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Middle East Brief

The Informal Roots of the IRGC and the Implications for Iranian Politics Today

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The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)—the military, security, and economic organization that is intertwined with Iran’s governance in numerous ways—has significantly expanded its influence in the Middle East in recent years. With support from the office of the Supreme Leader and under General Qasem Soleimani’s command, the IRGC has established or assisted Shi’a militias in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. In the past twelve months, the Trump administration has described this expansive presence as “destructive” and pursued a policy of maximum pressure to compel Iran to “act like a normal nation.” In addition to withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal (the JCPOA) and imposing extensive economic sanctions, the administration recently announced its decision to designate the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, even though the IRGC is an official military wing of the Iranian government. Will these policies successfully constrain the IRGC as the most controversial agent of Iran’s foreign policy in the Middle East?

This Brief argues that any answer to this question must rely on a careful examination of the inherently informal nature of the IRGC; otherwise, the IRGC’s behavior will be considered more predictable than it is in reality. In fact, informality was ingrained in the IRGC based on the contingencies of its early political and military history: The IRGC’s unconventionally informal and hence flexible political structure was established and soon became consolidated in the very first days of the Islamic Republic, after the 1979

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revolution. It was a structure that reflected the informal organization of clerical circles and lay Shi'a communities in the revolutionary resistance movement and their continued presence in politics after the revolution. The Brief explores the debates around the IRGC's formation regarding its connection to such informal circles and analyzes how the flexible modus operandi that emerged as a result was consolidated in the IRGC during the armed conflicts of the following years.

The Advantages of Informality

The legacy of internalized informality is important for understanding Iranian politics today, especially with regard to the IRGC and U.S. policy toward its military activities. Existing assessments of Iran's foreign policy and of the IRGC's regional activities often rely on the problematic assumption that the Iranian government is a monolithic entity operating consistently on an optimally rational bureaucratic basis and that, by extension, the IRGC is a masterfully designed, centrally controlled organization that pursues clear goals through rationally plausible means.

It is commonly acknowledged that there is a tension between the more moderate policies of President Hassan Rouhani and the radical posture of the IRGC, backed by the Supreme Leader. What is less commonly acknowledged is the distinctive organizational style under which the latter operates. The President and the offices under his supervision, like other formal bureaucracies, largely pursue premeditated, transparent, and legally justifiable policies. In organizations such as the IRGC, however, it has become acceptable over the years to make spontaneous decisions and embark on actions that are ideologically praiseworthy even when they are not pragmatically justified.

Even though the IRGC is arguably loyal and obedient to the Supreme Leader, occasional remarks or actions that go against centrally and collectively devised policies are neither restrained nor reprimanded, as long as they communicate a radical, revolutionary stance. Whereas some analysts take some such remarks and actions as representing the totality of the IRGC, other observers dismiss such occurrences as insignificant divergences from the organization's comprehensive system of command and control. Both approaches are problematic as a basis for addressing Iran and the IRGC's regional activities, however, as they disregard the spontaneity and unpredictability that the IRGC's informal structure enables.

Since the initiation of the IRGC into Iranian politics, its leaders and clerical supporters have prioritized personal trust over organizational roles, individual or small-group spontaneity over organizational decision-making, and "revolutionary" direct action over blind obedience. In reviewing these trends in the IRGC's early history, this Brief argues that the organization's strength lies not in a systematic network of operatives and resources, whether covert (as the Quds Force is sometimes characterized) or openly acknowledged (as its domestic economic presence is described), but rather in its flexibility and its tolerance for improvisation and spontaneity.

Informality and Early State-Building

The early power struggles in post-revolutionary Iran were not simply about who would get to assume which influential offices. They were about what

organizational form, what *modus operandi*, those offices should take. Moderate, mostly non-clerical activists envisioned a conventional form of government, with rational, bureaucratic underpinnings. This group of activists, sometimes referred to as “religious-nationalists,” had some experience in formal politics prior to the revolution. Although Muslim and supported by a few prominent clerics, they strived to restrict the influence of both religion and revolutionary passion on the government. Clerics close to Khomeini and their followers, on the other hand, preferred the communal, grassroots, and informal model of collective work that they had developed during the revolutionary movement. This latter group is commonly referred to as “Islamists” owing to their preference for the maximal incorporation of Islamic law and the dominance of clerical leadership in governance. The two rival groups are hereinafter referred to as religious-nationalists and Islamists.

