

The Iranian Security Apparatus

History – Present – Mission

Walter Posch

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Preface

Elements of Iran's security apparatus are routinely criticised by the European public. In most cases, comments focus on the activities of regular and irregular Iranian forces in the region, on Iran's missile and nuclear programmes as well as the numerous human rights violations perpetrated in the country. Only recently, in connection with the protests concerning the Iranian Kurd Mahsa Zhina Amini, who died in police custody, there have been calls for the dissolution of an important element of the security apparatus, namely the Revolutionary Guard. The aim of this paper is to outline the most important known elements of the Iranian security apparatus.

Definition and Characteristics

We understand the term *security apparatus* as a combination of the following elements: (a) the various bodies responsible for national defence, internal security and a country's power projection; as a rule, these are the military, police, secret or intelligence services and, should they exist, paramilitaries. Even non-governmental bodies can be part of the *apparatus*. Then, (b) those institutions and bodies, which manage, coordinate and monitor the aforementioned entities, are also part of the *apparatus*. The proper functioning of the processes between and within these institutions and bodies determines the efficiency of a security apparatus.

In the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, one has to observe some special features related to the revolutionary nature of the regime. Most importantly the combination of traditional, state-sanctioned bearers of arms, with revolutionary ones. Thus, the army and police coexist with revolutionary institutions co-responsible for security and power projection. This situation produces duplications, redundancies, unclear allocations of responsibilities and inter-institutional competition. From an external perspective, the initial duplication in the area of national defence is particularly striking, where the Revolutionary Guard exists alongside the army as a bearer of arms. At the same time, efforts have been underway for years to rationalise this parallelism and assign differing tasks to different institutions, so that today, one can assume that the various elements are in an ongoing process of fusion.

In fact, the Islamic Republic of Iran maintains a numerically strong conscript army, but in terms of budget and modern weaponry is hardly comparable to the highly armed Arab Gulf States. The core of Iran's armament still consists of American weapons systems from the time before the 1979 revolution, later on to be augmented and occasionally supplemented with weapons systems of Soviet, later Russian and Ukrainian, as well as Chinese and Iranian production. Despite sanctions and a relatively low defence budget, Iran has been able to set up its own arms industry, whose missile and drone production has attracted international attention. Its achievements in the field of naval armaments are also noteworthy. International observers agree, however, that the strength of Iran's power projection lies in the deployment of irregular forces and that its internal security is the product of the seamless and flexible surveillance of Iran's society and political opposition.

Origins

It is impossible to separate the history of the Iranian armed forces from the development of the modern Iranian state under the Pahlavi dynasty.¹ Although army reforms had already taken place in the 19th century, only Reza Khan Pahlavi (Reza Shah Pahlavi from 1925) could unite the various military academies and military units such as the Russian-led Cossack Brigade, the Swedish trained Gendarmerie or the British South Persia Rifles in 1922.² The transformation of a motley (*rangarang*) into a unified (*motabbed-ol-schekl*) army was undoubtedly Reza Khan's greatest achievement. The Iranian public appreciated the reorganisation of the armed forces, which was expressed in the new, standardised uniforms, as proof of the country's national unity and sovereignty.

Counterinsurgency and Army reform

Iran's young army consisted mainly of European-style cavalry and infantry divisions, which the government for the most part employed in counterinsurgency operations against nomadic tribes, autonomous regional rulers and mutinies in Khorasan and Azerbaijan.³ Operations by the Army Air Corps, originally used as a reconnaissance and fire support element for the divisions and transformed into an independent air force after the Second World War, proved particularly successful.⁴ In fact, the authorities managed with great military effort, to establish state control over the country. The pacification of the 'Soviet Republic of Gilan', a Moscow supported entity led by an in-

¹ This paper's military-historical analysis relies on the following Iranian accounts (all in Persian): Gholamreza ALI-BABAYI, *History of the Army of Iran from the Akbaemenid Empire to the Pahlavi Era*, Tehran 2003; Jalal PEZHMÁN, *The Collapse of the Imperial Army. The Memoirs of Lieutenant General Jalal Pezhman, Commander of the Imperial Guards Division (fourth edition)*, Tehran 2002; Mir-Hoseyn YEKRANGIYAN, *A Journey through the History of the Army of Iran. From the Beginning to September 1941*, Tehran 2005.

² The official establishment of the new Iranian Army took place on 4 January 1922 with the first *General Army Order*. cf. ALI-BABAYI, pp. 250-254.

³ Numerous Iranian authors have written on the insurrections of the various tribes. For a good and objective overall description from the Iranian Armed Forces' point of view cf. PEZHMÁN, pp. 53-76. The last large-scale insurrections took place in the 1950s, cf. Pierre OBERLING, *The Qashqā'i Nomads of Fārs*, Den Haag – Paris 1974.

⁴ For a short history of the Iranian Air Force cf. ALI-BABAYI, pp. 269-282.

digenous movement called Jangali, as well as the subjugation of the autonomous rulers of the Arabic-speaking oil province of Khuzistan posed particular challenges.⁵ These successes had an impact on the country's internal security. Especially when the new gendarmerie force subordinate to the military successfully suppressed banditry and highwaymen.

The Army's modernisation made steady progress in the face of major difficulties. In addition to technical and financial aspects, these primarily concerned command and control. The first step was to create a new Persian command language, to replace the Azeri-Turkish used by the troops and the Russian and French used by senior officers. In all three cases, ancient Persian terms were successfully adapted and neologisms created. Thus, it became possible to create a national military terminology in a short time. Concomitantly, the military regulations and training system were updated. Until then, there had been numerous traditions in officer training and the associated training and combat service regulations, namely Russian, Swedish and Austrian. The latter were a legacy of several military delegations from the monarchy, which had established a military academy as part of the Iranian polytechnic, the prestigious Dar-ol-Fonun founded in 1851.⁶

However, there was no institution training senior and flag officers, especially general staff training. With only a few exceptions, the Iranian Army counted almost no officers trained in the basics of operational-level command and general staff service at a modern military training establishment. Therefore, the shah decided to send graduates of the officer academy to France for further training and to bring French officers into the country. Finally, the War College was set up as a French-run higher military academic training centre to safeguard general staff training of the future military command echelon.⁷ The beginning of the Second World War put an end to the fruitful Franco-Iranian co-operation in higher officer training, the standard of which plummeted when young commissioned officers, previously employed as interpreters for the French, had to take over training responsibilities. In addition to a

⁵ On the Jangalis cf. Pezhman DAILAMI, 'The Bolsheviks and the Jangali Revolutionary Movement, 1915-1920,' *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 31 January 1990, pp. 43-59.

⁶ On the military education and training system until WWII cf. YEKRANGIYAN, pp. 215-238.

⁷ YEKRANGIYAN, pp. 243-5.

general modernisation, the French laid the foundations for a military intelligence and reconnaissance service, set up with the *Deuxième Bureau* as its model.⁸

In 1941, the Soviet Union and Great Britain occupied Iran and deposed the Shah. Prior to this, the general staff had already announced a ceasefire without imperial authorisation, in an attempt to save as much of the Army as possible. The occupation by the Allies weighed heavily and had a catastrophic effect on the Iranian armed forces: The allies reduced the Imperial Iranian Army drastically and, following Soviet pressure forced it to withdraw its units from the provinces of Azerbaijan and Kordestan. Furthermore, the Allies exerted severe supervision over the remaining Army units in the rest of the country, where they immediately restricted the Iranian divisions' freedom of movement and action. Essentially, the allies downgraded the Imperial Iranian Army to the role of a security unit for the so-called 'Persian Corridor' i.e. the route leading from the Gulf to Central Asia and Soviet Azerbaijan, which the Allies used to supply weapons and vehicles to the Soviet Union. Only the gendarmerie was present throughout the country, and therefore received the greatest attention from the government. In order to strengthen its own position against the British and Soviets, the Iranian government and the general staff turned to the USA, which agreed to rebuild the Iranian gendarmerie. This marked the beginning of the Iranian-American security co-operation, which lasted until 1979. The Allied occupation, however, produced another result: it changed the relationship between the monarch in his function as commander-in-chief, the government and the general staff.

Generals playing politics

In 1941, the young Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was declared Shah of Iran in his deposed father's stead.⁹ Nobody, either domestically or internationally, was interested in a strong and independent Iranian monarch whose room for

⁸ The most important source on the creation of Iran's military intelligence service still remains Hoseyn FARDOUST, *The Rise and Fall Of Pahlavi Rule: The Memoirs of former General Hoseyn Fardoust*, [in Persian], 2 vol., published by Abdollah Shahbaz, first ed., Tehran 1987 (second ed. ibid 2001), vol. I, p. 382.

⁹ On the last shah cf. Abbas MILANI, *The Shah*, New York 2011.

manoeuvre was restricted by the general staff, the aristocrats, parliament and the Allies. Added to this were, on the one hand, the activities of the communist Tudeh-Party, which had succeeded in penetrating deep into the ranks of the younger officer corps and which was the sole party to benefit from the Soviet presence in the country, and, on the other hand, the first activities of Islamist terrorist groups. When the Allies withdrew at the end of the Second World War, there were three centres of power in the state: the court, the general staff, and parliament, all of which wanted to control the government.

Although the proportion of aristocrats in the officer corps was quite high, the officers did not act as representatives of the nobility, but as representatives of a new, modern and secular technocracy and as teachers and guardians of the nation. This put them at odds with the wealthy landed aristocracy, which, as politicians and parliamentarians, had helped determine the country's fate.¹⁰ This antagonism led to a confrontation between the general staff and parliament as well as the chief of defence staff and the prime minister. When Hajj-Ali Razmara, a representative of the younger military technocracy, was appointed Chief of Defence Staff, and Mohammad Mosaddeq-ol-Saltaneh, a member of the wealthy, cosmopolitan aristocracy, became leader of the opposition and both were keen to achieve their ambition for the office of Prime Minister, the resulting escalation benefitted the third important institution: the Shah.

The young monarch had previously suffered two serious setbacks: on 4 February 1949, he barely survived an attempt on his life, an event never fully investigated. Even so, it served as an opportunity to ban the communist Tudeh Party and send the populist Ayatollah Kashani into exile. However, the people behind the assassination attempt were suspected to be in the Army's security service (G2 service of the general staff), demonstrating the extent to which the general staff regarded itself as an independent political actor. In November of the same year, 1949, the monarch's most important confidant at the time, Court Minister Abdolhossein Hazhir, was murdered by the Islamist terrorist group Fedayan-e Eslam – with Mosaddeq's knowledge and allegedly because he wanted to manipulate the 16th parliamentary elections.

¹⁰ Stephanie CRONIN, 'The Army, Civil Society, and the State in Iran: 1921-26,' in: Touraj ATABAKI und Erik J. ZÜRCHER (eds.): *Men of Order. Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah*, London – New York 2004, pp. 130-163, here p. 134-136.

In the subsequent period of unrest with changing prime ministers, the question of control over Iran's oil became the key issue for the country's future. The nationalist desire for complete sovereignty over the production and sale of the country's most important resource clashed with the continued dependence on foreign technical expertise. The controversies and dissensions regarding the role of the British culminated in a political crisis in 1951, during which the parliament elected the Chief of Defence Staff Razmara to Prime Minister. His opponents exploited the oil issue to exert political pressure on him. In the same year, the Fedayan-e Eslam struck again and fatally shot Prime Minister Razmara, again with Mosaddeq's knowledge.

Mosaddeq, who had succeeded Razmara in office, wasted little time in appointing his preferred officers to key positions in the security apparatus. He also laid the foundations for a civilian intelligence service, a task at which one of his predecessors, Ahmad Qavamo-ol-Saltaneh, had failed. The new service was only set up after his overthrow. The 'Organisation for Information and State Security' (*SAVAK Saẓeman-e Ettelaat va Amniyat-e Keshvar*) was originally supposed to report directly to the prime minister and coordinate and carry out all intelligence and state police functions under civilian command.¹¹ This would have limited the military intelligence service (essentially the G2 service of the general staff) to its core tasks, and the general staff would not have had much of a role to play as a political actor. Because Mosaddeq tried to sideline the shah and wrest the supreme command of all armed and security forces from him. In doing so, he antagonised the Shah and powerful groups among the generals. He then irritated his own political allies and angered the USA and Great Britain internationally until the Army finally staged a coup against him in 1953. Since then, the role of the USA and the responsibility of Iranian forces in the overthrow of Mosaddeq have been the subject of heated debate.¹²

¹¹ On the history of SAVAK cf. the analyses of sources by Walter POSCH, 'Die Memoiren des Hossein Fardust als Quelle für den SAVAK,' in: Alma HANNIG/Claudia REICHLHAM (eds.), *Zwischen Krieg und Frieden. Festschrift für Erwin Schmidl zum 65. Geburtstag*, Wien 2021, pp. 484-503. An overall view was attempted by Mozaffar SHAHEDI, *SAVAK The Intelligence and Security Service of the Country from 1335 to 1357*, [in Persian] Tehran (fourth edition) 2020.

¹² cf. Homa[yun] KATOZIAN, *Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, London – New York 1999; Darioush BAYANDOR, *Iran and the CIA. The Fall of Mosaddeq Revisited*, New York 2010; as well as Jalal MATINI, *A Glance of Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq's political programme*, (in Persian) Los Angeles 2005.

