

University of the Peloponnese

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences

**Department of Political Science and International
Relations**

Postgraduate Program

“Mediterranean Studies”

**The role of the Revolutionary Guards in the
regional role of Iran from Mahmoud
Ahmadinejad's presidency onwards**

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Corinth, September 2023

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Keywords: IRGC, Quds Force, Basij, non-state actors

Abstract

Over the last two decades, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps asserted a central role in the tumultuous landscape of the Middle East. This study delves into the transformative influence of the IRGC and its pivotal role in reshaping Iran's regional dynamics, focusing particularly on the transitions that the IRGC was brought through from 2005 to 2020. From its origins as a guardian of the nascent Islamic Republic in 1979, the IRGC has experienced a profound evolution, emerging as a potent political and economic actor in Iran. By exploring these aspects, this study aims to offer insight into the multifaceted IRGC and its profound impact on shaping regional dynamics in a region marked by volatility and uncertainty.

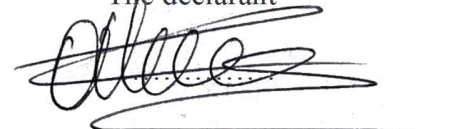
Τις τελευταίες δύο δεκαετίες, οι Φρουροί της Ισλαμικής Επανάστασης του Ιράν διεκδικούν κεντρικό ρόλο στο ταραγμένο τοπίο της Μέσης Ανατολής. Η παρούσα μελέτη εξετάζει τη μετασχηματιστική επιρροή των Φρουρών της Επανάστασης και την κομβική τους παρουσία στην αναδιαμόρφωση της περιφερειακής δυναμικής του Ιράν και ειδικότερα τις μεταβολές που χαρακτηρίζουν την περίοδο από το 2005 έως το 2020. Από τις απαρχές του, ως φύλακας της εκκολαπτόμενης Ισλαμικής Δημοκρατίας το 1979, το Σώμα των Φρουρών της Επανάστασης γνώρισε μια βαθιά εξέλιξη, αναδεικνυόμενο σε ισχυρό πολιτικό και οικονομικό παράγοντα στο Ιράν. Διερευνώντας αυτές τις πτυχές, η παρούσα μελέτη έχει ως στόχο να αποδώσει την πολυδιάστατη εικόνα των Φρουρών της Επανάστασης και του βαθύτατου αντίκτυπού τους στη διαμόρφωση της περιφερειακής δυναμικής σε μια περιοχή που χαρακτηρίζεται από αστάθεια και αβεβαιότητα.

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CHAPTER 1

THE BIRTH AND MANDATES OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS CORPS

1.1 Introduction

The inception of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the wake of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution brought about a transformative force in the country's political and military landscape. This chapter examines the genesis and evolution of the IRGC, emphasizing its transition from a revolutionary militia to a professional military entity. The IRGC's role as a guardian of the newly formed Islamic Republic is explored, as it swiftly evolved to adapt to the exigencies of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s.

Against this backdrop, this chapter delves into the IRGC's changing identity, its complex relationship with the Iranian state, and its multifaceted responsibilities beyond traditional military functions. It provides a foundational understanding of the IRGC's historical context, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of its roles, shaping the course of Iran's contemporary history.

1.2 The Islamic Revolution of Iran and the genesis of IRGC

1979 was the year of great change in the post-war world, with the Islamic Revolution dominating Iran. Iran's revolutionary path from the Constitutional Revolution¹ to the Islamic Revolution was influenced by the position of the three pillars of the social and political regime: the clergy, the large landowners, and the merchants and guilds of the

¹ Before the Constitutional Revolution in Iran (1905–1906), the Shia was serving as judicial authorities, providing *fatwās* for specific matters. As the Constitutional Revolution unfolded, the consultation requests began to take on a pronounced political dimension. Keenly observing the unfolding political events, the clergy soon became increasingly aware of the substantial political influence they could potentially exert, leading them to actively engage in politics (Roozbeh Safshekan & Farzan Sabet, 2010, σσ. 550-551).

bazaars². Equally important was the pillar of the army and the bureaucracy under the Pahlavi dynasty and especially of the new social forces that were created in the 1930s and grew from the 1960s onwards (Πούσσος, 2022, σσ. 145-147). The revolution of 1979 in Iran fundamentally altered the principles and patterns prevailing in the politics of Iran. Among the new structures given rise to was the Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC-Pāsdārān Enqelab-e-Islam), an armed corps, delegated to protect the revolution that over time evolved into a prominent actor in Iranian policymaking (Sinkaya, 2015, pp. 1-2), to the point that it was portrayed as “a king-maker in post-Khamenei politics” (Ali Gheissari & Vali Nasr, 2005).

In the 1970s, mass internal migration and squalid conditions in the slums had created major problems of crime, prostitution, alcoholism and a high number of suicides. The clergy aware of these circumstances, was attributing the situation to the breakdown of Islamic ethics and traditional values that had to be restored (Abrahamian, 1980, p. 25). Internal migrants relied on the support and social care of the clergy networks. The ideological schema of the struggle for the poor marginalized that had been shaped by liberation theology was appropriated by the Islamist movement and its leader Ayatollah Khomeini. At the critical moment of the revolution, Khomeini's network managed to mobilize the masses of poor internal migrants in the slums. This effective mobilization was due to Khomeini's adoption of a harsh rhetoric in favor of the outcasts and the urban poor and was the crucial factor in the victory and consolidation of the Islamic Revolution in the first months (Πούσσος, 2022, σσ. 191-192).

The spark that triggered the uprising in January 1978 was a libel in a regime newspaper against Ayatollah Khomeini. The publication sparked angry demonstrations by students of the madrasas in Qom, which were supported by prominent clerics such as the Grand Ayatollah of Tabriz, Shariatmadari. The clash with the security forces led to the deaths of

² The bazaars comprised a vast community of around 250,000 shopkeepers and effectively dominated up to 75% of Iran's retail commerce. Their sway extended beyond urban areas, encompassing numerous peddlers, small-scale vendors, and minor intermediaries. These bazaars were intricately interwoven with the religious establishment that continued to wield considerable political impact (Abrahamian, 1980, p. 24).

dozens of protesters. In August of the same year, the arson of a large cinema in Abadan would lead to the deaths of four hundred women and children and spark a huge outcry. Much of society believed that the arson was the work of SAVAK³ attempting to attribute the act to the conservative clergy. Large demonstrations followed with a clear message of "Shah go away". But the point that determined the course of the uprising was the massacre in Jaleh Square in September 1978. The day after martial law was imposed, the army clashed with protesters, opening fire on civilians and killing dozens of demonstrators. At the time Khomeini who was living in exile in Najaf was expelled by Iraq to France at the Shah's request. Still, at the Ayatollah's call a series of walkouts, strikes and other movements crippled the state (Ρούσσοϋ, 2022, σσ. 198-200). The country was reduced to chaos and the royal family abandoned the country. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi left Iran on January 17, 1979, ten days after he appointed Shapur Bakhtiar as head of a new civilian government. As the crisis persisted, Ayatollah Khomeini, who remained in Paris at the time, urged Iranians to topple Bakhtiar's government and progressively assumed a leading role, establishing the Revolutionary Islamic Council. Meanwhile, under mounting public pressure, Bakhtiar relented and permitted Khomeini's return. On 11 February, Bakhtiar's cabinet was toppled (Arthur Goldschmidt & Lawrence Davidson, 2010, pp. 373-374).

The new interim government led by Mehdi Bazargan, encompassing pragmatic reformists and Muslim hard-liners, initiated a referendum that approved of a new constitution and the establishment of an Islamic Republic, as advocated by Ayatollah Khomeini. Throughout the country, revolutionary committees instigated sweeping transformations, while a body of lawyers and *ulamās* deliberated to create a framework for the new constitution (Arthur Goldschmidt & Lawrence Davidson, 2010, pp. 373-374). The Constitution contained liberal provisions regarding individual freedoms and democratic procedures, but it also envisioned the central role of Islam as a guardian and guarantor of legislative compliance with Islamic law, Sharia. The key elements that would determine the nature of the political system were the position of the Supreme Leader and the implementation of *velāyat-e-faqīh*

³ SAVAK, emerging in the aftermath of the 1953 coup, served as the intelligence service responsible for upholding the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty. It gained notoriety for employing harsh tactics against those who opposed the regime.

through the Guardian Council (Shora-ye Negahban). The Council comprised six *ulamās* and six *faqīhs* (jurists), responsible for determining the conformity of enacted laws with Sharia. According to the Constitution, the Supreme Leader determined what is beneficial for Islam, set the guiding principles of state policies, had the right to dismiss the president or veto a candidate for the presidency. The Supreme Leader also had the authority to declare war and make peace, appoint the leadership of the armed forces, grant amnesty, and, most importantly, appoint the six *ulamās* from the twelve members of the Guardian Council (Πούσσος, 2022, σσ. 206-207).