Prior to the 1979 revolution, clerics and seminary students attracted to Khomeini’s anti-Pahlavi agenda came together in loosely organized resistance groups. What brought these activists together in such collectives, however, was not a planned organization with an explicitly articulated plan of action, of the sort characteristic of more conventional revolutionary activity. For instance, religious-nationalist activists worked mainly within various NGOs or participated in formal politics as reformers, and a range of Marxist militias operated as clandestine small cells. Instead of establishing independently designed resistance organizations, Islamists remained embedded inside seminaries or, in the case of lay activists, within neighborhood-based communal organizations, such as mosques and congregations that were responsible for holding annual mourning rituals. From within those structures, they identified other individuals who shared their political awareness. Although such communities were not completely mobilized, existing nodes and ties within them were activated for revolutionary purposes. The result was a resilient and flexible network with no recognizable organizational boundaries, which was hard for Pahlavi’s security organization to uncover.

The same flexible style of collective action was put to overt political use within the earliest post-revolutionary organizations, such as the Revolutionary Council. In January 1978, a month before the revolution was declared victorious, Khomeini asked clerics close to him to put together a team of leaders, to be called the Revolutionary Council. The Council was supposed to serve not just as centralized leadership for the movement but also as the nucleus for the *post*-revolutionary state apparatus; it was necessary, therefore, for experienced politicians, who

were to be found only among the religious-nationalists, to be included. Clerics close to Khomeini, however, insisted that leading the movement itself, for which there was no need to include religious-nationalist activists, was the more immediate agenda. They thereby postponed delegating leadership to professional religious-nationalist politicians and so strengthened their own foothold in the leadership circle.

With Khomeini’s return after fifteen years of exile ten days before the triumph of the revolutionary movement, activists needed to embark on large-scale logistical preparations, such as making arrangements for Khomeini’s flight back to Iran, organizing rallies for greeting him, and arranging for a suitable location for him to reside in the days to come. The Committee for Welcoming the Imam, which would become the headquarters of the revolution’s leadership upon Khomeini’s arrival, was established for this purpose. Facing major practical responsibilities, the Islamists agreed to put the more experienced religious-nationalists in charge of practical matters, including devising an organizational chart and recruiting necessary staff and security forces. They did not grant the religious-nationalists full authority to execute the plans they devised, however. Instead, they intermittently interrupted their organizing work and relied on two assets within their circles of clerics and their followers to get necessary tasks accomplished.

First and foremost, Islamists had access to manpower and resources within numerous trusted networks of activists already loosely mobilized through the semi-formal organizations mentioned above. By relying on such small communities, they managed to organize tasks in a decentralized fashion without risking disruption or division of their forces. As a result, they could disregard the plans that were centrally devised with the religious-nationalists’ cooperation and yet procure the resources needed for any given job, though not in the most efficient way possible. Mobilizing and training the Welcoming Committee’s security personnel was a case in point: Islamists disregarded the collective decision to recruit volunteers through a unified procedure and instead relied on trusted pre-existing, semi-independent small groups to provide security for Khomeini’s return.

Secondly, strong ties between individuals within established Islamist communities made for leaders with a high degree of flexibility. Individuals were able to drift away spontaneously from collective agreements without risking criticism or exclusion, and they could rejoin the community immediately afterwards, as long as the spontaneous move was not against the principles

that held their community together: the dignity of Islam and of the clerics, along with a revolutionary passion for achieving and preserving an ideal Islamic society under Khomeini's leadership. This flexibility allowed Islamists to diverge from plans that religious-nationalists had made whenever they felt that the religious-nationalists were influencing policies too strongly. Thus, while the Welcoming Committee had designated its headquarters, a school in southern Tehran, to serve also as Khomeini's residence, a single cleric decided to move him overnight to another location, where religious-nationalists did not have a strong presence. This move was met with surprise at first from other clerics, but was later praised as a decision that would "save the revolution" from the religious-nationalists' undesirable influence.