Mosaddeq's successor as Prime Minister was another general, Fazlollah Zahedi, whom the Shah dismissed even before he could follow Razmara's example and sent to Geneva as UN ambassador. The penultimate act of generals playing politics took place in 1958 and 1960, when two senior officers independently attempted *coups d'état*: General Mohammad-Vali Khan Qarani, the head of the G2 service of the general staff, and two years later General Teymur Khan Bakhtiar, who had been appointed head of the new SAVAK.¹³ Both failed, but the Shah maintained the practice of appointing senior officers from the general staff to head SAVAK, the (formally) civilian intelligence service. Although this service remained organisationally subordinate to the office of the prime minister, it actually worked for the Shah and observers regarded it as his most important buttress until the end of the monarchy.

Pillar of the realm

As had been the case before the Second World War, the Army continued to play an important role in the modernisation of the country. The Shah initiated an ambitious reform program, the so-called White Revolution, an education and health programme developed for the disadvantaged rural population, the implementation of which either was entirely in the hands of the Army or significantly supported by it.¹⁴ The Army therefore contributed to the stability of the country and the development of society through its support of popular education and social measures. The success of these measures can be gleaned from the fact that the Islamists under Ruhollah Khomeini did not attack the content of the land reform, but the referendum as such, which they rejected as a declaration of support for the Shah. During the Islamist unrest of 1963, contacts between high military officials (the dishonourably discharged former general Qarani) and high clerics (Ayatollah Milani in Mashhad) were established for the first time.

¹³ Mark J. GASIOROWSKI, 'The Qarani Affair and Iranian Politics,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 25 April 1993, pp. 625-644. Gasiorowski does not afford this attempted coup d'état the importance it deserves, especially as General Qarani was also active during the Islamist unrest in 1963 and became the Islamic Republic's first Chief of Defence Staff after the fall of the monarchy. The same applies to the aristocrat Teymur Bakhtiar, a close relative of Soraya, the Shah's second wife.

¹⁴ On the White Revolution or the Revolution of the Shah and the People cf. Ali ANSARI, 'The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah. 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, 37 March 2001, pp 1-24.

In 1955, by joining the so-called Baghdad Pact (CENTO – Central Treaty Organisation, made up of Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Iraq, coordinated by the UK and supported by the USA), Imperial Iran became part of the West in terms of military policy. Accordingly, the further expansion of the Iranian armed and security forces followed the Western, i.e. American, model. This initially concerned armament and equipment, training, tactics, etc. Senior officers completed their staff training (or parts thereof) in the USA, as did key technical personnel. However, most of the training on modern weapons systems and equipment took place in Iran itself, bringing large numbers of American military advisors into the country, which was sharply criticised by Islamists and communists. The Iranian armed forces supported by the USA now consisted of the Army, Navy and Air Force, each with their own general, admiral and air staffs. Together they formed the Great General Staff (*Setad-e Bozorg-e Arteshtaran*). In the mid-1970s, the Iranian Air Force and the Imperial Iranian Navy were considered to be the strongest in the region, enabling Iran as the ‘Gendarme of the Persian Gulf’ to replace the British as the preeminent regional power.

At the same time, the military also played an important role in the field of domestic security. Army generals held command positions in SAVAK, dominated the coordination committees on domestic and international security, and the gendarmerie and border troops remained part of the military despite their police duties. Above all, however, the Shah ordered the creation of a military unit, which served exclusively to protect the monarchy: the Imperial Guard.¹⁵ Originally a battalion-size unit, it was expanded into a brigade-size unit, the ‘Guard of the Immortals’ (*Gard-e Javidan*). Towards the end of the Pahlavi era, this mixed brigade was added to the 1st Infantry Division of Tehran, which was henceforth referred to as the Guard Division. Both together were swiftly called the Imperial Guard. This unit was organised with increasing autonomy from the rest of the Army and was directly subordinate to the Shah. Typical of the Middle East, Imperial Iran had thus created a second army, which only served regime security, similar to the Republican Guard in Iraq under Saddam Hussein. The Islamic Republic was to take the logic of the second army to its extreme after the revolution.

¹⁵ On the Imperial Guard compare the different perspectives of ALI-BABAYI, pp. 328-333 und PEZHMEN, pp. 323-337.

Dis-Continuity

In 1977, the domestic political situation came to a head and the political crisis began, which would lead to the revolution being victorious. The Army leadership played an important political role in this. On the one hand, the Shah appointed General Azhari as Prime Minister in November 1978, but his government failed after just a few weeks. The attempt to appease popular anger through (half-hearted) reforms of the security apparatus also failed. A few months earlier in the summer of the same year, the Shah dismissed General Nasiri, the head of SAVAK and thus the focus of public anger and replaced him with General Moqaddam, who, as the former head of Directorate General III Internal Security, had already held secret talks with the revolutionaries. Just as several generals had maintained contact with important representatives of the Khomeini movement long before the victory of the revolution. When, on 11 February 1979, the generals, who had sworn personal allegiance to the Shah, announced their political neutrality in the face of the revolution, it marked the end of the political role of the general staff. The first Chief of Defence Staff of the new Islamic Republic was Mohammad-Vali Qarani, who had already planned a coup in 1958 and conspired with Grand Ayatollah Milani against the Shah during the Islamist unrest in 1963.

Takeover of power

During the critical phase of 1979-80, the revolutionaries laid the foundations of the modern Iranian security apparatus. Khomeini and his supporters had to face several tasks at the same time: the country threatened to descend into chaos, ethnic conflicts erupted in many places and Khomeini's political opponents began to organise, including opponents from the Shiite clergy. The stabilisation of the country and the establishment of his control over the security apparatus went hand in hand, and thus, the new leadership took several measures almost simultaneously.

First, Khomeini's inner circle drew a clear line between armed and unarmed supporters. They convinced members of armed groups who wanted to remain politically active to give up their arms and join the parliamentary process. Then all militias and armed underground groups loyal to Khomeini had to merge and were reorganised as a parallel security unit in accordance with

military principles. In addition to the armed members of various parties, these groups also included local elements from the bazaar and internationalists trained by various Palestinian groups for decades. The newly founded 'Corps of Guardsmen of the Islamic Revolution' (*Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Engelab-e Eslami*, *Sepah* or Islamic Revolutionary Guard IRGC or Revolutionary Guard)¹⁶ was obliged to remain politically neutral and had to stay out of party politics. This meant that Khomeini had a relatively disciplined paramilitary force at his disposal, which was loyal to its leader (*rahbar*) and easily and rather soon deployed against communist and other groups. This also included the armed followers of various Ayatollahs. The most important of these was the Azeri-Turkish landowner Ayatollah Shariatmadari, whose followers were disarmed before Khomeini had him removed from power.

The so-called revolutionary committees (*komite-ye engelab*), entrusted with the realisation of the revolution, were more difficult to control. In the beginning, representatives of all revolutionary tendencies were active in these committees, which were organised in neighbourhoods or branches, but Khomeini's supporters soon succeeded in removing leftist and secular elements from the *komitehs*. The committees existed as an independent security force alongside the police and gendarmerie until their merger in the 1990s (see below). The *komitehs* and the Revolutionary Guard formed their own intelligence elements, which took over the function of the former imperial secret service SAVAK for four years.

A few weeks before the victory of the revolution, Prime Minister Shahpour Bakhtiar officially disbanded SAVAK, but the organisation did not really cease to exist. It was, however, no longer the natural centre to which other Iranian intelligence services and intelligence units of the police and provincial administrations sent copies of their reports and notifications of special incidents. In view of the revolutionary situation, the latter would have been impossible to manage anyway. One problem was the SAVAK and police files located in the provinces, over which Khomeini's supporters fought with the left-wing groups. The former had the upper hand because Ayatollah Hamid

¹⁶ Afshon OSTOVAR, *Vanguard of the Imam. Religion, Politics and Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, Oxford 2016 addresses the history of the Revolutionary Guard's creation and institution in only a couple of sentences. A good critical history of the Revolutionary Guard still needs to be written.

Ruhani (i.e. Sadegh Ziyarati) and a group took over the orphaned headquarters of the organisation and thus gained access to the central archive. Ruhani transformed the former secret service headquarters into a centre for research in contemporary history.¹⁷ In a first step, all representatives of the emerging regime had to submit written statements on their SAVAK-files, and then, the emerging regime used the material was subsequently used against political opponents. The various Directorates General worked in an uncoordinated manner and with varying degrees of efficiency. There were hardly any changes in Directorate General VIII Counterintelligence, while Directorate General III Internal Security, in particular the political department, experienced major bloodletting.

The most pressing issue, however, was to gain control of the Army. To this end, Khomeini used the occasion of the Persian New Year and issued a general amnesty on 21 March 1980, which included not only members of the armed forces, the police and the gendarmerie, but even SAVAK.¹⁸ In this way, the circle around Khomeini strengthened the regular security apparatus against communist efforts to disband the Army and replace it with a national guard led by left-wing officers. Khomeini's associate Rafsanjani had laid the groundwork for the co-operation with the military during years of underground activity, when he worked together with representatives of the moderate bourgeois-nationalist liberation movement. The contacts at that time formed the basis for the anti-communist alliance between Iranian nationalists and Islamists, which has remained stable to this day. Both groups had their supporters in the officer corps, who worked together to purge supporters of the old regime and communists, with Khomeini's representatives coordinating and overseeing the action. As representatives of the Supreme Leader (*namayandeh*) these clerics exercise political and ideological supervision and helped to establish a *Politruck* system by setting up 'ideological-po-

¹⁷ Hamid Ruhani (Ziyarati) was Khomeini's chronicler and wrote a five-volume history of the Islamic movement on his behalf: Hamid RUHANI (Ziyarati), *The Movement of Khomeini*, [in Persian], 5 vols. 1981-1995.

¹⁸ The 'Text of the General Amnesty of the Imam' quoted by ALI-BABAYI, II pp. 309-311, is often ignored by Western research.

litical offices' (*daftar-e siyasi va aqidati*) in all units. Even today, they still have a say in all matters regarding personnel and public relations.¹⁹

The Imperial Army thus became the 'Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran' (*AJA - Artesh-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*). Although high-ranking officers and members of SAVAK continued to be executed and some garrisons put up armed resistance, the Army had consolidated nationwide after the new swearing-in, even if the losses due to desertion among the troops were still significant at the beginning. The loss of experienced officers through flight and execution weakened the Iranian Army less than had been feared. Younger officers quickly stepped up, field officers were able to rise through the ranks and apolitical, patriotic generals could evade the revolutionary mania. As a result, the start of the war in September 1980 hit an army unprepared, but able to function. It was, however, no longer able to play the political role which some generals had intended for it. The Army also did not forget that its continued existence was due to the commitment of two (at that time) young clerics from Khomeini's circle: Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Seyyed Ali Khamenei.

Eight years of war

The dramatic events of the revolution and the markedly different appearance of the Islamic Republic of Iran compared with the previous regime make it tempting to overlook the continuity in the security apparatus. The Army continued to provide for national defence but was coordinated with a second military force, namely the Revolutionary Guard. At the same time, the intelligence services were reorganised. When the eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) broke out, the Iraqi aggressors thus faced chaotic conditions, but, despite the revolutionary turmoil, encountered a functioning army and a keyed up and politicised population. The Iraqi attack also led to an increased association of patriotic nationalists and revolutionary Islamists at the expense of the Marxist left.

¹⁹ Walter POSCH, 'Der Sicherheitsapparat der Islamischen Republik Iran,' in Ludwig PAUL (ed.), *Handbuch der Iranistik*, Wiesbaden 2017, pp. 148-159.

Defence: Revolutionary Guard and Basij

The most important immediate institutional change at the beginning of the war concerned the Revolutionary Guard, which was still being set up. In view of the large number of war volunteers, it was possible quickly expanded to fifteen divisions (*lashkar*), including armoured divisions and independent brigades. Later, naval and air force formations were added. The divisions were given numbers and a name from the Qur'an and were always referred to by their garrison location, e.g. 41st Infantry Division Sarollah (Revenge of God), Kerman, 27th Mechanised Division Mohammad Rasulallah (Mohammad, Envoy of God) or 7th Mechanised Division Vali Asr (Lord of Eternity), Khuzestan.²⁰ The Revolutionary Guard divisions were always characterised by a strong connection to their province of origin and its people. This can be explained by the fact that these divisions emerged from locally active Islamists and the traditional associations based in the bazaar, which in many cases also covered the costs of equipment and logistics and identified with 'their boys'. Initially inexperienced in military matters, Islamic fanaticism and ties to the local community helped these units fill the gaps at the front, defend their positions and, as they gained experience, they were able to undertake counterattacks. As a regular force, the military performance of the Revolutionary Guard was below that of the Army, with shortcomings particularly among the officers.