Following the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, harboring mistrust toward the military, led the establishment of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a means to balance the regular army (Nazemi, 1994, p. 205). During the course of the revolution, several small guerilla militias emerged, that following the victory of the revolutionary movement identified themselves as the “*guardians of the Islamic revolution*” and assumed the role of self-appointed law enforcement units. Recognizing the need for cohesion, the religious-nationalist interim government devised a strategy to merge these guardian groups with numerous armed civilian groups that operated as local surveillance units commonly referred to as Committees. The government aimed to consolidate all armed activities under a centrally commanded armed militia, temporarily substituting the pre-revolutionary law enforcement bodies. On April 22, 1979, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) released its inaugural declaration. A command council was established, proclaiming that the IRGC would henceforth receive directives exclusively from Ayatollah Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council, rather than from the government (Alemzadeh, 2019, pp. 4-5). Formally launched in May 1979, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmī), emerged as a self-professed equitable and grassroots organization, with its principal mission being to defend the Islamic Revolution against anti-revolutionary and opposing forces, specifically targeting the vestiges of the past regime (Abedin, 2011, p. 381). Similar to the groundwork established by the revolutionary movement, the IRGC has remained minimally subjected to government and parliamentary control, being constitutionally answerable solely to the Supreme Leader (Hesam Forozan & Afshin Shahi, 2017, pp. 72-73). The establishment of the Basij (Baseej-e Mostaz'afin -e

Sepāh-e Pāsdārān⁴) volunteer guerrillas as an adjunct to the IRGC in November 1979 propelled its organizational expansion. Despite being initially conceived as a temporary entity by the interim government, Islamists ensured its inclusion in the constitution that was ratified in December, thus solidifying its enduring presence (Alemzadeh, 2019, p. 5). In a short span of time, the IRGC emerged as a significant internal security mechanism. Evolving from militias composed of devout lay individuals, the IRGC played a pivotal role in consolidating power for its supporters aligned with Ayatollah Khomeini by effectively countering diverse adversaries (Hesam Forozan & Afshin Shahi, 2017, pp. 72-73).

1.3 Invasion of Iraq and the Pāsdārān s' military transformation

The Pāsdārān underwent a significant transformation following Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980, led by Saddam Hussein. Iran's armed forces were unravelling due to mass defections and cleansing within the officer ranks. To swiftly deploy a large number of personnel to the front lines and halt the rapid advance of Iraqi forces, the Iranian regime opted to restructure the IRGC into a parallel military force with the capacity to exert control over the regular army, established by the previous regime and deemed politically unreliable by the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Roozbeh Safshekan & Farzan Sabet, 2010, p. 548). During its initial engagements with Iraq, the Pāsdārān had a flexible and adaptable structure, engaging in urban warfare to protect cities such as Abadan and Khorramshahr. They faced entrenched Iraqi forces in and around these cities. Over time, the Pāsdārān further evolved, establishing military structure that made use of seized armor and artillery from the Iraqi forces. As the war progressed, the Pāsdārān also established its own training facilities, missile divisions, and platoons equipped to effectively manage and defend against chemical weapons (Katzman, 1993, pp. 396-397). The victories of Iran were not solely attributed to its advanced arsenal, but also to popular mobilization and, most importantly, to the volunteer-martyrs of Islam who bolstered both the Revolutionary Guards' militias and the regular army. Through this mobilization, various militias, such as

⁴ Pāsdārān's Mobilization of the Oppressed (Nazemi, 1994, p. 205).

the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij, transformed into formidable military bodies and staffed intelligence and security services. (Πούσσος, 2022, σ. 231).

The Pāsdārān relied on the volunteers of the Basij that encompassed minors and elder volunteers who were serving in three-month rotations at the frontlines. Unlike fixed units, the Basij were deployed en masse to the frontlines and integrated into Pāsdārān platoons under their command. The Basij exhibited high motivation and ideological commitment, playing an essential role in the Pāsdārāns' "human wave" engagements with Iraqi troops, resulting however in significant casualties for Iran and hardly any cooperation with the regular army, which vehemently objected to such unorthodox and resource-intensive strategies (Katzman, 1993, pp. 396-397). The organizational methods developed during the war remain prevalent today. Both then and now, the Basij emphasizes its widespread geographical presence and large membership base. Basij commanders periodically announce initiatives aimed at expanding the mobilization capabilities of the Basij by establishing centers in various locations, including academic institutions, industries, and elementary schools across the country, as potent pools of professionalization and recruitment, while being affiliated with local mosques or community hubs. Officially, only the members of the special branch are recognized as part of the armed forces and few of them undergo formal military training. Apart from receiving modest pay, Basij members are exempted from compulsory military service and are granted reserved seats in universities. (Noori, 2012, pp. 131-132). The organization's activities have predominantly focused on spreading ideological values through cultural works, and security and military activities. In particular, its association with the military, operating under the direct mandate of the Pāsdārāns' commander-in-chief, and its participation in security operations have gained it substantial notoriety. The Basij first garnered international attention for its participation in the violent suppression of students protesting for democracy in 1999, while in 2009, it assumed similar action during the -following the controversial re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president- crisis and has since continued to actively crack down any popular dissent (Ostovar, 2013, p. 247).

Following the invasion by Iraq, the IRGC and the Army found themselves embroiled in intense conflicts characterized by disputes over doctrine, antagonism over limited

resources, and persistent disparities in access to political leadership. These conflicts have persisted over time and remain unresolved to this day (Alfoneh, 2011). The Army, both historically and presently, functions as a conventional military organization with a traditional doctrine. As per Article 143 of the Constitution, the primary responsibility of the Army is to safeguard the independence and territorial integrity of the country, along with ensuring the maintenance of order within the Islamic Republic. In contrast, the IRGC operates based on principles of unconventional and "revolutionary" warfare, while article 150 of the Constitution emphasizes the need to maintain the IRGC in order for it to fulfill its role of safeguarding the Revolution and its accomplishments and the importance of fostering brotherly cooperation between the IRGC and other branches of the armed forces (Elliot Hen-Tov & Nathan Gonzalez, 2011, pp. 47-48).

By the mid-1980s, the IRGC established its own Ground Forces, Navy, and Air Force in parallel with the Army, to the great chagrin of the latter (Alfoneh, 2011). As in all spontaneous Revolutions the Iranian Revolution had to establish a new army to serve its interests. Unlike the premeditated uprisings in China (1949) and Cuba (1959), that had long developed effective military forces, the Iranian Revolution likewise the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 had to rely on devoted militias to constitute a dependable military force. However unlike the Russian Red Army and the Chinese PLA, which emerged as new revolutionary armies following the disbandment of previous conventional forces, the IRGC was established as a parallel military force during the Iranian Revolution and retained its separate identity alongside the conventional Iranian Army. To ensure dedication to the revolutionary cause, the Pāsdārān, like the Red Army and the PLA, underwent ideological and political indoctrination. To instill revolutionary ideals in the conventional armies consisting of conscripted soldiers, and ensure loyalty, regular army was integrated with volunteer militia forces of strong political perception. To that end, Red Army, PLA and the Pāsdārān, they all employed political surveillance through representatives, political commissars, or emissaries representing the clergy, who vigilantly supervised the conventional armed forces, in order to avoiding the development

of conflicting factions within the military⁵. All the revolutionary militia armies formed to defend revolutions have had a significant impact on the dynamics of post-revolutionary political landscape. In particular, the Pāsdārān - unlike the Russian Red Guards, who were assimilated into the Red Army - held a permanent status while sided with the conventional army in the Iraqi war, still continued to hold a pivotal role in the post-revolutionary era, peaking in the post-Ahmadinejad era (Sinkaya, 2011, pp. 20-26).