On February 5, 1979, Khomeini decreed the establishment of a provisional government. In line with his and others' belief that formal politics should be left to the more experienced religious-nationalists, he introduced Mahdi Bazargan, an experienced politician, as the provisional prime minister. Islamists did not leave the political scene, however, instead focusing their activities within semi-official organizations parallel to the new government. The Revolutionary Council, for example, continued to serve as the authority for providing overarching policy guidelines and overseeing presidential and parliamentary elections. In addition, impromptu revolutionary institutions started to emerge based on the same assets that had enabled the Islamists to manage the activities of the Welcoming Committee. The religious-nationalists initiated the IRGC as an official militia to centralize scattered armed activity. Emerging as it did, however, out of a political field divided over organizational styles of governance, the IRGC's structure was a matter of political struggle from the moment of its birth.

The IRGC as an Arena of Organizational Struggle and Institution-Building

Because of its ideological posture, its politics, and the prominent role it plays today in Iran's political sphere, it is often assumed that the IRGC has always been the Islamic Republic's loyal armed force and that it was heavily supported by the post-revolutionary government from its inception. That is not the case. It is almost forgotten today that it was the religious-nationalist provisional government that first took the initiative to unify under a national guard, tentatively called the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the multitude of grassroots militias that had emerged throughout the revolution. The IRGC, as we know it today, emerged only after months of struggle over which office would assume its command

and, as a result, how rigid an organizational structure would be imposed on it.

Throughout the revolution, a few small irregular warfare militias had formed under the leadership of activists briefly trained in guerrilla camps outside of Iran. With the revolutionary movement's success, at least three of these groups made themselves known to both the public and officials as "guardians of the Islamic revolution" and started to operate as self-authorized law enforcement centers. The religious-nationalist provisional government initiated a plan to unify these guardian corps, along with hundreds of civilian clusters that had taken up arms and acted as neighborhood watch units known as the Committees. The government's goal was to subordinate all armed activity under a centrally organized militia, which would serve as a temporary replacement for the pre-revolutionary law enforcement organizations.

Religious-nationalists close to the provisional government convened on February 24, 1979, to discuss the foundation of such a militia. Although Islamists in charge of the Revolutionary Council were aware of this development, they were not invited by the government to help establish the militia. The provisional prime minister declared on the same day that a national guard (i.e., the IRGC) had been established and would take orders from the provisional government.

Islamists went to work immediately, though, to impose their influence on this militia. Mohsen Rafiqdust, an activist who had been in charge of logistics at the Welcoming Committee, recalls that he was unofficially assigned by a couple of Revolutionary Council clerics to attend the provisional government's February 24 meeting, uninvited. He was unable to immediately bring the IRGC under the Revolutionary Council's command; at the end of that meeting, the entity was announced as an office of the provisional government. In the next few months, however, as the provisional government struggled to unify grassroots guardian units under this umbrella organization, Rafiqdust and other Islamist activists played a crucial role in minimizing the provisional government's control.

A reasonable and legal path for centralizing scattered militias seemed to be for the three established guardian organizations to join forces with the government's IRGC and gradually absorb and train volunteers active in grassroots neighborhood watch units (the Committees). Even though the IRGC was infiltrated by Islamists, however, none of the other three corps were willing to go along with this plan, nor were Committee activists: They were reluctant to forego their autonomy and submit

to government control. It was finally Rafiqdust, the Revolutionary Council's man imposed on the IRGC, who convinced the other groups to join in, with the promise that the Corps would soon release itself from government supervision.

The desire to put the IRGC under the control of the Revolutionary Council was not just a matter of political side-taking, but also reflected a preference for the Council's loose organizational constraints. Just as Rafiqdust was imposed on the first IRGC meeting as "the Council's Representative," other personal and informal decisions based on clerics' momentary inclinations could be made in the name of the Council. And if the IRGC were accountable to the Revolutionary Council instead of to the government, it would be easier for leaders to reproduce and maintain the same structure within the IRGC itself.