Political aspects played a key role in how the Iranians organised the war effort. The general staff was widely ignored; instead, the new leadership entrusted younger staff officers with operational planning. Army and IRGC units were put under a combined 'operational command' or 'operational headquarters' (*qarargah-e amaliyati*), led by two military commanders, one from the army and one from the IRGC. The main military command was the 'Central Headquarters' (*Qarargah-e Markazi*) 'Khatam-ol-Anbiya', equally staffed by army and IRGC officers, which was responsible for the entire military coordination and direction of the war. It is widely believed that army officers familiarized their IRGC comrades with staff work and the art of op-

²⁰ Iranian published memoirs contain numerous reports of this development, which have yet to be analysed systematically. cf. the development of the 41st Brigade Sarollah from Kerman to the 41st Mechanised Division Sarollah in Gol-Ali BABAYI and Hoseyn BEHZAD (eds.), *Dusty Rubber Dinghies. The Oral Memories of Major General Mohammad Aziz Jafari*, [in Persian] Tehran 2012, p. 298, note 1.

erational leadership. Khatam-ol-Anbia was subordinate to the 'National Defence Council' (*Shoura-ye Ali-ye Defa'-e Melli*), a military-political body of the highest level, directly responsible for the revolutionary leader. An important innovation with long-term consequences, however, was the establishment of 'headquarters' or 'combat groups' (*qarargah*: command post, command unit, headquarters, possibly 'task force') for special tasks in different regions. Some of these commands worked deep into the Iraqi enemy country along certain action lines ('axes' *mehvar*) and coordinated attacks or operations in the back of the Iraqi troops on site. *Qarargah* Ramazan was active beyond the border in Iraqi Kurdistan working there mainly with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Jalal Talabani. Ramazan coordinated Iraqi and Afghan volunteer associations (e.g. 9th division 'Badr', Abu Zar Brigade) with Iranian units, mostly IRGC units such as the 6th division special forces and 66th airborne brigade. Other units fulfilled specific missions: *Qarargah* Baqerzadeh was responsible for the persecution of the Iranian opposition, especially the People's Mujahideen on Iraqi territory and *qarargah* Sarollah, was responsible for the crackdown on communist underground structures and later on for the internal security of the greater Tehran area.

When the Iraqi offensive grounded to a halt at the end of 1980, it marked the beginning of static and bloody trench warfare, which also included missile attacks on the most important cities deep in enemy country. Yet, militarily speaking, hardly any territorial gains were achieved. Although Iranian cities were recaptured, Iranian advances into Iraqi territory remained operational successes, which could not be exploited strategically. Initially, the political leadership – i.e. Khomeini and his immediate entourage – believed that the mobilisation of ever more people would guarantee victory. This was the reason why in 1982, Khomeini ordered the creation of the *Basij-e Mostaza'fan*, the 'Mobilisation Forces of the Oppressed'.²¹ A generation younger than Revolutionary Guard soldiers and even less well trained militarily, the Basijis nevertheless played an important role. Initially, they were *Hezbollahis*, fanatical representatives of the Islamic lower class or subculture. They saw themselves as part of a large, equally political-revolutionary and religious move-

²¹ For the best accounts of the first revolutionary generation of Basijis and the connection between ideology, revolution and frontline experience cf. Farhad KHOSROVKHAVAR, *L'Islamisme et la mort. Le martyr révolutionnaire en Iran*, Paris 1995 and Saskia GIELING, *Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran*, London 1999.

ment which, under Khomeini's leadership, would first destroy Saddam Hussein in Iraq and then the embodiment of all-evil, the state of Israel. For these young, sometimes even underage fanatics, there was only total victory or martyrdom (*shahadat*). For them, being on the front line was as much an earthly battle as a religious service. Poorly trained and even more poorly equipped, the military leadership would often send them across minefields to clear the way for professional units. The *Basij* fought in the ranks of IRGC units but kept their distinct identity. Domestically, they fulfilled the function of an Islamist youth movement and served as ideological auxiliary police, supporting the revolutionary committees and the security forces in monitoring the population by intimidating the secular elements of society.

When both sides were exhausted after eight years of war, the political-military leadership of the Islamic Republic convinced Supreme Leader Khomeini to accept UN ceasefire resolution no. 598. This ceasefire has been in place since 17 July 1988, but Iran and Iraq still have no peace treaty signed which would address the underlying causes of the war, such as the (still) disputed border issues at the Shatt al-Arab.

Intelligence service: VAJA and Revolutionary Guard

During the first years of the war, domestic tensions resulted in bomb attacks and armed clashes between semi-legal Marxist groups and various Islamist movements in which Khomeini's supporters prevailed. However, different Khomeinist groups and cabals competed with each other, each controlling different elements of the intelligence services. This problem was both personal and institutional in nature. Intelligence services traditionally compete with each other and the unclear distribution of responsibilities favoured the ambitions of individual commanders. Ultimately, there was no unified, centralised intelligence service, so that the Islamic Republic of Iran lived through the first four years of its existence largely without intelligence coordination.

It was not until 1984, when Khomeini's supporters had prevailed in all areas of society and the civil service, that following a parliamentary initiative, Iran created its new intelligence service in form of the 'Ministry of Information of the Islamic Republic of Iran' (VAJA - *Vezarat-e Ettelaat-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*). The organisation of the intelligence service as a ministry ensures parliamentary oversight. Khomeini appointed a relatively apolitical cleric with-

out revolutionary influence as the first head of the intelligence service with ministerial rank Mohammad Mohammadi-Nik Reyshahri. Reyshahri successfully reorganised the service partly by retaining experienced SAVAK employees and incorporating younger Islamist activists from the ranks of the *Hezbollahis* into the new ministry. Subsequently, Reyshahri placed graduates of his own alma mater, the *Haqqaniye* Institute in Qom, in key positions in the ministry.

VAJA was not directly involved in the military aspects of the war, but coordinated domestic security, suppression and surveillance of the opposition at home and abroad, was responsible for general counterespionage and carried out industrial espionage, i.e. the Ministry was responsible for procuring material from abroad, which was important for the war effort, etc. Lethal international VAJA operations became notorious. In 1988, for example, Iranian agents assassinated Kurdish opposition leader Abdolrasul (Khan-e) Qassem-lou in Europe; a few years later, his successor Sharafkandi was also murdered.²² In the course of the judicial investigation into this murder, it was established that the decision in favour of this operation was made by the so-called Council of Three (or ‘Council of the Heads of the Three Powers’ *shura-ye ro’asa-ye qorra-ye seganeh*) – the president, the speaker of parliament and the head of the judiciary. Obviously, the Islamic Republic solved the delicate issue of the political authorisation of so-called network in this manner.

Not everybody welcomed the creation of VAJA. The IRGC Intelligence Service (Department, later ‘Organisation for Counterintelligence and Reconnaissance’ *vahed/sazeman-e befaizat va ettelaat*) perceived VAJA’s creation as an institutional defeat. Over the course of time and through sheer aggressiveness, it had gained key responsibilities in the security apparatus, which it now had to relinquish. For the remaining years of the war, the Revolutionary Guard Intelligence Service was sent to the front as the G2 service with the normal intelligence and counterintelligence tasks required by military operations. The bitter rivalry between the two services, which continues to this day, can be traced back to the – sometimes violent – disputes between the

²² On the Qassem-lou case cf. Peter PILZ, *Eskorte nach Tebran. Der österreichische Rechtsstaat und die Kurdenmorde*, Vienna 1997; on the Sharafkandi case cf. *Murder at Mykonos, the Anatomy of a political Assassination*, IHRDC, 2 February 2011 <https://iranhrdc.org/murder-at-mykonos-anatomy-of-a-political-assassination/>. We shall add that either case merits more political and academic attention.

VAJA and the IRGC. At least, the Revolutionary Guard was able to prevent the new intelligence service from using the term ‘state security’ (*amniyat-e keshvar*) in its name; as a result, VAJA remained dependent on co-operation with the Revolutionary Guard regarding arrests and the execution of operations. It was only towards the end of the war that they formed their own operational units, the ‘Anonymous Soldiers of the Hidden Imam’ (*sarbazan-e gonnām-e imam-e zaman*). Claims that there was a service called SAVAMA (*Sazeman-e Ettelaat va Amniyat-e [Keshvar-e] Iran*) or later VEVAK (*Veżarat-e Ettelaat va Amniyat-e Keshvar*, a mistranslation of SAVAK, in English usually MOIS, Ministry of Intelligence and [State] Security) have no foundation.²³

²³ On the development of the Iranian intelligence services after the revolution cf. FARDOUST, I p. 638, note 1.

Post-war period

The end of the war (1988) and the death of Khomeini (1989) presented the new leadership consisting of revolutionary leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei and President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani with new challenges: the army and the Revolutionary Guard were demobilized, and the security apparatus reorganized. The most important change concerned the 'Central Command Khatam-ol-Anbia', which had to hand over two of its elements: the air defence element to the army and the logistics and construction element to the Revolutionary Guard, but both continued to use the name 'Khatam-ol-Anbia'.

Revolutionary Guard: professionalization

Immediately after the end of the war, there was still uncertainty as to what new role the Revolutionary Guard's military elements should assume. There were even calls for the entire Guard to be disbanded. Clarity came in 1992 when the political leadership decided positively on the future existence of the IRGC. However, the revolutionary phase in which the 'brothers' - as the Revolutionary Guards called themselves - did not wear insignia and placed little value on military protocol was overcome, and new uniforms and military ceremonies were introduced. For the time being, the military division structure (15 *lashkar*) was retained, which existed parallel to the internal security commands (*qarargah-e amniyati*). Then, Khatam-ol-Anbia was assigned to the IRGC Command (*vabasteh*) as the 'Khatam-ol-Anbia Reconstruction Command' (*qarargah-e sazandegi Khatam-ol-Anbia*) and quickly became the main governmental institution to repair war damage and expand the country's critical infrastructure, employing several thousand demobilized IRGC personnel. By the late 1990s, Khatam-ol-Anbiya became the centrepiece of the Revolutionary Guard's economic empire.

As the regime army or second army, the IRGC was able to expand its influence at the expense of the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Initially, three components (land, sea, air) were formed during the war, which were referred to as branches (*niru*) and were later joined by the *Basij* and the *Qods* (hence the 'five branches' *niruha-ye panjaneh*). Later on, the Iranian missile programme was placed under the control of the Revolutionary Guard Air Force. The IRGC is also responsible for protecting the nuclear facilities and

operates its own air defence batteries for this purpose. In order to meet the demand for well-trained technicians and other experts, the Revolutionary Guard tries to attract future conscripts because its barracks are located in the country's metropolitan areas, while those of the Army are, for the most part, in the sticks.

Quite naturally, the IRGC's strife for military professionalization included officer training at all levels, which was deliberately organised independently of the Army. The Imam Hossein University (EHU), which opened in 1986, also included a cadet school (which was disbanded in 2005), a military medical institute and a staff or command school, which was later elevated to university level as the 'Command and Staff School of the Corps of Guardsmen of the Islamic Revolution' (*Daneshkadeh-ye Farmandehi va Setad-e Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami*).²⁴ At the same time, the IRGC leadership decided to add an additional Faculty of Military Sciences to EHU.

In parallel, the Army too reorganised higher staff training. Iran's prestigious War School was briefly closed after the start of the war and reopened after its end as the 'University for Higher Military Command of the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran' (*Daneshgah-e Farmandehi va Setad-e AJA* - DAFUS). From then on, DAFUS merged the command and staff schools of the Army, Air Force and Navy under one roof, although they retained university status for specialised officer training. Three more universities, one for intelligence, one for air defence and a medical university were added in the 1990s and 2000s. As before, junior officer training was carried out at the military academy, which has been called the 'Emam Ali Officer Academy' since the revolution. In general, DAFUS is considered by the Army to be the most important and highest quality educational centre for senior officer training.

Finally, the United General Staff opened a National Defence University, the 'University for Defence Research and Strategic Studies' (*Daneshgah va Pa-*

²⁴ Until recently, the university's homepage (ihu.ac.ir) was also accessible from Western IP addresses. With a few exceptions, almost all pages of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran are now blocked to foreigners. Outdated information can be viewed via *Wayback Machine* (web.archive.org). A useful if unverified overview of all Iranian military academies and military schools can be found in the Persian version of the online encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/فهرست_مدرسه‌ها_و_دانشگاه‌های_نظامی_ایران

zabehshgah-e ali-ye defa'-e melli va tahqiqat-e rahbordi) for the country's military and civilian leadership. The Revolutionary Guard ensured its primacy by the fact that an IRGC general is head of this university.

The military professionalization of the Revolutionary Guard took place during a phase of political thaw: as president, Ali Akbar Rafsanjani had ushered in the post-war period and placed technical expertise and reconstruction above ideology and revolution. His successor Mohammad Khatami went one step further and wanted to reform the Islamic Republic in the direction of more rule of law. The great popularity that Khatami enjoyed in the ranks of the Revolutionary Guard and its members reflects the development of Iranian society, which overcame the revolutionary mania and moved towards post-revolutionary tranquillity if not bourgeoisie.

Quite a few members of the political establishment viewed this development with concern causing enough impetus for a comprehensive reform of the Revolutionary Guard. Two more factors played a role in this decision: First, influential members of the clerical and political elite accused the IRGC of having lost its revolutionary spirit, because it eloigned itself from its popular roots and thus, increasingly appeared as a separate caste. And, secondly, the geostrategic framework changed so much in the early 2000s that the divisional structure was no longer the right response to anticipated military threats. The lack of volunteers may also have played a role, as did the fact that the divisions had never reached the desired personnel strength in peacetime. After a three-year preparatory phase, a new structure was adopted in 2009. Most divisions were disbanded and replaced by 31 provincial commands to which all land elements of the Revolutionary Guard and the *Basijis* in the respective provinces have since been subordinated.²⁵ These units were now simply called *sepah* (corps), i.e. *sepah* of Kerman, Esfahan, Ardabil. Above them are ten regional commands (*qarargah-e manteqehi*), which are endowed with great powers and authority. The aim was to take the social, economic, ethnic and political characteristics of each region into account. The main task, however, of these commands was to organize the resistance and maintain public order if communication with Tehran was interrupted by enemy action or internal unrest. For example, the 41st 'Sarollah' division in Ker-

²⁵ cf. Mohammad TULAYI, 'Reform and progress in the Corps of the Guardsmen of the Islamic Revolution,' [in Persian] *Hosun*, 35. 2012, pp. 4-19.

man became a *qarargah* and, together with *qarargah* Salman in Sistan and Baluchistan, was placed under the regional command (*qarargah-e manteqehi*) southeast 'Qods' in Kerman.