1.4 The identity of the Guards

The IRGC initially entailed young deeply indoctrinated individuals, with some possessing prior military and guerrilla expertise, some of whom were trained by the Palestine Liberation Organization in Lebanon during the 1970s. These youthful guerrillas' primary mission was to safeguard the nascent revolution by armed force (Abedin, 2011, p. 381). Following the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC transitioned toward professionalism as a military entity. This involved the adoption of regular military ranks, the establishment of clear promotion criteria, and a shift away from revolutionary fervor toward rational military strategies. The war demonstrated that relying solely on revolutionary fervency was insufficient for achieving victory, prompting the IRGC's transformation into a more strategic and disciplined force. While ideological loyalty was no longer the sole prerequisite for promotion within the Revolutionary Guards, it remained essential. Alongside these traits, the IRGC now placed greater emphasis on demonstrated military capabilities, leadership acumen, and specialized knowledge. A balanced combination of

⁵ To assert authority over the military and solidify his legitimacy, the Supreme Leader employs indoctrination, suppression, and assimilation tactics. Indoctrination emerges as the most significant and frequently applied control tactics for Iran's armed forces. This prominence is not only a consequence of the inherently ideological nature of the Islamic Republic but also because indoctrination represents an exceptionally nuanced and effective mechanism for control. The Ideological-Political Organization (*sazman-e aghidati va siyasi*), primarily tasked with legitimizing the regime and firmly embedding its ideology within the military ranks; the Counter-Intelligence Organization (*sazman-e hefazat-e ettelaat*), which serves as the key instrument for continuous surveillance of military members, and *farmandehi*, the military commandership constitute the three pivotal entities responsible for the implementation of these tactics. Though they operate independently, they answer directly to Ayatollah Khamenei (Golkar, 2019, p. 5).

both ideological dedication and practical expertise was now essential for advancing in the ranks, reflecting the organization's shift towards a more professional and effective military force (Sinkaya, 2015, pp. 4-5).

The IRGC's missions and responsibilities, as laid out in the 1979 provisional law, entailed the responsibility of defending the nation against foreign attacks and countering internal threats, maintaining domestic security and acting as a police force to combat counterrevolutionary forces, intelligence gathering, safeguarding public assets, and assisting in the execution of legal decisions. The original missions of the IRGC according to the provisional law of 1979 also encompassed a missionary aspect, involving assistance to liberation movements and advocacy for the oppressed people rights worldwide (Sinkaya, 2011, pp. 62-63).

The IRGC was established by the religious-nationalists as an authorized militia, in order to consolidate various dispersed armed groups. However, given its emergence from a politically divided landscape with differing views on governance structures, the IRGC's organizational framework became a subject of ongoing political contention right from its inception (Alemzadeh 2019, 4). Following the death of Khomeini, a major division arose within the political leadership regarding the role of the IRGC. The “moderate” faction, led by the then president, Alī Akbar Hāshimī Rafsanjānī, advocated for the IRGC to function as a professional military body and emphasized its transformation into a professional military force. This view, later echoed by reformist politicians, aimed to keep the IRGC focused on its military duties and away from politics, in line with Ayatollah Khomeini's testament. On the other hand, the hardliners, including Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, argued that the IRGC's responsibilities encompassed more than just military tasks. They maintained that the primary mission of the IRGC was to safeguard Islam, the revolution and the Islamic regime (Sinkaya, 2011, p. 66).

During the post-war period, aside from its security and defense responsibilities, the IRGC also took part in reconstruction undertakings. Following a decree by the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, the IRGC participated in non-military construction initiatives, aiding the government's efforts to rebuild the war-torn nation after the eight-year conflict. The IRGC

also played a crucial role in the cultural realm, safeguarding the country's "soft security" in the postwar era. Its engagement in safeguarding soft security has entangled it in the social and political spheres. Initially driven by the ideological goal of disseminating revolutionary values and advancing the Islamization of society, this aspiration has remained central to the IRGC's efforts. Against this backdrop, the IRGC/Basij has pledged to enforce the religious principle of promoting ethical behavior and preventing immorality within society (Sinkaya, 2011, pp. 65-69). In December 2007, Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, former supreme commander of the IRGC, characterized the scope of the Basij as overarching, stating that it encompasses all parts of society and is involved in various matters, including politics, security, culture, society, and economy, underscoring that both the Guards Corps and the Basij operate under the guidance of the revolution's leader, and their authorized role is dedicated to promoting the objectives of the revolution (Noori, 2012, p. 131).

After the Iran-Iraq war, the IRGC revived its extraterritorial assignments to combat its adversaries beyond Iran's borders and to support Islamic movements (Sinkaya, 2011, p. 68). In 1990, Khamenei being the supreme commander of Iran's armed forces, mandated the enlargement of the IRGC and the formation of a distinct division specifically tasked with the regime's extraterritorial pursuits. This division was named after Jerusalem, the Quds Force, reflecting the IRGC's objective to pursue the liberation of Jerusalem and the obliteration of Israel. The Quds Force was established by amalgamating several units, all of which had been engaged in exporting the revolution. Led by General Ahmad Vahidi – the current Minister of Interior since 2021 – the Quds Force was entrusted with carrying out all of the IRGC's extraterritorial operations and assumed the central role in implementing Iran's militia doctrine (Golkar, Saeid & Aarabi, Kasra, 2021, p. 27). Its mission has undergone significant evolution over the years to encompass various objectives, as indicated by IRGC commander-in-chief Ali Jafari in 2014. According to his statement, the mission of Quds Force is to aid the Islamic movements, expand the Islamic Revolution, and support the deprived and oppressed people and revolutionary movements worldwide in countries like Lebanon, Syria and Iraq (Kayhan Daily, 2014).

CHAPTER 2

THE GUARDS ROLE IN SHAPING IRAN'S REGIONAL POLICIES

2.1 Introduction

This chapter unfolds the remarkable transformation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) into a formidable power player within Iran's political landscape, unveiling the IRGC's strategic alignment with various political factions and highlighting its pivotal role in countering reformist initiatives. This chapter also explores the emergence of the Neo-Principalists, a faction closely entwined with the IRGC's ambitions, and their distinctive ideology.

Elucidating the IRGC's far-reaching involvement in the Iranian economy, tracing its roots to the Iran-Iraq war and its subsequent diversification into non-military sectors, the IRGC's economic ascension, including its monopoly-like presence in crucial industries, is a central theme. Lastly, this chapter delves into the IRGC's significant engagement in nuclear and missile programs, emphasizing its intricate ties to Iran's nuclear activities and its economic implications.

Together, these narratives unveil the multifaceted role of the IRGC, offering a comprehensive understanding of its ascendancy within Iran's political, economic, and security spheres.

2.2 IRGC as a power share holder

Profound shifts in Iran's domestic and international landscape brought about transformative changes in the country's politics. Internally, these changes were marked by the passing of Khomeini and the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war, while internationally, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ascent of the United States as a global hegemon played pivotal roles

(Roozbeh Safshekan & Farzan Sabet, 2010, p. 546). The advent of Hāshimī Rafsanjānī's government and the appointment of Khamenei as the new Supreme Leader led to a repositioning of the IRGC alongside the Principalists' faction, aiming to reinstate Khomeini's initial revolutionary vision, eliminate Western principles and end the corruptness prevalent within the clergy. The Principalists represented the aspirations of the Pāsdārān, the Basji, and the followers of the highly traditionalist Haqqani School, aiming to eradicate any aspects in the Constitution associated with democracy (Rezaei, 2017, pp. 9, 19). The absence of Khomeini's timely intervention and support left the Reformist faction at a disadvantage, resulting in a gradual decline of its influence in the subsequent political landscape. Rafsanjānī, being a realist leader, sought to strengthen the IRGC's military capabilities, structure, and cohesiveness seeking to depoliticize it and increase its accountability. He implemented reforms to transform the IRGC into an efficiently trained and orderly military organization with advanced weaponry. However, these efforts did not lead to the de-politicization of the IRGC, as it maintained unofficial relationships with the Supreme Leader and continued to be used as a support base. This became especially notable under Khamenei's leadership, as he and the Principalists leveraged the IRGC to curtail the influence of Rafsanjānī's cultural and foreign policies (Forozan, 2013, pp. 124-125).

During the Mohammad Khatami presidency, the IRGC saw an expansion and consolidation of power, marking a significant shift in its role within the Islamic Republic of Iran. At the outset, the IRGC firmly established itself as the Islamic Republic of Iran's primary security institution. As reformist initiatives increasingly clashed with the Principalists' setup and the Supreme Leader, the IRGC garnered support for countering these reforms. Over time, IRGC Intelligence and the Basij, in particular, took on the roles previously held by the MoIS and National Security Force (Roozbeh Safshekan & Farzan Sabet, 2010, p. 548).

