' leadership." This reveals an institutional reading from within the IRGC itself that believes the nature of this phase requires changes in leadership. This highlights the importance of the foreign factor in the decision.

- There are no fundamental differences between the outlook of Salami and Jafari, but Salami does tend to use explicitly threatening discourse. In fact, the most significant threat issuing from the IRGC as an institution came on his tongue: the threat to close the Hormuz Straits on May 4, 2016. He has also used bellicose language when talking about Israel: "If Israel persists with such folly, it will bring it closer to its end and it will not even find a place to bury its dead." In February 2019, speaking on state television, he warned European states about the missile program: "If Europe or anyone else in the conspiracy decides to move forward with missile disarmament in the Islamic Republic of Iran, we will be forced to shift our strategy." Following attacks in Ahwaz, Salami openly threatened Saudi Arabia and the UAE, saying they were crossing red lines and must bear the consequences.
- Iran's missile program seems to be a prominent part of the career of Salami, whose name was designated on the US terrorism list. The new IRGC commander is known for his defense of the missile program and the need to strengthen its capabilities, and he cautioned, and almost threatened, European parties against interfering with it.
- Domestically, Salami took a firm stance against the Green Movement, describing it as "strife."
- Salami's rise clearly indicates a shift in type of IRGC leaders. He is neither part of the first nor second generation of the IRGC. Even though he took part in the Iran-Iraq war, Salami was not influential in the first two decades of the Islamic Republic. Even before Jafari's appointment, Salami's name was never mentioned as a prominent member of the IRGC, and his name is not among the corps' commanders who signed the letter to Khatami. His position today therefore comes from his institutional position as an IRGC commander, not his personal charisma.
- Salami's appointment should not viewed separately from other recent senior appointments in Iran, most significantly the appointment of Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi as the head of the judiciary and Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani as head of the Expediency Discernment Council, both of whom have been floated as possible successors to Khamenei. This suggests the Supreme Leader is looking forward to the coming transitional phase and hoping to maintain the cohesion of state institutions.

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