Army and air defence

Nevertheless, the old rivalry between IRGC and AJA continued, often with tragic consequences. The Army made a comeback in 1998 when, in the wake of a serious crisis with Afghanistan following the Taliban's first takeover, Tehran ordered the general mobilisation and prepared to invade its neighbour. At that time, the position of Chief of Defence Staff was filled again and a new General Staff was established, reminiscent of the Great General Staff of the Pahlavi era: the 'General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran' (*Setad-e Koll-e Niruha-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*). The General Staff coordinates and commands the co-operation of all other staffs and command elements of the armed forces. These are the 'Combined General Staff of the Army' (*Setad-e Moshtarak-e Artesh-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*), the 'Command of the Corps of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution' (*Farmandehi-ye Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslam*) and most recently the 'Law Enforcement Command' (*Farmandehi-ye Entezami-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*). Although a commander of the *Basij* was initially appointed as the new Chief of Defence Staff in order to balance out the competition between the Revolutionary Guard and the Army, the revitalised general staff proved its worth when it advised the Supreme Leader to refrain from invading Afghanistan because the final scenario was far from positive.

Equally important was the reorganisation of the Army's air defence. This goes back to the Air Defence Command of the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran called Khatam-ol-Anbiya (*qarargah-e Padafand-e Havayi-e Artesh-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*, *PADAJA*) which was split off from the Central Command Khatam-ol-Anbia in 1992. Khatam-ol-Anbiya coordinates and commands all air defence units, including those of the Revolutionary Guard. In 2008, the Air Force air defence units were also subordinated to Khatam-ol-Anbiya, until finally in 2019 the Air Defence Command was elevated to a separate branch of the armed forces: the 'Air Defence Forces of the Army of the Islamic Republic Iran' (*Niru-ye Padafand-e Havayi-e Artesh-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*) with its own uniforms and branch colours. This step was part of the ongoing professionalization of air defence. But the necessary level of

standardisation and professionalization had not yet been reached. This became tragically clear one year later in 2020, when an air defence battery of the Revolutionary Guard stationed in Tehran shot-down flight UAI 752 and killed all 162 passengers. Four years later, Iranian president Raisi died together with other dignitaries including Foreign minister Abdollahian in a helicopter crash. Since foul play is ruled out, material failure is regarded as the most likely cause for the accident, drawing a bad light on both the *artesh's* Air Force responsible for the presidential air fleet as well as the IRGC's Ansar-ol-Mahdi unit responsible for the safety of high dignitaries.

Police, counterintelligence service(s) and Basij

The security forces were also modernised in 1992: The police, gendarmerie and the revolutionary committees were merged and henceforth formed the 'Law Enforcement Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran' (*Niru-ye Entezami-ye Jomburi-ye Eslami-ye Iran*, *NAJA*). This step was popular because it included the disbandment of the revolutionary committees and therefore the broader public saw it as a step towards deradicalisation of the regime. At that time, the first special units (*yeganehha-ye vizheh*), a kind of riot police against public unrest, were set up. Concomitantly, the border troops (*marzbani*) and thus the entire agenda of border protection became part of the responsibility of NAJA, which were still popularly referred to as the police (*polis*). In 2011, cyber defence was modernised, and a separate cyber police force was established. In 2021, a far-reaching reform was carried out and NAJA was transformed into a new 'Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran' (*Farmandehi-ye Entezami-ye Jomburi-ye Eslami-ye Iran - FarAJA*), giving the organisation a military appearance. This impression is reinforced by its subordination to the General Staff and the establishment of defence and reconnaissance units along military lines. A reconnaissance organisation (*Sazeman-e Ettelaat-e FarAJA*) was created based on the model of the G2 service (*roken-e do*), to which a new public security police force (Police for Public Security *Polis-e Amniyat-e Omumi*, *PAVA*) is also subordinate. In the event of serious internal crises in the greater Tehran area, the Sarollah security command (*qarargah-e amniyati*) leads. Due to its importance, Sarollah is directly subordinate to the IRGC-command and can directly rely on the sepah 'Mohammad Rasulallah' in Tehran (formerly 27th Mech. Div.) and 'Emam Hasan' in Alborz and on specially trained Basij battalions.

As with all military and paramilitary units, immediately after the revolution, a counterintelligence organisation or service (known as the ‘Information Security Service’: *Sazeman-e Hefazat-e Ettelaat*, SHE) was set up in the police, gendarmerie and committees, located at the highest command echelon of the NaJA (1992-2021) and FarAJA (since 2021). This service is responsible for information and personnel security, as well as security of means of communication and installations. Similar SHE units, all of which are located at the highest command echelon, exist in the Army and the Revolutionary Guard. There, however, the SHE service has developed a life of its own and one has to regard it as an independent actor, which wants to expand its sphere of influence at the expense of the VAJA.

The counterintelligence element (SHE) has a civilian double: the ‘Whole-of-State Protection Organisation’ (*sazeman-e herasat-e koll-e keshvar*, SHKK), which is part of the Ministry of Intelligence VAJA. This organisation reports directly to the Minister for Intelligence, who appoints its head (*ra’is*). Like the SHE, SHKK is responsible for the protection of installations, personnel and communications, information security, etc. However, the SHKK’s area of responsibility extends across the whole country and includes all ministries, state companies, revolutionary organisations and institutions, banks, provincial and municipal administrations, as well as all bodies responsible for the selection and training of civil service personnel.

The main tasks of the SHKK are awareness-raising among civil servants concerning the possible influence of foreign agents and counterrevolutionary elements at home and abroad, monitoring the public’s mood, providing training in self-protection and counterintelligence, etc. To this end, SHKK operates various protection or ‘Counterintelligence Offices’ (*daftar-e herasat*) in public institutions. These also include universities and other scientific institutions, whose members are, for example, briefed and made aware of possible intelligence risks prior to trips abroad and international scientific conferences. SHKK is omnipresent and observers consider it extremely efficient. Above all, however, the organisation is hardly known to the public and is almost invisible despite its influence and importance.

This distinguishes it from the intelligence elements of the Basijis. These are blunt instruments mainly recruited from volunteers. They have a visible presence at schools and academic institutions, compile personnel files on the po-

litical views of their fellow students and teachers, prevent debates critical of the regime among the student body and are an important element in the armed suppression of protests. Membership of the Basij is widely regarded as proof of political and ideological reliability; it goes hand in hand with social benefits and facilitates entry into the bloated civil service, the country's largest employer. Society considers the Basij opportunistic and self-serving, which is why the relationship of subordination to the Revolutionary Guard was reorganised in the course of the 2009 reform.

Irregular forces

The Basiji organisation can also be seen as an attempt by the regime to integrate and control revolutionary currents and groups, the so-called *Hezbollahis*, but this has only been partially successful.²⁶ *Hezbollahis* advocate the principle of permanent revolution, i.e. they believe that the revolution is not yet complete and that the principles of revolutionary Islam are still to be realised in society. With reference to the Qur'anic principle of 'enjoining good and forbidding wrong', they derive the right to correct un-Islamic behaviour in public on their own initiative: raiding parties of *Hezbollahis* (so-called moral patrols *gasht-e ershad*) beat up young people who, in their opinion, do not behave Islamically enough or even un-Islamically, without the police being able to intervene. In the mid-1990s, a special staff unit was set up (the 'Staff for ordering the good and combatting vice' *setad-e amr be maruf va nahiy az monker*) to coordinate the activities of these groups: beauty parlours, cinemas, theatres, concerts and similar venues repeatedly fell victim to fanatical gangs of *Hezbollahi* thugs. At the end of the war, veterans joined these groups, which occasionally set up weapons caches.

In the mid-1990s, war veterans set up *Ansar-e Hezbollah*, an umbrella organisation with good relations to the Revolutionary Guard. Brigadier Allah-Karam, a former fighter in Bosnia and later Iran's military attaché in Croatia, was among the founders and served for years as chairman. *Ansar-e Hezbollah*

²⁶ On the Hezbollahis and the violent underground cf. Walter POSCH, 'Islamistische Gewalt in der Islamischen Republik Iran,' in: Jasmina RUPP (ed.): *Der (Alb)Traum vom Kalifat. Ursachen und Wirkungen von Radikalisierung im politischen Islam*, Vienna 2017, pp. 211-236 and idem 'Iran's Hezbollah: A Radical and Decisive Political Current,' in: David JALILVAND and Achim VOGT (eds.): *Radicalisation under the Rouhani Years. Iran's Political Shifts and Their Implications*, (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung) March 2021, pp. 15-22.

soon became the visible spearhead of the *Hezbollahi* movement on the streets, hand in glove with the ‘staff unit’, which foreign observers ignored although it worked in plain view of the public. *Ansar-e Hezbollah* played a critical role in the suppression of the 1999 student protests and the large-scale protest movement against the re-election of President Ahmadinezhad in 2009. *Ansar-e Hezbollah* was mainly responsible for human rights violations and was accordingly placed on the pertinent UN and EU sanctions lists.

Ansar-e Hezbollah played its last role during the presidency of Hasan Ruhani, whose attempted social liberalisation it thwarted through, sometimes brutal, disruptive actions. Due to its age, this organisation of ideologised veterans disbanded in 2017. They achieved their goal of installing an *echt-Hezbollahi* president with the election of President Raisi, who had been the first Secretary General of the staff unit in the 1990s. When nationwide protests broke out in 2022 and 2023 following the death of a young Kurdish student named Mahsa Zhina Amini, the staff organised gangs of *Hezbollahis* who took arbitrary and extremely brutal action against the women’s protests, acting in parallel to Special Police and Revolutionary Guard units deployed alongside them. However, in the Sunni provinces of Kordestan and Baluchestan, only special police and Revolutionary Guard units were deployed. Although the unrest was brought under control over time, more and more women in urban areas refused to wear the mandatory headscarf, and in Baluchestan an attack carried out by the Revolutionary Guard Intelligence Service, which resulted in hundreds of dead, left the population deeply embittered.

Command, security and coordination

Like the Shah and Khomeini before him, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is the ‘Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces’ (*farmande-ye koll-e qorra*).²⁷ As in the imperial era of the Shah, the supreme leader appoints commanders in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief, whereby the President has the right of nomination. The Supreme Leader has an office (*beyt-e rahbari*) with a staff estimated at 5,000 at his disposal, with a military and intelligence department to keep informed of current developments. For ideological and

²⁷ On the ideological surveillance, indoctrination, political command and leadership, as well as coordination of the Iranian security apparatus cf. POSCH, ‘Der Sicherheitsapparat der Islamischen Republik Iran,’ *passim*.

political monitoring, he relies on the structure of the Representatives of the Supreme Leader and the ideological and political offices.

The safety of the Supreme Leader and the political leadership was handled extremely unprofessionally at the time of Khomeini and was only improved after a series of assassinations in the early 1980s, when the Revolutionary Guard founded the Ansar-ol-Emam Protection Corps (*sepah-e befaẓat*). Under Khamenei, the organisation was divided and other units such as elements of the disbanded 6th Special Forces Division and the 66th Airborne Brigade of the Revolutionary Guard were added, creating the Protection Corps Vali-Amr for the revolutionary leader and the Protection Corps Ansar-ol-Mahdi for senior politicians and installations. Together with the 'Protection Corps against Air Piracy' (*sepah-e befaẓat-e havapeyma*), they were under the supervision of the Revolutionary Guard's intelligence service, but in 2010 they were attached to the Law Enforcement Forces, although contradictory statements have been made about the role played by the Revolutionary Guard in the personal protection of the Supreme Leader.

The Iranian constitution stipulates the establishment of a 'Supreme National Security Council' (SNSC *Shura-ye ali-ye amniyat-e melli*). This body meets under the chairmanship of the President, or a secretary general appointed by the President and deals with all security issues and strategic problems of national interest at ministerial level. *Inter alia*, nuclear negotiations with the international community were – at least for a while - delegated to the SNSC. As SNSC matters do not have to be dealt with in parliament, governments are happy to treat questions where they expect parliamentary opposition as security issues in the SNSC. Internal security issues are dealt with in the 'State Security Council' (*shura-ye amniyat-e keshvar*), which is chaired by the Minister of the Interior. This body is duplicated at the provincial and district levels, with the provincial governor and district prefect (*ostandar, bakhshdar*) presiding.

Concepts and instruments for power projection

The revolution of 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran left all alliances and agreements that its predecessor regime had entered into with the USA. This also affected contracts relating to armament and maintenance of war material. Contrary to general expectations, neither the supply of spare parts nor the system for maintaining and servicing Western weapons systems collapsed totally after the withdrawal of American technicians and military advisors. Although spare parts, ammunition and electronic equipment had to be purchased more expensively than usual and often illegally, the Ministry of National Defence and Armaments Policy, whose responsibility this was, mostly succeeded in securing the material basis for combat capability through purchases, with the exception of the air force.