Another manifestation of the IRGC's transformation to a power shareholder was its active involvement in political affairs. During the late Khatami presidency, a new and distinctive political faction, the Neo-Principalists, came into prominence, closely aligned with the aspirations of the IRGC leadership. The Neo-Principalist ideology was influenced by the jurisprudence of Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, exhibiting strong propensities

towards anti-clericalism, authoritarianism, nationalism, and pragmatism, despite its outward appearance of Islamic fundamentalism. This amalgamation of principles created a doctrine that bears striking similarities to the Chinese model, characterized by political authoritarianism, a focus on economic growth, national self-determination, and a vision of national greatness. The Neo-Principalist leadership, consisting of figures like President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, chief of staff and senior advisor under President Ahmadinejad Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, and IRGC Generals Mohammad Ali Jafari, supreme commander of the IRGC from 2007 to 2019 and Yadollah Javani, current deputy commander of the IRGC for political affairs, rose to prominence from relative obscurity within the middle ranks of the IRGC during the 2003 City and Village Council elections and beyond. Additionally, Hossein Taeb, the former Basij commander and Head of the Intelligence Organization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from 2009 to 2022, also played a key role in this faction's leadership (Roozbeh Safshekan & Farzan Sabet, 2010, pp. 548-550).

Over the course of three decades, from 1979 to 2009, the IRGC underwent a significant evolution, shifting from a pro-Khomeini militia to a multifaceted social-political-economic-security entity deeply ingrained in various facets of Iranian society (Roozbeh Safshekan & Farzan Sabet, 2010, pp. 548-550). The IRGC's involvement in politics has expanded to shaping foreign policy or wielding influence on existing policies. Against this backdrop, currently the IRGC maintains a dynamic presence in Iranian embassies worldwide, especially in neighboring countries and those considered of significant strategic or ideological importance to the Islamic Republic. In terms of exerting influence the IRGC is exerting an impact on the foreign policy discourse through its think tanks and research centers. By the same token, the IRGC actively backs non-state actors in areas of conflict, providing assistance to various groups. The IRGC ostensibly exerts influence on the Supreme National Security Council's foreign policy strategic decision-making processes and engages in direct lobbying with the offices of the Supreme Leader to advocate for specific policies. (Abedin, 2011, p. 621).

In late May 2023, President Ebrahim Raisi appointed Ali Akbar Ahmadian, a veteran Commander from the IRGC, as the new Secretary of the Supreme National Security

Council (SNSC), replacing Ali Shamkhani, also an IRGC commander. This change has led to discussions about the potential implications for Iran's foreign policy, focusing on Ahmadian's role, as he has been a driving force behind the IRGC's involvement in various aspects of the Islamic Republic, advocating for its presence in every sphere to safeguard the revolution⁶. Ahmadian's appointment as the new Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council underscores the ongoing impact of the IRGC on both Iran's foreign policy and internal affairs, further solidifying its role as a key player in shaping the country's trajectory (Saeid Golkar & Kasra Aarabi, 2023).

2.3 The rise of the IRGC in the Iranian economy

The IRGC's engagement in Iran's economy can be traced back to its pivotal role in the Iran-Iraq war during the mid-1980s. This conflict provided the opportunity for the IRGC to establish its defense industry, enabling the production and distribution of essential war resources. In the aftermath of the war, the IRGC assumed a significant role in spearheading reconstruction initiatives, capitalizing on its well-structured organization to become a prominent force in the Iran's rebuilding endeavors (Sune, 2019, p. 12). The advent of privatization during Rafsanjānī's presidency provided the IRGC with multiple openings to engage in commercial ventures and establish its enterprises. Concurrent with the privatization process, the IRGC also assumed control of confiscated industrial facilities, laying the groundwork for the creation of the *moavenat khodkafae* (self-sufficiency headquarters) and *moavenat bassazi* (reconstruction headquarters) that facilitated the establishment of diverse companies in various sectors. In 1990, these headquarters evolved into the *gharargah sazandegi Khātam al-Anbiyā*, commonly known as Ghorb (Rizvi, 2012, pp. 590-591).

⁶ Ahmadian has been, for more than 15 years at the helm of the IRGC's Strategic Research Center, which serves as the nucleus for the IRGC strategic planning and intellectual leadership. This center plays a crucial role in analyzing the challenges confronting the Islamic Republic, formulating effective solutions, and shaping the IRGC's policies and doctrines accordingly (Saeid Golkar & Kasra Aarabi, 2023).

This marked the organization's entry into non-military sectors, including agriculture, industry, mining, transportation, and the construction of vital infrastructure such as roads, refineries, depots, and gas and oil pipelines. As the IRGC secured contracts from prominent government bodies, its affiliated bureaucrats found opportunities for wealth creation and consolidation of power. The organization's involvement expanded to critical areas like oil and natural gas extraction, pipeline construction, and large-scale infrastructure development. The administration of President Ahmadinejad, in particular, granted no-bid contracts to the IRGC, further bolstering its economic dominance (Sune, 2019, pp. 94-96). In tandem with these developments, the organization obtained numerous governmental contracts, notably including the construction of the border wall aimed at curbing drug smuggling across Iran's eastern borders, specifically in the Sistan and Baluchestan provinces (Farhad Rezaei & Somayeh Khodaei Moshirabad, 2018, p. 145). The IRGC thus leveraged its border security role and its ability to bypass customs oversight by exploiting "national security" considerations. This enabled the organization to establish an expansive smuggling network, affording it control over various commodities by procuring them at low import costs (Roozbeh Safshekan & Farzan Sabet, 2010, p. 549).

Khātām al-Anbiyā's extensive global integration was manifested through its collaborations with foreign companies from Europe, China, India, and Russia⁷. These partnerships have facilitated the organization's involvement in significant economic ventures, allowing Khātām al-Anbiyā to establish a strong international presence and contribute to Iran's economic activities on the global stage⁸. Exhibiting momentous adaptability, the Revolutionary Guards' associated companies have embarked on a trend of enlisting Western consultants and politically moderate professionals to facilitate their

⁷ In 2010, Khātām al-Anbiyā, collaborated with China Railway Engineering Corporation for the construction of a high-speed railway connecting Tehran to Qom and Isfahan. Additionally, Khātām al-Anbiyā has engaged with European companies in projects like the construction of the Gudar-i Landar dam and has formed partnerships with Chinese, Indian, and Russian firms for gas and oil projects (Sune, 2019, pp. 13-14).

⁸ The expansion of Ghorb's influence within Iran's economy becomes apparent through its contentious agreement during Hassan Rouhani's tenure to oversee the development of the fifteenth and sixteenth phases of South Pars Gas Fields. Additionally, Ghorb secured a contract to construct a 600-mile pipeline, facilitating the transportation of gas from Iran to Pakistan (Youhanna Najdi & Mohd Azhari Bin Abdul Karim, 2012, pp. 79-80).

engagement in foreign business ventures⁹. International sanctions further propelled the commercialization of the IRGC, granting it immunity from government rules and facilitating large-scale trading. Notably, the organization was involved in the export of state-subsidized gasoline outside the country, generating significant profits. Thus, the IRGC evolved into one of Iran's largest monopolies, comparable to the bonyads¹⁰, with a considerable stake in various sectors, including the telecommunications industry and the Tehran Stock Exchange (Sune, 2019, pp. 94-96).

The economic facet of the Guards also encompasses a range of bonyads linked to the IRGC. In Shia Islam, what is commonly referred to as waqf in Islamic law aligns with the concept of Bonyad, denoting an inalienable charitable endowment as defined by Islamic law. Bonyad-e Taavon-e Sepah (BTS), established in 1988 as a cooperative aimed at providing housing for IRGC members. This cooperative's objective permitted it to engage in commercial activities to fund its housing initiatives. Over the years, BTS expanded its reach, purchasing public companies during the privatization drive under Hāshimī Rafsanjānī's administration, leading to the formation of a corporation with diverse business interests. A similar approach was taken by the Basij, which established Bonyad Taavon Basij (BTB). BTB also seized control of various public enterprises during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency. Utilizing their respective Islamic banks, Ansar and Mehr, both BTS and BTB employed strategic purchases in sectors such as air transport, automobile, steel, oil, petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals, and telecommunications during the so-called privatization initiative under Ahmadinejad's first terms (Coville, 2017). Notably, there are bonyads indirectly linked to the Guards, such as the Martyrs Foundation, which extends financial aid to the families of individuals who were casualties of military operations. IRGC officials affiliated with this nexus, such as Saeed Mohammad, Rostam Ghasemi, and

⁹ In 2014, following the termination of an international agreement with Türkcell, the IRGC assumed control of the Telecommunication Company of Iran. Subsequently, the company enlisted the services of French IT consultancy Sofrecom to enhance service quality and implement network computerization (Sune, 2019, p. 14).