The refurbished Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps issued its first declaration on April 22, 1979. A command council was introduced, and it was declared that the IRGC would now take orders only from Ayatollah Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council, not from the government. The Islamists had thereby taken their style of informal collective action to a more complex level. Whereas previously they had deployed an informal approach in leading unofficial collectives such as neighborhood congregations and resistance circles, they were now responsible for running a nationwide militia, which was soon to become involved in armed conflict.

Soon afterwards, IRGC leaders expanded the organization along the lines of this same logic: Trusted individuals with limited experience were assigned to establish specialized units, and trusted pre-existing local armed clusters were given official status to expand their activities under the banner of the IRGC. The formation of the Basij volunteer militia as an attachment to the IRGC in November 1979 further accelerated its organizational growth. And although the IRGC was initially created by the provisional government as a temporary entity, Islamists made sure that it was enshrined in the constitution that was ratified in December 1979.

Indeed, the IRGC soon became the epitome of Iranian revolutionary identity. Under the umbrella afforded by the Revolutionary Council's lenient expectations with respect to transparency and organizational discipline, it embraced its passionate volunteers' desire for semi-autonomous "revolutionary" action. As the IRGC undertook more intensive engagement in armed activity, this organizational flexibility was gradually ingrained in the IRGC as its combat identity.

Armed Activity and the Continuation of Informality

Even before the end of the struggle over which office would command the IRGC, small Guards units had become involved in repressing ethnic uprisings around the country. The most intensive of such clashes happened in Kurdish-populated areas along the western border, where the hiatus in central control had emboldened the Kurds' plea for self-governance.

As the IRGC became more heavily engaged in repressing such uprisings, it would have been reasonable for leaders to come together in order to professionalize the militia. Orchestrating armed activity within a nationwide militia could have marked a turning point in the Islamists' organizational logic, from a spontaneous, informal approach to one marked by more central planning. But this was still not to be the case: The IRGC continued to operate in a flexible and spontaneous manner when fighting against Kurdish insurgents. The chain of command was not yet established; local commanders had limited or no military experience; and the volunteer troops were not professionally trained.

The building blocks, instead, were small, semi-autonomous units led by individuals trusted as dedicated revolutionaries. The irregular nature of warfare with Kurdish guerrillas highlighted the advantages of the Guards' organizational flexibility and enabled IRGC leaders to even claim technical superiority over the classically organized Iranian Army when it came to irregular warfare. The IRGC's organizational flexibility was appreciated by volunteer participants: They sought direct and passionate involvement in the cause that was the Iranian revolution, and the IRGC was able to offer them the opportunity for such involvement. The dependence was mutual: The IRGC's minimally planned decentralization necessarily relied on the will of participants to undertake initiatives independently.

This mutual dependence was greatly enhanced and relied upon when the war with Iraq started in September 1980. In the first year of the Iran-Iraq war, as Iran's religious-nationalist president, Banisadr, was reluctant to provide the nonprofessional Guards with arms or financial aid, the IRGC continued to rely on informal resources and flexible organizational structures. At the level of intermediate leadership, the IRGC relied on the personal initiatives of officers on the ground to build small structures throughout the vast battlefield, using what minimal equipment the organization could offer them.

They remained connected to the leadership through either existing interpersonal acquaintances or newly built ties of trust, based on a positive informal assessment of their revolutionary identity.

Even when the IRGC expanded in size by recruiting hundreds of thousands of volunteers, the same informality remained at the core of its organizational work. Many volunteers bonded with their immediate commanders and projected a similar level of connection to higher levels of command. IRGC leaders counted on their dedication to perform small high-risk night raids, and volunteers in turn appreciated the IRGC's recognition of their desire for free-spirited action.