Despite sanctions, Tehran was able to obtain the most necessary supplies abroad, including from Israel and Europe. The procurement of modern artillery systems and the necessary fire control systems and ammunition from Europe or the arms deals with American middlemen which were revealed in the course of the so-called Iran-Contra scandal (in Iran: the Mehdi Hashemi affair) are the best-known examples of this. At that time, the proportion of (post-)Soviet and Chinese weapons systems was also increased. The expansion of Iran's own weapons industry was successful to a certain extent. For example, the domestically produced *Karrar* main battle tank turned out to be just a Russian T72/T90 blend with some Western applications.²⁸ Although the Iranian arms industry is currently experiencing a surge in innovation, it does not alter the fact that the armed forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran have to rely on predominantly outdated material, which may prove its mettle in national defence, but seems less suitable for power projection.²⁹ This requires unconventional means informed by a strategic concept.

Strategic concepts

The strategic break with the USA and the new, revolutionary and anti-imperialist orientation of the Islamic Republic were laid down in the constitution: Articles 152-154 commit Iran to strict neutrality and non-alignment and to

²⁸ 'Karrar MBT Tank,' *Army Recognition*, 24 May 2024 (armyrecognition.com).

²⁹ Farhad REZAI, 'Iran's Military Capabilities: The Structure and Strength of the Force,' *Insight Turkey*, 2019, pp. 1-33.

support revolutionary liberation movements worldwide – regardless of their religious affiliation. In reality, however, Tehran could establish contacts only with Islamic, predominantly Shiite groups. Rather exceptionally revolutionary Iran could enter a viable strategic relationship with the anti-imperialist African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, which continues to the present day. After the start of the war, the country's strategy was evaluated. On the one hand, the security architecture was streamlined with the establishment of the Ministry of Intelligence, as described above, and on the other, 'political expediency' (*maslahat-e nezam*) was given priority over all other foreign policy and strategic principles. Still under Khomeini, the leadership decided policies and strategies must be designed in such a way that they ensure the survival of the regime and prevent Iran from being attacked again. In practical terms, this resulted in the policy of persistent provocation of Western powers, which the Iranians have practised to this day, although this has never gone so far as to incite military action against Iran.

The application of the principle of political expediency was a typical and therefore to be expected reaction of a revolutionary regime to geostrategic realities and resulted in a systematisation of strategic interests on the basis of ideological maxims or principles which can be reduced to a simple 4x3 formula:³⁰ four ideological principles are applied to three regions. Firstly, there are two revolutionary approaches, i.e. those directed against the *status quo*, namely political Islam in the tradition of Ayatollah Khomeini (Khomeinism), which is intended to be interdenominational but generally only appeals to Shiites, and Third World ideology, a legacy of the anti-imperialist left of the 1970s, whose arguments and concepts were adopted in a superficially Islamised form. Added to this are Iranian nationalism and traditional Shiism. These concepts are applied to the immediate neighbourhood, the Middle Eastern region and the Global South. However, it is not possible to precisely delineate the application of the aforementioned principles to the respective regions, nor can implemented strategies be perceived solely on the basis of ideological principles.

³⁰ The following is based on Walter POSCH, 'The Islamic Republic of Iran: Contemporary History and Strategy,' *Perspectives*, (Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research,) 30 August 2023; 'Ideology and Strategy in the Middle East: The case of Iran,' *Survival*, 59.5 2017, pp. 69-98 and *idem* *The Third World, Global Islam and Pragmatism. The Making of Iranian Foreign Policy*, (SWP Research Paper) Berlin 2013.

Although the academic public in Iran likes to discuss the Islamic Republic's strategies and security policy approaches on a regular basis, the official side very rarely makes binding strategic documents, available to researchers, especially those relating to concrete sub-strategies and doctrines. An interesting strategy paper on a twenty-year vision, which conceived the development of the Islamic Republic of Iran into a transport and energy hub between Russia and Saudi Arabia on the one hand and between Europe and India on the other, was only partially implemented. Moreover, the position of this strategy within the framework of Iranian strategies remains unclear. The same applies to the *Guerrilla at Sea*, a strategy or doctrine for the defence of the Persian Gulf, which was elucidated in the form of a technical paper in the early 1990s. Here too, it is difficult to grasp its significance in the context of Iran's overall strategy. Even so, based on ideological principles, Iran's overall strategy must be combative and have its centre of interest in the Middle East.

Iran's strategic vision is usually derived from the statements of Supreme Leader Khamenei and is thus to be understood largely in terms of his biography. Firstly, Khamenei stands in the tradition of the Iranian Islamists of the 1940s and 1950s, who already at the time of the founding of the state of Israel understood the liberation of Palestine as an Islamic mission and not as a matter of (interdenominational) Arab nationalism. This interpretation was reinforced by decolonisation, above all by the fall of French Algeria and the overthrow of the apartheid regime in South Africa. In both cases, a combination of pressure from the indigenous population (resistance, *moqavemat*) and political agitation in the West led to the European and American public refusing to support these regimes and paved the way for resistance movements to take power (FLN in Algeria, ANC in South Africa).

In this sense, Khamenei sees the end of Israel to be predetermined: The 'Zionist entity', as Israel has been referred to for decades in Iran, allegedly lacks historical roots in the region. Therefore, continued resistance by the indigenous Palestinian population and moral, political and military support for its leadership by the Islamic world could empower the Palestinians to the point where they bring about the fall of Israel themselves. Similarly, all pro-Western regimes in the region will fall because the culturally and politically westernised elites will have lost all credibility with their own ever more impoverished Muslim population, so that the withdrawal of foreign powers, espe-

cially the USA, is only a matter of time and the Muslims in their region can be sovereign again.

This strategic view is too facile, first, it ignores the impact of the Holocaust on the Israeli mind and secondly it ignores the Arab reality, most importantly Saudi Arabia. After all, the competition between the two littoral Gulf states, Iran and Saudi Arabia, is an *organising conflict*, in the sense that states and non-state actors in the region align their positions with the notions of order propagated by either Tehran or Riyadh. The apparent differences between the two states are often cited as the cause of their competition: the conservative, Sunni Arab kingdom faces a revolutionary Shiite Persian republic. In essence, however, it is an ideologically and religiously inflated conflict between two regional powers. The fact that after the war Iran developed the concept of an 'Axis of Resistance' (*mehvar-e moqavemat*)³¹ formally directed against Israel does not change this assessment. Because in the political reality of the region said 'Axis of Resistance' was also directed against Saudi Arabia, as it united ideologically and politically diverse players at odds with Riyadh, such as the Syrian regime, the Lebanese *Hezbollah*, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and later the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (*Harakat al Muqawama al-Islamiyya* - HAMAS).

HAMAS primarily used the axis of resistance to gain material and political support from Tehran when no help was forthcoming from Arab states. After the American intervention in Iraq in 2003, Iraqi groups and, following the start of the Syrian civil war, the Yemeni *Ansarullah* organisation (Houthis) became loosely attached to this axis. As a result, Riyadh warned the world of a *Shiite crescent* and began to roll back Iranian expansion, especially since, according to the Saudi interpretation, Tehran safeguards its expansion with a nuclear and missile programme.

Nuclear policy and missile programme

The Iranian nuclear programme was initiated in the 1950s, with American support, as an expression of the country's strategic power, so its object was not just energy production. Nevertheless, Iran is one of the 62 first signatories to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). After a brief interruption imme-

³¹ POSCH, 'Ideology and Strategy,' pp. 82-84.

diately after the revolution, the nuclear programme led a shadowy existence until it was fully resumed under Rafsanjani. Problems were caused by the lack of international support, which failed to materialise due to American intervention, with the result that Tehran turned to Russia to complete its reactor in Bushehr. After an undeclared Iranian facility was discovered in 2002, a ten-year marathon of negotiations began between the international community and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Originally, only the EU and the so-called big three France, Germany and Great Britain (EU+E3) spoke on behalf of the international community. In 2004, the other three members of the Security Council (USA, China, Russia) joined the negotiations, so that the term EU/3+3 or P5+1 (the five permanent Security Council members and Germany) was used.

From an international perspective, the aim of the negotiations was to prevent the militarisation of the programme, while Tehran, in turn, sought international recognition and acceptance of the technical status achieved, followed later by the lifting of economic sanctions. Finally, in 2015, both sides concluded the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA or ‘nuclear deal’), which ensured the mechanisms for the withdrawal of international sanctions while at the same time intensifying binding verification and control measures for the Iranian programme. The unilateral withdrawal of the USA from the agreement in 2018 marked the beginning of a legal limbo accompanied by half-hearted attempts at revitalisation, which lasted until 2023, when the USA and Iran ruled out a return to the JCPOA in unofficial declarations. The Islamic Republic of Iran is therefore to be regarded as a virtual nuclear power, i.e. although the country does not have nuclear weapons, it must be assumed on the basis of its technological progress that it would be able to produce nuclear weapons, should it decide to do so. The Islamic Republic’s ambitious missile programme underlines its status as a virtual nuclear power.

Although the Shah started the work on the development of an Iranian ballistic missile with Israel, the actual missile programme only began after the start of the war. Difficulties in access to spare parts required by the air force, seriously hampered its efficiency. Hence, missile procurement proved to be a (cheap) alternative. Tehran procured Soviet SCUD-Bs (300km range) from Libya, Syria and later North Korea (*Nodong* variant), which were deployed from 1985. After the war, the Islamic Republic expanded its production fa-

cilities and further modified these missiles:³² SCUD-B and SCUD-C became Shahab-1 and Shahab-2. These liquid-propellant missiles, with a range of 300 and 500 km respectively, reach the most important population centres in neighbouring countries. An advanced version of the Shahab-2 is the *Qiyam*, which is equipped with a separable warhead and has a range of 600-700 km.

The Shahab-3, based on the North Korean *Nodong*, has a range of 900km and a payload of one tonne; its more advanced version, the *Ghadr-1*, has a range of 1,600km, but has a significantly lighter warhead weighing 750kg. Little is known about its further development, the *Emad*, whose range is probably less than 1,500 kilometres. The surface-to-surface missiles of the *Sajil* family, which are equipped with solid-fuel engines, deserve special attention because they could become delivery vehicles for nuclear weapons. *Sajil-2* has an average range of 2,000km and a 750kg warhead. The *Sajil* is not yet fully developed; in addition to trajectory problems, a nuclear bomb of a suitable size must first be developed, which is generally considered a technical hurdle not be underestimated.

Iran also has a series of short- and medium-range missiles of the *Fateh* family, which originally had a range of 200-500km (*Fateh-110*, *Fateh110-A*, *Fateh-313*) and generally carry a payload of 450kg. This group with solid propellant propulsion also includes *Khalij-e Fars* and *Hormoz*. Other *Fateh* systems are *Zolfeghar*, *Dezful* and *Haj Qasem Soleymani* with ranges of 700, 1,000 and 1,400 km respectively and a payload of 550kg. These systems have accurate precision guidance systems, and especially *Zolfeghar* is considered to be fully developed. Finally, Tehran is also trying to develop medium-range missiles (MSR) based on the North Korean *Hwasong-10*, a submarine-launched ballis-

³² This chapter relies on the relevant sections of the Persian and English versions of Wikipedia and on the following studies Farzin NADIMI, 'The Next Generation of Iranian Ballistic Missiles,' Policy Notes 138, WINEP 25 July 2023; Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance*, Washington DC 2019, pp. 43-48; Iran Watch (Ed): *Table of Iran's Missile Arsenal*, 22 February 2024, <https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/weapon-program-background-report/table-irans-ballistic-missile-arsenal>; CSIS (Ed): *Missile Threat: Country Iran*, https://missilethreat.csis.org/country_tax/iran/; 'Iran's Missiles: Infographics and Photos,' in: USIP (Ed), *The Iran Primer*, 12 April 2024, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/feb/17/iran%E2%80%99s-missiles-infographics-and-photos>; Congressional Research Service, *Iran's Ballistic Missiles and Space Launch Programs*, 9 January 2020, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nuke/IF10938.pdf>.

tic missile based on the Soviet R-27 (Ss-N-6). However, the MSR *Khorramshahr*, which is designed to travel 2,000km with a payload of 1,800kg and up to 3,000km with a payload of 1,000kg, is as unreliable as the North Korean model. In 2023, Iran unveiled *Fattah-1*, a new hypersonic missile said to have a range of 1,400 km.

Iran's space programme, which also involves intercontinental ballistic missiles, ostensibly serves civilian purposes. The *Safir* was the first successful model of a multi-stage rocket used to launch satellites into space, but further attempts since 2019 have failed. Trials with *Simorgh*, an offshoot of the *Shahab-3/Nodong*, have so far not been very promising. According to reports, attempts have been made to adapt the *Simorgh* as an intercontinental ballistic missile, which is widely regarded as ill-advised. More promising is *Qased*, which successfully launched a reconnaissance satellite into orbit for the first time in 2020. *Qased* uses the *Ghadr* liquid-propellant rocket for the first stage, but it is assumed that this will be replaced by the *Sajil-2* solid-fuel rocket. In theory at least, solid-fuel rockets are easier to convert into intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Iran's liquid-fuel missiles are notoriously inaccurate, which reduces their military value, but they remain strategically relevant as a means of exerting political pressure. Militarily and strategically important, however, are the solid-fuel missiles of the *Fateh* family, which offer impressive targeting accuracy and can be deployed primarily in the region. Iran used several types of missiles in its attacks on Erbil in 2021 and 2022 and on Iraq, Syria and Pakistan in 2024, allegedly hitting their targets with precision. The most noteworthy attack took place on April 13, 2024 against Israel. According to Tel Aviv, Tehran fired 170 Drones, 30 cruise missiles and more than 120 ballistic missiles on Israeli territory, killing none and causing minimal damage thanks to Israel's efficient air defence systems and its allies, which downed 99% of the missiles before impact. However, the IRGC claims the attack as a success, because the intended targets were hit.