¹⁰ Bonyads operate as charitable Islamic institutions as semiprivate or semi-governmental organizations and maintain a direct reporting line to the Supreme Leader, operating independently from Iran's parliament and not being bound by Iran's General Accounting Law (Youhanna Najdi & Mohd Azhari Bin Abdul Karim, 2012).

Parviz Fattah, head of the Foundation for the Oppressed and the Disabled (Bonyad-e Mostazafan) are primarily focused on Iran's economic concerns and the Guard's involvement in both national and international economic activities. Against this backdrop, in the lead-up to his unsuccessful 2021 presidential candidacy, Mohammad's foreign policy agenda chiefly emphasized the IRGC's economic expansion within the countries associated with the so-called resistance axis—namely, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria (Saeid Golkar & Kasra Aarabi, 2021).

Over the span of three post-revolution decades, the IRGC amassed a diverse and extensive array of businesses. When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad assumed power in 2005, his administration notably heightened its backing for the Revolutionary Guards, cementing and expanding their presence within the government cabinet, bureaucracy, and the Majlis. Employing the pretext of privatization and guided by Article 44 of the Constitution, these bodies sanctioned the divestiture and transfer of state-owned enterprises and other assets to the IRGC (Eric Lob, Nader Habibi, 2019, p. 279). Remarkably, over half of the cabinet members were selected from either Guards veterans or individuals with ongoing affiliations to the organization. The newly inaugurated president, once an IRGC official himself, aimed to cultivate a group of Guards ranks who would oversee an extensive array of companies while demonstrating allegiance to him (Farhad Rezaei & Somayeh Khodaei Moshirabad, 2018, p. 145). The appointment of Rostam Qasemi, the former head of the Khātām al-Anbiyā, as the new Iranian oil minister in August 2011 marked a significant development in the expansion of the economic and political sway of the Revolutionary Guards. Notably, this position also held the presidency of OPEC, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, granting the IRGC access to a prominent international platform. Given Iran's significant role as the second-largest crude oil exporter in OPEC and the prevailing turmoil in the Middle East, especially the ongoing war in Libya, the appointment of Rostam Qasemi carried potential ramifications for determining global oil prices and geopolitical dynamics in the region (Dehghan, 2011).

2.4 The Guards' involvement in nuclear and missile programs

Iran's pursuit of a ballistic missile program traces back to the Shah's era, but its significant expansion occurred after the 1979 revolution. The end of the Iran-Iraq War marked a turning point, with the IRGC and the Aerospace Industries Organization, a Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) subordinate, notably expanding the program to encompass missiles with extended reach. This progression culminated around the turn of the millennium, when these entities embarked on endeavors toward intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capabilities, albeit without conducting any tests of such weaponry up to this point. Central to Iran's ballistic missile initiative are two key bodies: the Shahid Hemmat Industrial Group, an offshoot of the Aerospace Industries Organization, and the IRGC's Al-Ghadir Missile Command. Assuming the complexity of developing a ballistic missile program, which demands substantial capital and advanced technology, the IRGC's extensive expertise in fields ranging from construction to robotics and computer science, is fortified by its control over significant enterprises operating across sectors that provide avenues to essential resources, processed materials, skilled workforce, specialized knowledge, and global procurement networks (Emanuele Ottolenghi, Saeed Ghasseminejad, Amir Toumaj, Annie Fixler, 2016, p. 23).

The Revolutionary Guards are intertwined with the nuclear issue to the nuclear question through their association with the economic sanctions imposed on Iran as a response to its nuclear activities. Their active engagement in nuclear and missile initiatives, while not entirely clear in its scope, adds complexity to this relationship. Aside from the ballistic missile program, which has dual potential for conventional and nuclear use, the Revolutionary Guards' engagement in nuclear activities is multifaceted. Principally, certain nuclear installations in Iran, like the Fordow processing facility, were constructed on bases controlled by the Guards. Indications from leaked speeches by Guards commanders reveal their influential role in the development of the facilities in Fordow and Natanz. Khātām al-Anbiyā was similarly engaged in ballistic missile activities and related tasks (Farhad Rezaei & Somayeh Khodaei Moshirabad, 2018, p. 141). The Annex to Resolution 1929 designates it as one of the Guards-affiliated entities, playing a significant part in Iran's nuclear proliferation actions and the advancement of ballistic missiles and systems for

delivering nuclear weapons (UN. Security Council (65th year: 2010)). Of greater significance, some IRGC ranks are also scientists contributing to the nuclear program, reportedly through the Guards-operated Imam Hossein University (IHU), a key player in Iran's nuclear initiatives. This includes figures like Fereydoon Abbasi-Davani, the former head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Mohsen Fakhrizadeh Mahabadi, a Brigadier General in the Revolutionary Guards and a physics professor at IHU since 1991 (Farhad Rezaei & Somayeh Khodaei Moshirabad, 2018, p. 141) Remarkably, both high-profile nuclear scientists were targeted for assassination, Abbasi unsuccessfully in 2010, while Fakhrizadeh was killed in November 2020 by unknown perpetrators (Khoshnood, 2021, pp. 199-201).

As a consequence of the nuclear accord between Iran and the P5+1, several Guards officials, entities affiliated with the Guards, and companies engaged in transactions on behalf of the Guards could be removed from the nuclear sanctions rosters of either the United States, European Union, or United Nations¹¹. The accord's relaxation of economic sanctions resulted in a substantial influx of funds into the semi-military, semi-commercial realm of the organization. Subsequent to the JCPOA, considerable external enterprises displayed keen interest in entering the Iranian market. To revitalize the struggling economy, the Normalizers, a coalition led by Ayatollah Akbar Hāshimī Rafsanjānī and President Hassan Rouhani, consisting of pragmatic conservatives, reformists, and scholars advocating for international reintegration, promoted foreign business investment in Iran. Abiding by Iranian law though, foreign enterprises are mandated to collaborate with an Iranian partner to conduct business in the country. To a great extent in extensive ventures, this equates to cooperation with the Guards, which directly or indirectly hold influence over pivotal sectors of the economy. The opening up of Iran's economic sphere could potentially enhance the Guards' capacity to safeguard their interests in the Middle East (Farhad Rezaei & Somayeh Khodaei Moshirabad, 2018, pp. 148-152).

¹¹ The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, referred to as the Iran nuclear agreement, was forged in Vienna in July 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 countries, which include the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States) along with Germany (Seyed Hossein Mousavian & Mohammad Reza Chitsazian, 2020, p. 99).

CHAPTER 3

THE CURRENT PERIPHERAL ROLE OF THE IRGC

3.1 Introduction

As the pages of history turned and geopolitical dynamics shifted, the IRGC underwent a transformative evolution, extending its influence well beyond Iran's borders. This chapter explores the contemporary landscape of the IRGC's activities, revealing a complex tapestry of strategic partnerships, political maneuvering, and military expansionism. Central to this narrative is the IRGC's engagement with prominent non-state actors like Hizb'allah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and its connection with Afghan Shia, which gave rise to groups like the Fatemiyoun Brigade.

Unveiling the motivations behind Iran's support for these non-state actors, the chapter scrutinizes the IRGC's strategic footprint in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. It unfolds the evolution of Iran's regional interests, driven by critical events such as the Arab Spring. Exploring the IRGC's current peripheral role in the Middle East, it operates as both guardian and instigator, intricately weaving a complex web of alliances, rivalries, and ambitions across this volatile region.

3.2 The Guards' partnership with non-state actors

The Iranian leadership's pledge to Islamic unity, rooted in Ayatollah Khomeini's vision of *mustazafan* versus *mustakberan*¹² (Alavi, 2019, p. 2), has been a consistent cornerstone of Iran's foreign policy since the revolution. This framework transcends the Shia-centric nature of the Islamic Republic, reflecting their dedication to Khomeini's pan-Islamic principles (Ostovar, 2016, p. 1). Iran initiated the deployment of non-state actors as an extension of its foreign policy shortly after Khomeini's rise to power, forming over time,

¹² oppressed versus oppressor

an intricate web of non-state actors, in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, that has yielded a dual impact on Iranian foreign policy—deepening Iran's international isolation and simultaneously strengthening its regional sway and enhancing its maneuvering capacity when engaging with major world players (Oktav, 2018, pp. 193-194). Over the years, the Iranian regime's motivations for supporting regional non-state actors have shifted, driven by the need to solidify domestic legitimization. Hence, economic justifications gained significance amid deteriorating domestic economic conditions, particularly with the onset of international sanctions in 2006. This shift allowed Iran to utilize Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria as conduits for its exports. Furthermore, as U.S. sanctions increasingly constrict Iranian oil exports, Syria emerged as a major beneficiary, becoming a primary importer of Iranian crude oil (Zweiri, 2021, pp. 4-5).