Toward the end of the first year of the war, the IRGC managed to convince Iranian army officers that the strategic information the IRGC was gathering about enemy lines and the IRGC's motivated infantry units could complement classic military plans. Ten infantry battalions of Guards and Basijis were deployed in the first successful grand offensive on the Iranian side, in October 1981: Operation Samen. The success of Samen, alongside political conflicts leading to the impeachment of the religious-nationalist president, who had been reluctant to assign the IRGC a bigger role in the war, elevated the IRGC's status as an armed force independent of the army, even as it was still operating with extreme organizational flexibility.

Post-war Formalization and the Survival of Grassroots Ideals

The IRGC had even greater appeal for the Islamists after it successfully institutionalized a flexible and, hence, popular style on the battlefield by May of 1982. Islamists had ascended to power in all government departments by then, and the IRGC was receiving increased financial and political support. After Operation Samen, the IRGC began a streak of expansion that continued until the end of the war in 1988; every few months it grew in one way or another. In the fall of 1981, its first armored unit was established by refurbishing looted Iraqi tanks. Infantry battalions rose from 10 in September of 1981 to 100 in March of 1982. The percentage of the military budget allocated to the IRGC rose from 7.3 in 1980 to 20.3 in 1982, 31.1 in 1984, and 44.1 in 1987.

In 1983, as IRGC commanders refused to accept the army's command any longer, the political leadership granted them the opportunity to plan and execute major operations independently. During that same year, the IRGC became entitled to a proportion of conscripts of

the compulsory service, which provided them with a more stable supply of rank-and-file soldiers. From 1984 onward the IRGC started training new commanders at military universities and education centers, using IRGC commanders' war experiences as well as army officers' military knowledge. In 1985, IRGC commanders got Khomeini's permission to transform the organization into a three-force military, and an IRGC Air Force and Navy were established.

Despite all the professionalization and organizational consolidation underway, a flexible style of organizational work was institutionalized deeply enough in the IRGC to continue as the engine running the organization. Until the end of the war with Iraq in 1988, the chain of command was still not transparent; major decisions were still made in informal settings; and spontaneous moves were still tolerated across the board. Even after the introduction of military ranks and promotion paths and the exponential increase in the IRGC's political power in the post-Iran-Iraq war decades, it has preserved its identity as a "network of brotherhood."

In the years following the political and military rise of the IRGC, starting as early as 1982, some IRGC officers left the organization in protest. Some volunteers declined the offer to become members and preferred to serve as Basijis. Some members were fired as they continued their early-days habit of challenging authorities freely when they saw fit. But surprisingly, a large group of Iran-Iraq war veterans still see the IRGC as the ideal revolutionary organization and believe that it does, or at least can, run according to the flexible modality it adopted in its early years. They have remained dedicated to the belief that the IRGC still serves the cause of the revolution. Until today, they defend the IRGC's conduct during the war, even if they no longer have an affiliation with the IRGC or never had one officially.

Implications

This history of the formation and early years of the IRGC raises two points that have important implications for understanding Iran and the IRGC's foreign and political behavior today. First and foremost is the fact that the fluid organizational style that at first characterized the IRGC has now become an embedded characteristic of the organization. Informality has been deeply institutionalized within the IRGC in a gradual, multi-stage manner, so that even after its bureaucratic expansion after the Iran-Iraq war, it continues to drive the organization. More importantly, since that informality has been associated with embracing genuine

grassroots activity in defense of the Islamic Republic's ideals, it has acquired a sacredness in the discourse not only of "revolutionary" organizations such as the IRGC itself, but of the political offices under the Supreme Leader's supervision. As a result, expectations for this organizational behavior to morph into a more "normal" *modus operandi* within the Islamic Republic of Iran do not seem realistic.

The second point to be concluded from this historical narrative is that the IRGC was the most enduring result of the power struggle between grassroots-oriented Islamists and the religious-nationalist technocrats who were of a more conventional organizational mindset. Although religious-nationalists have long been expelled from Iran's political scenery, reformists and moderates have taken up their place in the country's political struggle. And the same pattern of interaction that eventually led to the monopolization of the IRGC by Islamists can be seen in Iranian foreign policy today. While the office of the President and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are together the on-the-ground face of Iran's diplomacy in international venues, organizations accountable directly to the Supreme Leader roam freely and pull the strings of the country's anti-American and anti-Zionist posture.