Special forces

An important means of Iranian power projection are its special forces and volunteer organisations which include political partners with their own militias. Iran's political and military leadership at various strategic centres em-

loys these units. They can be categorised according to institutional affiliation and range from disciplined elite units under direct command to local militias. The image spread by the Islamic Republic, i.e. that Tehran can draw on a network of surrogate forces (proxies) anywhere in the region, is a propagandistic exaggeration.

65th NOHED

Iran's oldest Special Forces units are constituents of the Army and were established in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1958, the 23rd Special Forces Brigade (*tip-e 23-e niruha-ye vizheh*) was founded, consisting of five battalions and an HQ battalion, which was renamed the 23rd Airborne Brigade (*tip-e 23 nirubah-ye vizheh-ye havabord*) in 1970 and supplemented with a battalion for hostage rescue and one for psychological warfare. After the revolution, this Brigade was reorganised into the 23rd Commando Division (*lashkar-e 23rd takavor*) and consisted of three brigades, including the 65th Airborne Special Forces Brigade (NOHED *niruha-ye vizheh-ye havabord*, literally: special forces airborne), which had emerged from a paratrooper unit trained by the French and later the British and Americans. In 1991, the 65th NOHED, also known as the Green Berets (*kolah-sabziha*), was uncoupled from the 23rd Commando Division and has since been an independent brigade that the political leadership has direct access to. Its domestic mission remains secret, but exercises in the greater Tehran area in 1991 and 2009 suggest that it is intended to restore government control over state institutions if it has been lost, for example due to a coup.

The 65th NOHED can look back on a long history of international deployments, including with the British in Oman in the 1970s and during the Iran-Iraq War. At that time, the 65th Brigade was also deployed across the border against Iranian opposition groups such as the People's Mojahedeen and the Marxist *Komala* in Kurdistan. In these and similar operations on the southern front, they worked closely with Mostafa Chamran, one of the founders of the Revolutionary Guard and later Minister of Defence, who promoted special warfare. More recently, their reconnaissance activities in Afghanistan have attracted attention, as has the presence of some of their elements in the Gulf of Aden and Syria. In addition to (presumed) combat missions, their main task there is the (proven) military training of allied forces and military reconnaissance activities. Their tasks and operational profile therefore differ

from the usual commando and airborne brigades of the Iranian army (e.g. the 25th, 35th, 45th, 55th Commando Brigades), but are similar to those of the Revolutionary Guard, in particular the *Qods* special unit.

(Former) 6th Special Forces Division and 66th Airborne Brigade

The history of the IRGC'S special forces (*niruba-ye vizhe*) is closely linked to the *qarargah* Ramazan, within the framework of which they were originally employed. In the mid-1980s, the 55th Special Forces Brigade was formed in Iranian Kurdistan, which was subsequently merged with the 110th Brigade based in Rey to form the 6th Special Forces Division (Lashkar 6th *vizheh*). In contrast to the tradition of the Revolutionary Guard, i.e. a close connection to a region and its people, the members of the 6th Division were recruited from all over the country and from all ethnic groups. During the war, the Division was active across the border in Iraqi Kurdistan as part of the *qarargah* Ramazan. After the war, the 6th was disbanded, one brigade was transferred to the *Qods*, one to the Division in Kashan and one to the 10th *Seyyed-ol-Shohada* Division in Karaj.

A unit comparable to the Army's 65th NOHED Brigade in the Revolutionary Guard was the 66th Airborne Brigade (*Tip-e 66 Havabard*), founded in 1984. This unit emerged from a group of volunteers who had completed a parachuting course with the Army. During the war, however, they were not deployed as paratroopers, but they first trained *basijis*, with whom they were then placed under the command of *qaragah* Ramazan. They were deployed in the Mosul area during the attempted liberation of Iranian prisoners of war and the attack on the Kirkuk refinery, and later in the defence against the People's Mojahedeen's offensive. After the war, the Brigade was briefly active as part of the 27th Mohammad Rasulallah Division in Tehran as a special unit for hostage rescue. In this capacity, they were allegedly sent to North Korea as trainers. However, the Brigade was disbanded, and the key personnel and teams were transferred to the IRGC's intelligence unit. They subsequently played an important role as trainers for other special units and an important part was transferred to the Vali-Amr unit.

Qods

Qods emerged from the unification of several elements of the Revolutionary Guard.³³ In 1981, on the initiative of Mostafa Chamran, a first commando unit (*qarargah*) called *Qods* was founded with the task to operate across the border behind Iraqi lines and make contact with local resistance groups. The first commander at the time was Mohammad Ali 'Aziz' Jaafari, later commander of the Revolutionary Guard. *Qods* was later assigned to *qarargah* Ramazan, which was responsible for the coordination of pro-Iranian Iraqi forces with Iranian special forces. In the mid-1980s, the responsibilities and remit of *Qods* were expanded, including the integration of elements of the Revolutionary Guard's Office for Liberation Movements, which was forcibly disbanded in 1984 in the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal (called the Mehdi Hashemi affair in Iran) and was responsible for numerous terrorist attacks in the region.³⁴ In any case, its expansive spirit (i.e. the support of oppressed Muslims and resistance movements worldwide in accordance with the constitution) was transferred to the *Qods*. After the war, the 6th Special Forces Division of the Revolutionary Guard was disbanded and a brigade was transferred to the *Qods*. In 1991, as part of a major reorganisation. It was decided that the international operations required better coordination and *Qods* was therefore elevated to a separate branch of the Revolutionary Guard (*Niru-ye Qods*) and the former head of the Revolutionary Guard's intelligence unit, Brigadier Ahmad Vahidi, was assigned as commander, who was succeeded by Qasem Soleymani in 1997.

The operations in Bosnia and Afghanistan, and probably also earlier ones in the Sudan and the Middle East, fell under Vahidi's *aegis*. The high level of training and better armament of the Lebanese *Hezbollah* in the 33-day war against Israel in 2006 can probably be attributed to his successor Soleymani. Operations in Yemen from 2017 onwards are confirmed just as openly as the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and later in Syria. In all of the *Qods*' operations, the focus is on military counselling, the organisation and the

³³ Information concerning these groups can be gleaned from a number of Persian internet sites; a useful overview was produced by Ali ALFONEH, 'The Evolution of Iran's Qods Force Since 1979,' WINEP Policy Watch 3495, Washington DC 2021.

³⁴ The Office and its dealings with the international arms trade is discussed by Ulrich VON SCHWERIN, 'Mehdi Hashemi and the Iran-Contra-Affair,' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2015, pp.3-17.

monitoring and implementation of the transfer of expertise and technology, including the transfer of missiles, as well as intelligence activities at all levels. The focus is on politico-intelligence work in the sense of helping people to help themselves, whereby a common ideological starting point is sought in advance. Active combat operations and military operations therefore take a back seat in Qods' remit. A special unit of the Revolutionary Guard founded in 2000 is responsible for this: the Saberín.

Saberín and Fatehín

The Saberín Brigade initially filled the gap left by the integration of the Revolutionary Guard's 66th Airborne Brigade into the Vali-Amr unit. However, its remit goes beyond that of traditional airborne brigades. It is emphasised that its members, who are recruited from physically and mentally fit volunteers fitting the ideological profile of the regime. Their training comprises a variety of fields such as naval infantry, mountain combat and border protection tasks. This is intended to achieve two goals: First, to successfully combat modern forms of terror (Al-Qaeda, IS, PJAK, Jaish al-Adl, etc.), and second, to protect and defend the regime's values and ideology domestically and abroad, it is for this reason, why the soldiers must be both ideologically reliable and fully trained. The activities of the Saberín in Syria were confirmed. There, they were initially employed together with another unit, the Fatehín, to protect the Shi'ite centre (Shrine of Saint Zainab) in Damascus and subsequently took part in numerous combat operations in defence of the Syrian regime.

The special unit Fatehín (*yegan-e vizheh-ye Fatehín*) is the actual militia of the Basij. It was founded in 1999 on the initiative of the West Tehran Basij and was employed during the unrest in 1999 and 2009. Iranian observers emphasise the voluntary nature and enthusiasm (*kehod-jush*) of the Fatehín. Their willingness and ability to perform prompted the leadership of the Revolutionary Guard to train them as special forces and extend this successful model to other regions of Iran. Every province is now said to have a Fatehín battalion. The Fatehín played a role in the Syrian civil war from 2015, first in Damascus and later in the greater Aleppo area. During the 2022-23 protests, Fatehín units were again active in Tehran.

Volunteer organisations and partners

The definition of Iranian volunteer organisations poses difficulties. Strictly speaking, the term only refers to those military units in which foreign nationals serve or have served on the Iranian side and which are led and employed by the Iranian military. These units must be distinguished from those groups which follow the 'Hezbollah-model'. This is an Islamist adaptation of the Maoist two-pillar concept, i.e. a political party is joined by an autonomously organised armed wing: in this case, the party is always called Hezbollah (literally 'Party of God') and the military wing 'Islamic Resistance' (*Moqavemat-e Eslami*). If necessary, it is also possible to split off the military wing and give it a new political wing; conversely, the political wing can form a new military element. The boundaries between a volunteer organisation and the Hezbollah model are sometimes blurred. Obviously, the Iranians want such a volunteer organisation to become an independent national entity and thus a strategic partner of the Islamic Republic. So far, this has only been the case with the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi Badr unit.

Badr

The 'Badr-Organisation' (*Munazzamat Badr*), which today operates as a political party in Iraq, was generally regarded as the military arm of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. This Tehran-sponsored Council was conceived as a rallying organisation for the Iraqi opposition, but quickly transformed itself into a political party under the leadership of the Iraqi cleric family Al-Hakim. Badr, however, was founded in 1984 at the instigation of the Revolutionary Guard, which merged two Iraqi groups residing in Iran: the 'Modjahedeen of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq' under Jamal Jaafar Mohammad-Ali Al-Ebrahim (known as Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes) and the *abrar*, Iraqi prisoners of war who volunteered to fight Saddam Hussein. The security checks for the *abrar* were carried out by the Supreme Council. Members of the Supreme Council command were represented in the Badr command and vice versa.³⁵ In other words, it was the Hezbollah model politically, but militarily the '9th Independent Brigade Badr' (*tip/faylaq 9th Mostaqall Badr* originally *Badr* Battalion) was part of the Revolutionary Guard, wore Iranian uniforms and was led by Iranian officers.

³⁵ Faleh A. JABAR, *The Shi'ite Movement of Iraq*, London 2003, pp. 253, 254.

It has already been mentioned that the 9th Badr was deployed together with other units as part of the *qarargah* Ramadan in northern Iraq, and later also in the south. At the end of the war, Badr was demobilised and deserving fighters were granted the right of residence or Iranian citizenship. In addition, Hadi Farhan Abdullah al-Ameri became the first Iraqi to be appointed commander. Members of the Supreme Council and Badr played a role in the Basra and Amara region during the 1991 uprising (*intifadha*) against Saddam Hussein.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the Supreme Council and Badr returned to Iraq and many Badr members were recruited by the Ministry of the Interior and the police. From this point forward, Badr can no longer be described as an Iranian volunteer organisation. Badr kept quiet on the outside and steadily expanded its position in the new security structure, including two Badr members holding the office of Iraqi Minister of the Interior and Hadi al-Ameri becoming Minister of Transportation. In other words, thanks to the American intervention, a volunteer organisation belonging to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard was implanted in the Iraqi security apparatus. In 2012, the Supreme Council and Badr officially parted ways, after which the Supreme Council established its own militia. As an organisation, Badr behaved calmly and constructively towards the Americans, but some of its members secretly formed the so-called special groups, which carried out attacks on the American Army.

Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq

Not all members of Badr remained with the organisation. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis founded the 'Hezbollah Battalions' (*Kata'ib Hezbollah*) in 2003, as a militia without a political wing. The *Kata'ib* cooperated closely with the Qods unit, and Abu Mahdi and Qasem Soleymani were very close; both were killed by an American drone strike in Baghdad in 2020. Since then, the balance in this partnership has shifted in favour of the Qods. The US classifies the Hezbollah Battalions as special groups, characterised by particularly close relations with Tehran.