Iranian clergy and early members of the Revolutionary Guards had reached to Arab Shia activists in Lebanon having formed ties with Shia activists in Lebanon and Iraq, prior to 1979 and with official endorsement, these connections were strategically utilized to forge pro-Iranian affiliated groups. This strategic maneuver capitalized on the social and political upheaval resulting from regional conflicts (Ostovar, 2016, pp. 13-14). In 1982, following the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, Iran initiated the provision of vital military and ideological support to the Lebanese Shia. Approximately 1,500 Pāsdārān were deployed to Lebanon in this context, tasked with training new forces for revolutionary activities in the region (Kindt, 2009, p. 127). The Iranian involvement in Lebanon extended beyond organizing resistance against Israel; it also encompassed Iranian efforts to uphold a new political movement, known as Hizb'allah, within the Shia community in Lebanon (Sinkaya, 2011, p. 147). This marked the commencement of an enduring relationship wherein Hizb'allah professed and demonstrated loyalty to Iran's religious leadership, in return for essential military, financial, and ideological support for its operations in Lebanon and Israel (Kindt, 2009, p. 127).

The Iranian revolutionaries had long been committed to the cause of Palestinian liberation. During an interview in 1968 with representatives from al-Fath regarding support for the al-Fath guerrillas, Ayatollah Khomeini emphasized the imperative duty to utilize all available resources and capabilities in support of Palestinian liberation, expressing

confidence in their ultimate victory through divine assistance (The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 2010, p. 50)¹³. The Iranian leadership has recognized the Palestinian question's relevance from its inception and has consistently believed that advocating for the Palestinian cause could serve a strategy to broaden the reach of the Iranian Revolution across the region, ultimately establishing "ideological hegemony" over Muslim community. Against this backdrop, dissenting groups have come to understand that by emphasizing their pro-Palestinian stance, they can position themselves as champions of revolutionary principles, thereby garnering support from the clergy and the Guards. To that end, Ahmadinejad's persistent references to Palestine were part of his government's approach to leverage populist rhetoric in advancing his Neo-Principalist hardline policy, both domestically and internationally (Alavi, 2019, pp. 5-6).

Iran has upheld a durable strategic partnership with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Established in 1981 in the Gaza Strip, PIJ's ideological underpinnings were significantly shaped by Iran's Islamic Revolution. Though PIJ has continuously enjoyed Iranian backing and assistance, it remains a relatively modest organization without significant aspirations for vying for Palestinian political leadership. During the 1990s, Iran pursued the establishment of a strategic connection with Hamas, the preeminent and most influential of the Palestinian Islamist factions (Spyer, 2016, p. 34).

During the 1980s, Iran contributed significantly to Hamas's financial support, with this assistance steadily growing throughout the decade. In the early 2000s, Iran continued its substantial financial backing, supplying more than 25% of Hamas's budget. The IRGC established an intricate network of connections with the political arm of Hamas, which had been in control of the Gaza Strip since 2006 and Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas military arm. Hizb'allah, played a significant role in this endeavor by providing training to Hamas fighters in Lebanon and aiding in the smuggling of arms (Rezaei, 2017, pp. 229-

¹³ *"It is incumbent on us to use all the powers and means at our disposal to help our brothers, the great men of the Fath movement and their fighting forces al-Assifa, who, with the help of God the Almighty, will achieve the ultimate victory, and the other noble, self-sacrificing fighters who struggle in the way of God. And God guarantees success."*

230). Iran has also furnished military support to Hamas in Gaza, which encompassed the provision of technology required for the construction of Fajr-5 rockets, as stated by the IRGC commander-in-chief Ali Jafari in 2011 (KhabarOnline, 2011)¹⁴.

However, this growing association was interrupted by the post-Arab Spring ascendance of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, followed by the onset of civil war in Syria. Hamas's course of action not to back Bashar al-Assad's beleaguered government and its shift toward Saudi Arabia and Qatar strained its relationship with Iran (Majidiyar, 2017). However, Washington's unilateral announcement of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017 triggered an immediate response from the IRGC leadership and shifted balances once more. The IRGC commander-in-chief Qassem Soleimani, in communication with the leadership of Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades and the leadership of Islamic Jihad battalions, declared Iran's preparedness to extend full-scale support to the Islamic Resistance units in Palestine (Sepah News, 2017), an announcement that was warmly welcomed by the Hamas leadership expressing its appreciation for the Iranian support in a letter to Ayatollah Khamenei (Tasnim News, 2018).

The U.S. removal of the Taliban from Afghanistan in 2001, though initially seen as beneficial to Iran, however President Bush's reference to Iran as part of the “axis of evil”, signaled a fluctuating Iranian-U.S. relationship that has had a significant impact on Tehran's approach to Afghanistan. In order to mitigate potential security threats arising from the presence of American troops in its vicinity, Iran adopted a multi-faceted approach. In addition to maintaining a formal cooperative relationship with Kabul, the Quds Force pursued to cultivating relationships within Shia and Hazara communities, among others, as a means of exerting influence, by facilitating the establishment of charitable networks, including the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, along with various cultural and educational associations (Jalali, 2021, pp. 308-309). The strong connection between Afghanistan's Hazara Sha and Iran finds its roots in the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan in 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980s. In response to the Soviet occupation, the

¹⁴ “*We have not sent these missiles directly to Gaza, but its technology has been transferred from Iran to the resistance, and countless quantities of these missiles are being produced*” (KhabarOnline, 2011).

IRGC mobilized Afghan Shia within the newly formed “Mohammad Army” to combat the Red Army. During the Iran-Iraq war, the IRGC set up the “Ramadan headquarters” as its external base. Within this structure, they formed the “Abuzar Brigade”, responsible for training Afghan residents in Iran for their involvement in the war against Iraq. The Abuzar Brigade was dissolved after a year and its members later returned to Afghanistan in the 1990s to combat the Taliban. After the Taliban regime fell in 2001, some of these fighters returned to Iran. In 2013, a group of 22 individuals from this cohort was deployed to Syria under the banner of the Fatemiyoun Brigade and with the support of Iran’s Quds Force, shortly after the Syrian crisis erupted (Hamidreza Azizi & Amir Hossein Vazirian, 2023).

3.2 IRGC bolstering their strategic footprint in Syria, Iraq and Yemen

From 2003 onwards, Iranian foreign policy has increasingly exhibited a sectarian dimension. This shift towards a more pronounced support for Shia allies and partners in the Middle East can be primarily attributed to two major events: the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 and the onset of the Arab Spring in late 2010. These developments, along with the subsequent conflicts they triggered, especially in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, have significantly contrasted Iran's regional interests with those of its neighboring countries. In response to the threats faced by its allies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, Iran has adopted a more resolute stance favoring Shia interests to safeguard its regional interests and investments, as demonstrated in the actions and rhetoric of the Revolutionary Guards. Beyond its active involvement in regional conflicts, the IRGC now presented its allies and partners as part of a unified Shia front with broader regional aspirations¹⁵ (Ostovar, 2016, pp. 3-4).

15 IRGC commander-in-chief Qassem Soleimani of the IRGC outlined Iran’s preeminent position in the Muslim world, stating: “*Supporting Islamic and revolutionary warriors and defending Muslims and Islam from assaults have allowed Iran to take leadership of the Islamic world*”. Soleimani cited Iraq, where “*Shia have now asserted their authority to govern*” as an explicit demonstration of Iran's influence (Fars News Agency, 2014).

The 2011 revolution against the Assad regime directly confronted Iran's power and influence in the Levant. Syria, not only a steadfast ally of Iran, held crucial significance as the logistical center for IRGC's assistance to Hezbollah in Lebanon (Taverner, 2021, p. 192). Syria, under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad, has represented Iran's sole regional state ally. Moreover, it has played a pivotal role in Iran's broader strategy concerning Israel and the United States and its position within Iran's "axis of resistance" (Ostovar, 2016, p. 17). Diverging viewpoints emerged between the IRGC and the Iranian government during this period. Ahmadinejad made a declaration, asserting that "The time of Bashar is over" (Hassan Ahmadian & Payam Mohseni, 2020), whereas Hāshimī Rafsanjānī, the head of Iran's Expediency Council, openly criticized the Syrian regime, particularly for its brutal actions against the Syrian populace. The IRGC perceived the Arab Spring as a significant threat to Iran's regional gains and an effort to diminish its influence (Mason, 2021, p. 100). As the protests extended beyond the Syrian government's ability to manage, the IRGC intervened to assist Assad in suppressing the growing rebellion. Qassem Soleimani, the commander-in-chief of the IRGC Quds Force, articulated Iran's rationale for its involvement: "*the main goal is to break the resistance front, but we will support Syria till the end*" (Fars News Agency, 2013).