To neglect this divide is to misconstrue the effect of punitive policies on Iran's domestic and international politics. The IRGC's extraterritorial operations are executed through informal channels that are sometimes devised spontaneously. As a result, restrictive policies that target predictable organizational behaviors are unlikely to directly and exclusively affect the IRGC's fluctuating methods, networks, and resources or their largely volunteer mass support. Instead, punitive restrictions imposed on Iran weaken the technocratic, internationally accountable section of the polity, which relies on more predictable venues for running the country's day-to-day affairs.

Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of State, "Remarks on the Creation of the Iran Action Group," August 16, 2018.
- 2 The White House, "Statement from the President on the Designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a Foreign Terrorist Organization," April 8, 2019.
- 3 For examples of analyses that rely on such assumptions, see Nikola Schahgaldian, *The Iranian Military under the Islamic Republic* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1987); Ali Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards Is Turning Theocracy into Military Dictatorship* (Washington, D.C: AEI Press, 2013); and Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary*

Guards and Wars in the Middle East (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).

- 4 For example, Uskowi (in *Temperature Rising*, pp. 21ff.) talks about the "Shi'a Liberation Army (SLA)" as a systematic transnational militia that the IRGC has diligently established and centrally commands today. But, in fact, the term "SLA" was coined in an interview with a mid-ranking commander, reflecting his own interpretation of the IRGC's support for scattered militias in the region. The term has not been contested by IRGC's central command, as it is consistent with its general ideology; but it is nonetheless a distorting exaggeration of the level of central organization and planning behind the IRGC's regional presence.
- 5 The Iran Action Group's first report, for instance, introduces the IRGC as a homogenous and highly disciplined organization that is the agent of Iran's "devastating activities" across the Middle East (U.S. Department of State Iran Action Group, "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities").
- 6 Informal organizations did emerge *out of* such structures, as the existence of entities such as the Society of Combatant Clergy and the Association of Mourning Congregations testifies. And I believe that their separation from non-political clerical and lay networks was more nominal than anything else. One can imagine them as politicized sub-networks, embedded within religious ones, which still operated on the basis of the same personal connections and with the same overall structure.
- 7 See Beheshti's public speech in April 1979, reprinted in Morteza Nazari, *Khaterat-e mandegar as zendegi-ye Ayatollah Doktor Sayyed Mohammad Hoseyni Beheshti* [Unforgettable memories from the life of Ayatollah Dr. Mohommad Hoseyni Beheshti] (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Farhang-e Eslami, 1378[1999], p. 200).
- 8 Mohsen Rafiqdust, *Baray-e tarikh miguyam: khaterat-e Mohsen Rafiqdust* [I Speak for history: Memoirs of Mohsen Rafiqdust], vol. 1 (Tehran: Sureh-ye Mehr, 1393[2014]).
- 9 Muhammadreza Mahdavi-Kani, *Khaterat-e ayatollah Mahdavi-Kani* [Memoirs of Ayatollah Mahdavi-Kani] (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 1386[2007]).
- 10 Javad Mansuri, *Tarikh-e Shafahi-ye ta'sis-e Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami* [Oral history of the establishment of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps] (Tehran: Markaze-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 1393 [2014]).
- 11 Interview with Keyhan, quoted in Mansuri, *Tarikh-e Shafahi-ye ta'sis-e Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami*, p. 47.
- 12 Mohsen Rafiqdust, *Baray-e tarikh miguyam: khaterat-e Mohsen Rafiqdust*, p. 51.
- 13 "Management and Planning Organization," document reprinted in Hoseyn Ala'i, *Ravand-e Jang-e Iran va Iraq* [The Iran-Iraq War process], 2 vols. (Tehran: Marz-o Bum, 1391, [2012]).
- 14 Ali Ansari, "The Revolution Will Be Mercantiled," *The National Interest* (January/February 2010), p. 50.



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