Iran took advantage of the militia chaos in Iraq to form so-called special groups for special missions. These included *Jaish al-Mukhtar*, a group, which attacked the opposition Iranian People's Mujahideen, as well as Sarollah, which systematically killed Iraqi Baath-party members. Only in one case can

Iran's command be proven beyond doubt: the companies of Al-Khorasani were founded by Brigadier Hamid Taqavi, who fell in 2014 and had been active in *qarargah* Ramazan a few decades ago. Two Shiite militias are disguised tribal militias: The 'League of the Righteous Family [of the Prophet]' (*Asaib Ahl al-Haqq*) under Sheikh Qays al-Khaz'ali and the 'Hizbullah Movement of the Nobles' (*Harakat Hezbollah al-Nojaba*) of Sheikh Akram Ka'bi, who has excellent connections with the most important Shiite ayatollahs. Both militias are regarded as intransigent opponents of the American presence in the country. The Asaib split from the followers of Muqtada Sadr in 2007 and proved themselves in the fight against IS from 2014 onward. Nojaba emerged in the context of the Syrian civil war. Both groups attracted attention with threats to Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Arab Shiite tribes of Khaz'al and Ka'bi are represented on both sides of the Iran-Iraq border. In Iran, these tribes are seen as the standard bearers of Arab nationalism and separatism. Tehran therefore has an interest in ensuring that the tribes on the Iraqi side are fully committed to the axis of resistance and revolutionary Shia.

Following the triumph of IS, the groups mentioned above were merged with units which invoke Grand Ayatollah Sistani to form the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) in 2014.³⁶ Tehran was only able to influence the PMU indirectly and via individuals, e.g. through Qasem Soleymani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who led the fight against IS on the Iraqi side. It should not be overlooked here that this was ultimately a defensive operation together with Western allies, i.e. not Iranian power projection. However, the deployment of Iraqi fighters on Iranian orders in Syria served to project power and protect and expand the axis of resistance.

Syria: Abulfazl, Fatemiyun, Zeynabiyun

In 2011, Iran decided to intervene in the Syrian civil war on the side of the ruler Bashar al-Asad. In Syria, units of the 65th NOHED of the Iranian army, the Saberun and the Fatehin units were or have been employed in combat operations, while the Qods were responsible for coordination and operational advice and command. However, even the employed/deployed Iranian

³⁶ On the economic role of the VMEs cf. Inna RUDOLF, *Tracing the Role of Violent Entrepreneurs in the Iraqi Post-Conflict Economy*, New Line Institute Washington DC, May 2023.

units were unable to compensate for the Syrian regime's troop shortage. Especially as Syrian jihadists successfully recruited fighters in Iraq, who were soon followed by Shiite militias from Iraq: the civil wars in Iraq and Syria overlapped at the time. Tehran therefore resorted to international Shiite volunteers.

Initially, Iraqi-Arab volunteers, who already belonged to well-known groups such as Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl Al-Haqq, Jaish al-Mukhtar, etc., were grouped together to form the Abu Fazl al-Abbas Brigade. They originally responded to the threat of Sunni fundamentalists to blow up the Shrine of Zeinab in Damascus, something they had already done in Iraq. In doing so, they played straight into the hands of Shiite propaganda, which had a great effect on Iraqi Shiites. Volunteers first had to enlist and join one of the Iraqi militias before receiving training on behalf of the Iranians and the Lebanese Hezbollah before they were sent to Syria, where they fought for three months alternating with two months at home for recuperation. Similar to the Popular Mobilisation Units, the individual Iraqi militias retained their respective identities within the Abu Fazl Brigade. Leadership positions appear to have been evenly split between Iranians, Iraqis and Lebanese from Hezbollah.

This was not the case with the next two groups, as the command and the most important staff functions, in particular the G2 service of the Fatemiyun and Zeynabiyun Brigades, are in Iranian hands.³⁷ The origins of the Fatemiyun Brigade, recruited from Persian-speaking Afghan Shiites, can be traced back to two older organisations: The Army of Mohammad (Sepah Mohammad) and the Abu Zar Brigade. The Army of Mohammad fought against the Soviets and later against the Taliban and left the country after the American intervention in Afghanistan at the end of 2002/2003. With the outbreak of the civil war, some of them went to Syria, where they joined the Shrine of Zeinab in Damascus and were integrated into the Fatemiyun. Another Afghan element to end up with Fatemiyun was the independent Abu Zar Brigade founded in 1980, immediately after the start of the war. It was deployed in the framework of the *qarargah* Ramadan organisation to Iraqi Kurdistan.

³⁷ Amir TOUMAJ, Candace RONDEAUX and Arif AMMAR, *Soleimani's Shadow. The Fatemiyoun Division and Iran's Proxy Warfare Propaganda*, New America Institute, Washington DC, July 2021.

The Iranians were therefore able to fall back on institutional experience when they established the Afghan Fatemiyun Brigade in Syria in 2014. At that time, every Afghan in Syria fit for military service was mobilised together with Afghan volunteers from Iran and a handful Afghan fighters in the Lebanese Hezbollah. The degree of voluntarism, especially among Afghans living in Iran, is contentious. According to reports, Tehran exerts administrative pressure on the young Afghans to report to Syria. A combat operation in Syria makes it easier, *inter alia*, to acquire Iranian citizenship, while others use the lump sum they get paid after completing military service to set off for Europe. Former president Raisi showed a particular interest in the Fatemiyun, for whom he had social housing built in Mashhad. This suggests that Raisi intended to use the Fatemiyun fighters based in Mashhad as his personal guard. The Zeynabiyun unit is recruited from the ranks of Pakistani and Indian Shiites from various ethnic groups such as the Hazara, Pashtuns from Parachinar, Punjabis and Shiites from the greater Karachi area. Members of the Zeynabiyun originally fought as part of the Fatemiyun before they became numerically strong enough to form their own unit.

Thus, regular Iranian forces and volunteer militias fighting on the side of Damascus would play a key role in securing Bashar al-Asad's rule over (parts of) Syria. The Lebanese Hezbollah, which must be seen as a partner on an equal footing with Tehran, played a key role too.

Hezbollah

The Lebanese Hezbollah is so far the only long-term success of the Hezbollah model. Similar projects in Turkey and Afghanistan have failed. Founded in 1982 Hezbollah would appeal to the younger generation of Lebanese Shiites who did not feel represented by the Shiite AMAL Militia. Key figures in founding the movement were the Iranian ambassador in Beirut, Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, and the Revolutionary Guard officers at his disposal. They built up Hezbollah in accordance with the train-the-trainer method, so that a militia was available within a short space of time. The transfer of already trained Shiite fighters from other organisations such as the PLO strengthened the military capabilities of the fledgling force. This included the Lebanese Shiite Imad Moghniye, who later became chief of staff and head of Hezbollah's intelligence service. For years, Moghniye lived incognito in Tehran, Damascus and Beirut and had direct access to Iran's security policy

elites. In the 1980s, he was successfully active in southern Lebanon against the Israeli occupation, after which he rose to the command echelon of the Islamic resistance.

The successful defence against the IDF in 2006 is attributed to his careful planning. Moghniye fell victim to a Mossad attack in 2008, and a personality cult has been organised around him ever since. Expectations that the Lebanese Hezbollah would be weakened after his death have not materialised. Hezbollah has received Iranian support for decades, but the organisation's independence and capability to act on its own, was planned from the outset, and it is now seen as an equal partner or ally of Iran. Even more, Hezbollah became a source of inspiration for many other Shiite groups and maintains good working relationships with Sunni groups such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Resistance Movement HAMAS.

Manifestation of a regional power: the Navy

With its network of sympathetic groups and movements, Tehran has been able to maintain and secure its position in the region. However, Iran's ambitions go beyond this and maintain the tradition of the Pahlavi state – although not admittedly. This applies above all to the attempt to become a naval power. In 1988, the Iranian Navy, which was well equipped at the time, suffered heavy losses in a battle with the American navy (Operation Praying Mantis) (five ships sunk, one frigate damaged) after the Iranians had previously attempted to mine the Strait of Hormuz.

Since 1985, Iran has had two naval forces: the regular Navy ('Naval Forces of the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran' *Niru-ye Daryayi-e Artesh-e Jomburi-ye Eslami-ye Iran*) and the Navy of the Revolutionary Guard ('Naval Forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' *Niru-ye Daryayi-e Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami*).³⁸ The latter operates exclusively in the Persian Gulf and acts, inter alia, as a coast guard. Both units have their own marine infantry units, minelayers, and minesweepers.

The Revolutionary Guard Navy has a large number of missile-equipped speedboats, patrol boats and a missile corvette built in Iran and based on the Chinese model (Type 22 catamaran). During the Iran-Iraq war, it played an important role in the so-called tanker war against Iraq. At that time, in accordance with the doctrine of guerrillas at sea, swarm tactics were used for the first time, i.e. numerous smaller speedboats attacked and immediately disengaged from battle. The IRGC Navy was and has been notorious for its daring operations, in which Iranian speedboats crossed close to American aircraft carriers and warships. In three cases, members of the Revolutionary Guard Navy captured British and American soldiers for alleged border violations. From 2017, the US has vigorously enforced the oil embargo against Iran and prevented the transport of Iranian oil in international waters. Since

³⁸ For this chapter on Iran's navy, its ship types and armament we have utilised publicly available general studies such as the relevant sections of Wikipedia in English and Persian. For the most part however, we relied on the following studies: Office of Naval Intelligence (ed.), *Iranian Naval Forces. A Tale of Two Navies*, Department of the Navy 2017; NTI, *Iran Submarine Capabilities*, 17 February 2023, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/iran-submarine-capabilities/>.

then, the Iranians have been intercepting foreign tankers at will. This mainly happens in the Persian Gulf or in its immediate neighbourhood, i.e. in the Revolutionary Guard's area of command.

Iran's regular Navy was expanded by the USA and Great Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, Iran wanted to increase its influence in the Indian Ocean, a wish which the fall of the Shah, the war with Iraq and a lack of budget put paid to. In the 1990s, the western ships were modernised and equipped with Chinese, Russian and Iranian missiles. The core was made up of four (since 1988 only three) British-built Alvand-class frigates (British Vosper Mark5). Iranian shipyards were able to deliver four new Mouj-class frigates to the Navy from 2010 and fast attack craft (FAC) of the Kaman class, based on the French La Combattante II, have been in service since the 1970s.

The Persian Gulf is also home to the Iranian submarine fleet, which began in the 1990s with three Soviet Kilo-class submarines, to which an estimated 20 Ghadir-class mini-submarines have since been added. Ghadir is an Iranian in-house product based on North Korean (Song-O and Yono) and Yugoslavian (Una, Yugo) models. Another in-house product is Fateh, a medium-sized coastal submarine which succeeded in forcing the American nuclear submarine Florida, which was stealthily cruising in the Strait of Hormoz, to surface and change course.

An increased level of ambition on the part of the Iranian Navy has been evident since at least 2011. At that time, IRI Navy ships called at Chinese, Sudanese and Syrian harbours for the first time. The presence of the IRI Navy in the eastern Mediterranean caused an international stir. In 2019, the importance of regular manoeuvres with Russia and China was publicly acknowledged. Maritime cooperation between the three countries has intensified since then. In 2022-2023, the destroyer Dena and the helicopter carrier Makran circumnavigated the globe for the first time. For the first time in its history, Iran was present on all the world's oceans. In addition to this naval achievement, it is striking that Iran is now able to operate freely along the most important neuralgic naval straits, namely the geostrategic important triangle consisting of the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca and the Gulf of Aden. In Hormuz, Iran shares the maritime border with Oman. The Islamic Republic also maintains excellent diplomatic relations with Indonesia,

including naval diplomacy, and is present in Yemen, where Tehran maintains close relations with the Ansarullah militia (Houthi rebels), which controls the north of the country and which Iran has equipped with, *inter alia*, missiles.

It can be assumed that Iran, first, wants to prove the seaworthiness of its fleet in this region and then establish a permanent presence. Above all, Iran's navy needs peace and quiet. Given the attacks by the Houthi rebels on Israel and international shipping since October 2023, in which Iranian missiles have also been employed, Tehran must expect to either be held accountable by the international community or be seen as weak or irresponsible because the Yemenis do not give the Iranians any say over the use of the missiles they supply. In both cases, this development goes against the interests of the Iranian Navy, which wants to establish itself as a rational and responsible element in the region.

Conclusion and outlook

A century has passed between the founding of the modern Iranian Army under Reza Khan (Shah) Pahlavi in 1922 and the present day. From modest beginnings in the 1920s and 1930s, one of the best-equipped armies in the Middle East emerged in the 1970s, which, having survived revolution and war, is today the most important part of an efficient and effective security apparatus entrusted with national defence. Western observers often overlook the continuity in the Iranian security apparatus, which Iranian revolutionaries such as former President Rafsanjani are well aware of. Nevertheless, the revolution marked a dramatic turning point and gave the military and security forces a new ideological frame of reference, which, despite all the desire for expansion and ideological propaganda, ultimately turned out to be (again) the defence of national interests and a mere striving for power.

Without the solid foundations laid by the two Pahlavi shahs, the Islamic Republic would probably never have been able to seriously aspire to the role of a regional power. Conversely, the Islamists brought the knowledge and skills of the political underground to the very modern Iranian state created by the Pahlavis, which, in turn, allowed Tehran to influence the fate of the region to its favour. Not to mention the ability to mobilise millions of war volunteers when the Iraqi dictator attacked Iran. Seen in this light, the revolution and war brought the armed and security forces a tough reform package which, despite all the setbacks, was successfully implemented in the field of defence technology and the organisation of the forces.