IRGC-affiliated media made explicit mentions of the "axis" or the "front" stretching from the northwestern part of the Middle East, that is from Lebanon, extending through Syria and the Iraqi Shia administration to the east, and eventually reaching down to Bahrain and Yemen in the southern brinks of the Arabian Peninsula. The IRGC commanders and Basij officials commonly term this coalition the "Axis of Resistance," denoting an alliance network, active throughout the Middle East and spearheaded by Iran, encompassing various state and non-state entities, with major Shia communities. For several decades, the "Axis of Resistance" was employed by Iran to describe Islamic struggle movements in regions such as Palestine, Lebanon, Iran, and Syria, aimed at countering Israeli and U.S. influence in the area, initially symbolizing an ideological and strategic coalition that intertwined the fight on imperialism and Zionism. Nevertheless, with its expanded geographic scope encompassing various Shia entities, notably following the events of 2003 in Iraq, the term "Axis of Resistance" has increasingly converged with the notion of the "Shia Crescent." Over time, the "Axis of Resistance" strategy has taken on a more

pronounced ideological and religious character, primarily due to its geographical concentration on regions with significant Shia populations. This evolution is evident in the overt external operations of the IRGC, as well as the rhetoric surrounding the "defense of Shia shrines." In this regard, the "Axis of Resistance" has progressively mirrored the earlier policy of "exporting the revolution" that characterized the first decade of the IRI (Uzun, 2020, pp. 3-4).

The IRGC's commitment to aiding the Syrian regime grew stronger following rebel forces' assault on the city of Zabadani in late 2011, a notable logistics center for the Quds Force's support of Hizb'allah in Lebanon (Taverner, 2021, p. 192). As the Syrian government faced an escalating popular uprising in 2011, Iran, its longstanding Arab ally since 1979, escalated its military and economic support. The exact financial commitment Iran has made in Syria is a subject of debate, with estimates spanning from \$20 billion to \$105 billion (Lob, 2021, pp. 223-224). Starting in May 2012, Iran initiated collaborative efforts with the Assad regime by deploying Quds forces to Syria and persuaded the Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, to support the transit of goods and weaponry through Iraqi territory and to facilitate Syrian trade and financial transactions through Iraqi banks, in order to assist the Syrian government in withstanding the economic sanctions enforced by the US and neighboring countries like Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Oktav, 2018, pp. 199-200). With Iranian aid, the Assad government managed to compensate for its dwindling manpower by enlisting local militias of various types. These militias ranged from informal armed groups and former smugglers, often referred to as "shabbiha," to local volunteers known as "popular committees". After 2013, these auxiliary forces underwent formal organization and expansion into what became known as the National Defense Forces (NDF), supported, both in terms of training and financing, by Hizb'allah and the Guards' Quds Force (Droz-Vincent, 2021, pp. 38-39).

Iran asserted that two significant units under its command, namely the Fatemiyoun and Zaynabiyoun brigades, consisting of Afghan and Pakistani volunteers, were primarily established for the protection of Shiite shrines located in Syria. A report in government-aligned Iranian daily Kayhan praised the Fatemiyoun as a "self-motivated unit that immediately departed for Syria" in response to the "takfiri threat" directed at the Sayyida

Zaynab shrine (Kayhan News, 2014). The Fatemiyoun brigade, overseen by the IRGC, rapidly grew in both manpower and operational scope. As suggested by Iranian sources, there were approximately 12,000 to 14,000 deployed Fatemiyoun members (Shahram Akbarzadeh, William Gourlay & Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 2023, p. 694). The Zainabiyoun Brigade, comprising Pakistani Shia members, was established in 2014 under the guidance of the Quds Force¹⁶. In 2015, it was estimated that the brigade consisted of about 1,000 fighters, however, as the conflict in Syria intensified and deployments grew, the number of fighters surged to 8,000–10,000. The Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun brigades have demonstrated their effectiveness in advancing Iran's strategic objectives in the Syrian conflict, notably through their notable contributions in key battles in Aleppo, Southern Syria, Palmyra, and Eastern Syria (Hamidreza Azizi & Amir Hossein Vazirian, 2023, p. 546).

A significant segment of Iran's militia presence in Syria comprised of Iraqi militants who fought collectively as the Heydarioun, encompassing various pro-Khamenei Iraqi Shia militias, including entities like Asaib al-Haaq, Khata'ib Hizb'allah, and the Badr Corps, alongside several newly established militias crafted by the IRGC. Operating under the Heydarioun umbrella, these Iraqi Shia militants received training from IRGC commanders at the Heydarioun Headquarters in Syria. Starting in 2013, efforts to establish IRGC-backed militias resulted in the formation of several new factions dedicated to safeguarding Shia shrines¹⁷. Primarily composed of Shia Iraqis, including refugees residing in Syria, these militants not only underwent preparation for the IRGC's mission in Syria but also encompassed *velâyat-e faqīh* (Golkar, Saeid & Aarabi, Kasra, 2021, pp. 43-44).

The association between the IRGC and Iraqi Shia militias traces its origins to the year 1980, following the Iraqi invasion of Iran. Saddam Hussein's severe repression of Shia

¹⁶ The strong connection between Pakistani Shia and Iran can be traced back to the 1980s when Pakistani cleric Syed Arif Hussain Al Hussaini founded the Jafaria religious school in Parachinar, to propagate the teachings of the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. However, his endeavors drew the ire of Sunni extremists, leading to his assassination in 1988 (Hamidreza Azizi & Amir Hossein Vazirian, 2023, p. 546).

¹⁷ These groups included Liwa Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas (comprising 5,000 fighters), Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (with 7,000 fighters), and Harakat Hizb'allah al-Nujaba (consisting of 10,000 fighters).

political factions, steered the radicalization of Iraqi Shia activists and eventually drove to a significant influx of Iraqi Shia exiles finding refuge in Iran. Iran's backing of these exile groups eventually gave rise to the expatriate branches of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Badr Organization in Iran. Importantly, all of these entities encompassed the ideological principles inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini. The downfall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 allowed Iran's allies within the SCIRI, including the IRGC-trained Badr military wing, to reenter Iraq's political landscape. In response to internal Iraqi dynamics, the SCIRI rebranded itself as the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq (SICI) to shed its image as an Iranian proxy. This move led to a divergence with the Badr group, which, under Hadi al-Amiri's leadership, established the Badr Organization, maintaining strong ties with the IRGC and Tehran (Ostovar, *Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide*, 2016, pp. 13-14).

Particularly following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Qassem Soleimani cultivated strong connections with pro-Iranian factions in Iraq, notably Kata'ib Hizb'allah, the Badr Organization, and Asaib Al-Haq, that later played pivotal roles in combating the Islamic State (Christian Høj Hansen & Troels Burchall Henningsen, 2022, pp. 973-974). The rise of ISIL in Iraq in 2014 posed a dual challenge and opportunity for the Islamic Republic. Given its hostile stance toward Shia Muslims, ISIL was considered a threat to Iran, but at the same time, it presented an opening for the Quds Force to advance its interests in Iraq and solidify the presence of its Heydarioun militia in an Iraq following the ISIL era. A fatwa issued by Iraq's most prominent Shia religious authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, in 2014, urging all Iraqis to take up arms against ISIL, played a pivotal role in the formation of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), also known as Hashd ash-Sha'bī. The Hashd serves as an overarching militia coalition comprising 40 paramilitary factions, boasting a force of over 140,000 combatants. Forming the bedrock of the PMU, the Heydarioun militia was armed, trained, and prepared for deployment. Within these Shia militia units, there existed varying degrees of alignment with Iran; some groups were closely affiliated with Iran, while others adhered to Iraq's Shia seminary and were considered advocates of Sistani (Golkar, Saeid & Aarabi, Kasra, 2021, pp. 43-44).

Encompassing Sistanists, Sadrists, and Iran-aligned Hashds, the Hashd mirrors the diversity within Shia politics and paramilitary organizations. The Iran-aligned Hashd militias, commonly known as the “Hashd Soleimani”, funded and controlled by the Quds Force, distinguish themselves due to their robust institutional support, military proficiency, and operational experience. By the same token, they maintain close ties with Iranian-aligned political groups such as the Badr Brigades in Iraq, and they wield significant influence in shaping the outcomes of Iraqi polls. This considerable Iranian sway in structuring the Hashd, coupled with their strategic impact on individual Hashd factions, suggests that Iran's Quds Force aimed to establish a structure akin to the Iranian Basij in Iraq (Uzun, 2020, pp. 19-22). In line with this, an article issued by the IRGC-linked Tasnim News Agency hailed the formation of an organization in Iraq, known as the Popular Mobilization Units or *Ḥashd ash-Sha‘bī*, taking inspiration from the Iranian Basij (Tasnim News Agency, 2016).

From Iran's viewpoint, the ISIL menace presented a chance to reshape its profile as a protector of religious minorities in the region, including Shia Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis. This juxtaposed sharply with the Quds Force's secretive activities in Syria. Iran openly promoted its initiatives to support proxy factions in Iraq and to offer assistance, both in terms of politics and military, as well as financial and in humanitarian aid, to significant players like the Shia and Kurdish communities (Oktav, 2018, p. 202). The outreach campaign led by Qassem Soleimani, featured photographs of his interactions with various groups in Iraq. This campaign provides concrete evidence of Iran's active efforts, which sharply contrasted with the clandestine role the Quds Force played in Syria (Dina Esfandiary & Ariane Tabatabai, 2015, p. 5). Qassem Soleimani, the commander-in-chief of the Quds Force, being in Iraq, demonstrated Iran's readiness to employ force and underscored the gravity with which it regarded the escalating crises in Syria and Iraq. (Oktav, 2018, p. 207). Notably, on the evening of January 3, 2020, a US airstrike targeted and killed the Quds Force commander-in-chief Qassem Soleimani alongside the Iraqi *Khata'ib Hizb'allah* militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Christian Høj Hansen & Troels Burchall Henningsen, 2022, pp. 973-974).

Motivated by their achievements in Iraq, the IRGC-QF expanded its reach to Yemen, a nation characterized by a significant Shia-Zaidi minority population. Following the Iraq invasion, a faction within the - historically moderate - group radicalized, staging large-scale protests against the United States and Israel. Tensions escalated when, in November 2009, the Houthis crossed into Saudi territory and occupied several Shia villages, causing alarm in Riyadh that launched a full-scale offensive against the Houthis, which prompted the IRGC to extend support to the rebels. Confronted by daunting challenges and compelled by the situation, in February 2010, the Houthis withdrew from Saudi territory and entered into a ceasefire treaty with Saudi Arabia (Rezaei, 2017, p. 165). The 2014 seizure of Sanaa, by the Houthi movement, known as Anṣār Allāh presented the Quds Force with a chance to expand its sway. The roots of the connection between the Houthi movement and the IRGC trace back to 1979, a significant year when leaders from the Yemeni Shia Houthi tribe journeyed to Iran to extend their congratulations to Ayatollah Khomeini upon the establishment of an Islamic state, while throughout the 1980s, a number of Houthi cadres pursued studies in Qom's seminary, where they were exposed to Iran's fervent interpretation of Shiism, hoping to bring about an Islamic Revolution in Yemen. In 2014, as the moment unfolded, the Quds Force swiftly dispatched Lebanese and Iraqi Shia militias, to support the Houthis in solidifying their control (Golkar, Saeid & Aarabi, Kasra, 2021, p. 45).

Despite the long-lasting relationship between the Houthis and Iran, as well as the Quds Force's resources and tactical assistance for their cause, establishing full control over the Houthis proved challenging. Although the Houthi movement at its core was undeniably shaped by the Islamic Revolution, it's essential to note that the Houthis follow the Zaydi branch of Shia Islam, distinct from the Twelver Imam Shia embraced by IRGC. This religious distinction limited Iran's capacity to secure unwavering allegiance and control over the Houthis (Golkar, Saeid & Aarabi, Kasra, 2021, p. 45). Still, similar tenets of challenging the established order led the Houthis to align themselves with the Axis of Resistance. Primarily comprised of Shia groups like Iran and Hizb'allah, the Houthis stand against a regional dominance led by the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and their predominantly Sunni partners. As the Houthis have solidified their control in northern Yemen, their socioeconomic, defense, and strategic outlooks have increasingly converged

with those of Iran. This congruence has enabled the IRGC to exert a constant and strategically significant military presence across the South of the Arabian Peninsula, countering Arab foes like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Yemen, in line with Tehran's broader regional goals, has become another arena for Iran to challenge Israel and the newly formed Abraham Accords coalition in the Middle East (Katherine Zimmerman & Nicholas A. Heras, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

Iran's foreign policies are strategically driven, with sectarianism as a factor but not the exclusive or overwhelming one, as often portrayed. Throughout its trajectory, the Islamic Republic has largely followed a nonsectarian path. Iranian leadership has consistently highlighted the importance of pan-Islamic unity and have actively sought alliances with Sunni partners. Iran's policy of backing resistance groups via the involvement of the IRGC signifies the Islamic Republic's recognition of an ideological and institutional device that enhances its regional stimulus. Against this background, Iran regards its religious ideology and institutions like the IRGC as intrinsic sources of power. This perception extends to the Islamic Republic's policy of supporting resistance groups through IRGC involvement, indicating that Iran, despite its support for these groups, continues to act rationally and pragmatically in pursuit of its strategic interests, aligning more closely with a *realpolitik* approach.

Over its course the IRGC has transformed itself from solely a military entity into a multifaceted force that extends into economic, social, and eventually political realms within the Islamic Republic of Iran, driven by its active participation in the comprehensive post-war reconstruction efforts across various spheres of Iran's development. As it assumes its economic role, IRGC emerges as an ideologically-driven corporate entity with a unique degree of autonomy, often operating beyond the purview of state regulation. This evolution profoundly shapes the Iranian politics, essentially creating a formidable blend of military and industrial interests concealed behind a civilian veneer. This domestic influence has empowered the IRGC to evolve into a prominent political actor, wielding substantial influence across a diverse range of interests tied to Iranian foreign policy, particularly in the context of regional stability and military. Over the years, the IRGC's economic activities have expanded to cover approximately one-third of Iran's GDP. This significant economic footprint not only grants the IRGC considerable influence but also provides a compelling motive for the Guards to engage in shaping foreign policies with economic consequences. To safeguard its vast economic interests, which have permeated nearly every facet of the Iranian economy, the IRGC has adopted a hardline stance, employing tactics aimed at countering or thwarting perceived foreign challenges to these interests.

Iran's political order relies on intricate arrangements among elites with power bases in either the state or parastatal sectors. Key actors in this intricate dance include the president, the state bureaucracy, the Revolutionary Guards, influential revolutionary foundations, and ultra-conservative clerics. Both domestic and foreign policy matters become battlegrounds for these competing elites, engaged in intense and at times tumultuous rivalries. Given that the Revolutionary Guards, bonyads and clerics run independently of state institutions, they often diverge from the official government stance. The IRGC, in particular, are known for promoting foreign policy objectives that oppose those of the president, occasionally even undermining government decisions.

Ahmadinejad's promotion of a quasi-nationalist ideology, even in the face of strong clerical opposition, signified a fundamental shift in the political calculus, actively engaging in the construction of a novel political ideology, one aimed at legitimizing the ascent of war veterans from the Iraq-Iran War era while concurrently seeking to diminish the influence of the clerical elite. This situation offers insights into the strategic maneuvering of the IRGC that has initially leveraged the discord between the president and the supreme leader and then swiftly shifted its position in favor of Khamenei. This intervention underscored, in essence, the IRGC's emergence as the ultimate determiner of power within Iran, proving its adaptability and resilience within a political system of constant power struggle.

Iran's influence in the MENA region is profoundly shaped by the transformations occurring within its state-society dynamics and internal state institutions. The increasing prominence of the IRGC as a key regional player can be attributed, at least in part, to the process of militarization and heightened securitization within Iran's political framework. Today, Iran avoids openly advocating for *velâyat-e faqīh* as a potential political system for Middle Eastern states undergoing political transformation. Nonetheless, Iran's engagement within the “Axis of Resistance” indicates that, by the mid-2010s, the idea of exporting Iran's political system has transformed into a different concept, the dissemination of Iran's military framework. The formation of paramilitary groups such as Hashd ash-Sha‘bī in Iraq and the NDF in Syria represents a significant facet of Iran's comprehensive institution-building endeavors throughout the Middle East. The “Iranian Basij model”, in the context

of these nascent institutions, suggests that the Islamic Republic is extending not only its military framework but also potentially its political structure across the region through diverse initiatives. However, it's essential to acknowledge that conflicts within these countries could have significantly influenced this situation, by assessing the perceived security threats and other opposition forces that prompted military cooperation among the “Axis of Resistance” members.

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