A further change has been observed since 2010, when the Revolutionary Guard Divisions were disbanded. The corps was never the homogeneous unit one might have assumed, given the uniform and largely similar social background of the personnel. The border troops, which belong to the Law Enforcement Forces and had previously already been part of the Army and gendarmerie, were able to retain their *esprit de corps*. And in fact, professionalization is also reflected in the different uniforms of the various special units such as the Saber, the Vali Amir or the special police units. The fact that the Revolutionary Guard Navy changed from the green of the Guard to the white of the Navy two years ago underlines the specialisation of the Revolu-

tionary Guard. The specialisation of individual formations obviously goes hand in hand with the merging of the military apparatus.

This development is far from complete, and it is not clear from outside to what extent efforts are under way to functionally, and subsequently institutionally, dissolve the Revolutionary Guard through specialisation without having to break with its history and tradition. Ultimately, the Islamic Republic seems to be slowly moving into the same military situation as the last Shah, when, supported by a strong and capable Army, he kept the neighbouring states and the international community in the dark about his actual intentions and regional policy ideas. Back then, Iran's behaviour caused tension and distrust on behalf of Iran's neighbours and the international community. The same holds true today and Iran's revolutionary ideology –vibrant or not – does not help to gain trust. Even less so, when aggressive rhetoric meets technical failure: the downing of a civilian airliner in 2020 and the accidental crash of the president's helicopter in 2024 were grave incidents, cannot be brushed aside as mere tragedies but raise legitimate questions about Iran's handling of sophisticated arms systems, especially its missiles, and the role, the IRGC plays.

In any case, a further change in the Iranian security apparatus is imminent, at the latest when the over 80-year-old revolutionary leader Khamenei leaves office, which must have domestic political and strategic consequences.

Appendix I: What is a qarargah

Source: Military dictionary of General Rostami

Qarargah: Command Post (*setad-e farmandehi*)

A 'qarargah' [headquarters] is permanent or temporary military institutions (*tasisat*) in a given region containing [the necessary] means of communication (*mokhaberat*) and transport (on ground and airborne) enabling it to act as an operative command and control (*farmandehi va kontrol*) centre for the [respective] units. In all Headquarters (*qarargah*) all officers of the coordination staff (*setad-e hamahang konandeh*) and the specialized staff (*setad-e takhassossi*) serve, who are responsible for combat operations (*amaliyat-e razmi*) and the necessary combat support (*poshtebani-ye razmi*). In general, headquarters are established at the level of army (*artesh*), corps (*sepah*) and division (*lashkar*) and organised in two elements (*raddeh*): a forward (*jelou*) and a rear (*oqb*). This allows to combine widely dispersed (*parakandegi-ye bishtar*) troops and material (*saz-o-barg*). On the level of units (*be surat-e yeganha*) these two are not separated but included as elements (*anaser*) in the Headquarters (*qarargabha*) of the units. The titles (*anavin*) 'forward headquarters' or main command post (*pasgah-e asli-ye farmandehi*) and rear headquarters or exchange command post (*pasgah-e farmandehi-ye raddeh-ye oqb*) are synonymous and it is therefore possible that they may replace each other.

During the Imposed War [against Iraq 1980-88] several regional headquarters were created for the purpose of command (*farmandehi*) within the framework of Khatam-ol-Anbia [central] Headquarters, namely the headquarters [for the regions] Northwest, West, South and Northeast. For operational command and control (*farmandehi va edareh-ye amaliyat*) in reaction (*moqabeleh*) to changes of the situation (*vaz'-e motahavvel*) at the front, other headquarters, namely operational headquarters (*qarargabha-ye amaliyati*) such as Karbala 1, 2, 3... Qods, Nasr, Fath und Fajr were created, which were disbanded after the operation and the stabilisation of the front.

Appendix II: IRGC Units

The following two presentations are based on publicly accessible sources, including the Persian version of Wikipedia. They are intended as a rough guide and are in no way a replacement for the Iranian specialist literature that has not been accessible up to now. Contradictions in the sources have been marked with (!).

Core Units: Divisions and Brigades (until 2010)

<i>IRGC units 1980-2010</i>					
<i>Unit</i>	<i>Branch</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Sobriquet</i>	<i>Garrison</i>	
				<i>Province</i>	<i>City</i>
Division	Mechanized	27	Mohammad Rasulallah	Tehran	Tehran
Division		28	Ruhollah (disbanded)		Tehran Revolutionary Committee
Division		23	Khatam-ol-Anbiya		Reyy
Brigade	Ranger (<i>takavor</i>)		Hazrat-e Zahra		
Brigade		20	Ramazan		Reyy
Group	Artillery	63	Khatam-ol-Anbiya		Reyy
Brigade	Special Forces (<i>niru-ye vizheh</i>)	110	disbanded, became part of 6 th Div		Reyy
Division	Special Forces	10	Seyyed-ol-Shohada	Alborz	Karaj
Brigade		82	Saheb-ol-Amr	Qazvin	Qazvin
Division	Infantry	17	Ali ebn-e Abi-Taleb	Qom	Qom
Brigade		83	Emam Jaafar Sadeq		Qom
Brigade		36	Ansar-ol-Mahdi	Zanjan	Zanjan
Division		14	Emam Hossein	Esfahan	Esfahan

<i>Unit</i>	<i>Branch</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Sobriquet</i>	<i>Garrison</i>	
				<i>Province</i>	<i>City</i>
Division	Tank	8	Najaf-e Ashraf		Najafabad
Group	Engineering	40	Saheb-ol-Zaman		Esfahan
		39	Emam Sadeq	Bushehr	Bushehr
Brigade		13	Amir-ol-Momenin (transferred to IRGC Navy)		Bushehr
Division		19	Fajr	Fars	Shiraz
Brigade		33	Al-Mahdi		Jahrom
Brigade	Ranger		Emam Sajad		Kazerun
Brigade	Ranger		Ansar-ol-Hojeh		Fasa
Group	Engineering	46	Emam Hadi		Kavar
Group	Artillery	56	Yunes		Sarvestan
Division	Tank	7	Vali-Asr	Khuzistan	Ahvaz
Brigade		15	Emam Hasan		Behbahan
Brigade	Tank	51	Hojjat		Ahvaz
Group	Artillery	64	Al-Hadidi		Ahvaz
Brigade		12	Qaem-e Al-e Mohammad	Semnan	Semnan
Division		41	Sarollah	Kerman	Kerman
Brigade	Mechanized	38	Zulfeqar		Kerman
Brigade	Ranger		Saheb-ol-Zaman		Sirjan
Group	Artillery	45	Sa'eqeh		Rafsanjan
Division		110	Salman	Sistan and Baluchestan	Zahedan
Division		5	Nasr	Khorasan Razavi	Mashhad
Brigade	Tank	21	Emam Reza		Nishapur
Group	Engineering	47	Salman		Sabzevar
Group	Artillery	61	Moharram		Torbat-e Heydariyeh
Brigade		88	Ansar-ol-Reza	South Khorasan	Birjand
Brigade		45	Javad-ol-E'imeh	North Khorasan	Bojnurd
Division		35	Karbala	Mazandaran	Sari

<i>Unit</i>	<i>Branch</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Sobriquet</i>	<i>Garrison</i>	
				<i>Province</i>	<i>City</i>
Brigade			Mirza Kuchek Khan	Gilan	Langerud
Division		16	Qods		Rasht
Division		31	Ashura	East Azerbaijan	Tabriz
Brigade			Emam-e Zaman		Shabistar
Division (!) Brigade (!)	Special Forces	155 (!) 3 (!)	Hamzah Seyyed-ol-Shohada	West Azerbaijan	Orumiyeh
Brigade		37	Hazrat-e Abbas	Ardabil	Ardabil
Division	Infantry	4	Be'sat (disbanded)	Kermanshah	Kermanshah
Division		29	Nabi-Akram		Kermanshah
Brigade		59	Moslem-ebn-e Aqil (disbanded)		Gilangharb
Brigade		100	Ansar-ol-Rasul		Javanrud
Division (!) Brigade (!)		22	Beyt-ol-Moqaddas	Kordestan	Sanandaj
Brigade	Special Forces	55	(disbanded, added to 6 th Division Special Forces)		?
Division		1	Amir-ol-Mo'menin		Elam
Division		57	Abu-l-Fazl al-Abbas	Lorestan	Khorramabad
Group	Engineering	24	Bes'at		Borujerd
Brigade		48	Fath	Kuhgiluye and Boyer Ahmad	Yasuj
Division	Engineering	42	Qadr	Markazi	Arak
Brigade		71	Ruhollah		Arak
Brigade		1	Ninava	Golestan	Gorgan
Brigade	Tank	60	Ammar		Gonbad Kabus

<i>Unit</i>	<i>Branch</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Sobriquet</i>	<i>Garrison</i>	
				<i>Province</i>	<i>City</i>
Group	Engineer- ing	45	Javad-ol- E'imeh		Gonbad Kabus
Brigade		34	Emam Sajjad	Hormozgan	Bandar Abbas
Brigade		18	Al-Ghadir		Yazd
?		32 (!) 44 (!)	Qamar-e Bani Hashem	Chehar- Mahhal and Bakhtiar	Shahr-e Kord
Division		32	Ansar-ol- Hossein	Hamadan	Hamadan
Group	Engineer- ing	43	Emam Ali		Molayer
Division	Special Forces	6	(disbanded)	All provinces	Bakhtaran (Kermanshah)
Brigade	Airborne	66	(disbanded)		QG Ramazan
Brigade	Special Forces		Saberin	All provinces	
Brigade	Tank	30	(disbanded)	All provinces	

				<i>Foreigners</i>	
Division	Infantry	9	Badr (disbanded)	Iraqis (volunteers and POWs)	Qg Ramazan
Brigade	Infantry		Abu Zar (disbanded)	Afghan volunteers	Qg Ramazan
Brigade	Infantry		Mozaffar (disbanded)	Afghan volunteers	Qg Ramazan

Regional Headquarters and Provincial Commands (since 2010)

The new regional headquarters (*qarargahha-ye manteqehi*) and provincial commands (*sepah*) very often continue the sobriquet of disbanded divisions of the IRGC.

<i>Regional Headquarters</i>				
<i>Sobriquet</i>	<i>Garrison</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Tasks</i>	
Hamzah Seyyed-ol-shohada	Orumi-yeh	Kurdish Areas: West-Azerbaijan, Kordestan, Kermanshah	Securing the Western borders, counterinsurgency	Founded in 1984; coordinated action against Kurdish insurgents
Karbala	Ahvaz	Southwest Iran: Lorestan, Khuzestan, Kuhgilu and Boyer Ahmad	Border Security, Minority issues	qg Abulfazl is tasked with minority issues and counterinsurgency within the framework of qg Karbala
Samen-ol-E'imeh	Mashhad	North-East, greater Khorasan (i.e. North, South and Razavi Khorasan)	Securing the eastern border against DAESH, reaction on the weakness of the Afghan government since 2012	Founded in 2012 on orders of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei
Najaf	Hamadan	Central area, Elam and Hamadan provinces	Fulfilled intelligence and state-police tasks during the Iran-Iraq war	
Qods	Kerman	Southeast, Kerman, Sistan and Baluchestan	Border security to Afghanistan and Pakistan, fighting drug gangs, counterinsurgency	Tasked with border security in 2015, Qods cooperates with certain army units
Ghadir	Rasht (?)	Northern border, Gilan, Mazandaran and Golestan provinces	Replaces 35 th Division 'Karbala' which originally was responsible for intelligence gathering in these areas	Founded in 1985

<i>Sobriquet</i>	<i>Garrison</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Tasks</i>	
Madineh-ye Monavvareh	Shiraz	South: Fars, Bushehr, Hormozegan provinces		
Ashura	Tebriz	Northwest, East-Azerbaijan, Zanjan, Ardabil		
Saheb-ol-Zaman		Central Iran: Markazi, Semnan, Qom and Qazvin provinces		
Seyyed-ol-Shohada	Esfahan	Esfahan, Chahar Mahall and Bakhtiari, Yazd	Of key importance for training and logistics, fields of responsibility cover inter alia the following division: 14 th Emam Hossein, 8 th Najaf; Brigades: 44 th Qamar, 18 th Al-Ghadir, and the missile force 15 th Khordad, Engineering Brigade 40 th Saheb-ol-Zaman and others	

Appendix III: Allies and Partners

<i>Islamic Republic of Iran: Formations for Defence and Power Projection</i>			
<i>Iran-Iraq War 1980–1988</i>			
<i>regular</i>	<i>international</i>	<i>partners</i>	
		<i>ideologic</i>	<i>strategic</i>
65 NOHED (Army)		Hezbollah	Syria
QG Ramazan (until 1988) 6 th Division Special Forces RG 66 th Brig. Airborne <i>Qods</i>	9 th RG <i>Badr</i> (Iraqi) 2 Afghan Brigades <i>Abu Zar, Mozaffar</i>	Palestinian Islamic Jihad	PLO until 1981
			Kurdish Organisations (PUK, KDP, smaller groups)
		Sepah Mohammad (Afghanistan)	
Office for the Support of Revolutionary Movements (RG) until 1986			
Ministry of Information (since 1984, i.e. Intelligence)			
<i>Post-War 1990–2000</i>			
<i>regular</i>	<i>international</i>	<i>partners (axis of resistance)</i>	
		<i>ideologic</i>	<i>strategic</i>
<i>Qods</i> , since 1992 branch (<i>niru</i>) of IRGC	9 th Div. RG <i>Badr</i> , demobilised, 1992 deployed in Iraq	Hezbollah	Syria
Ministry of Information (<i>inter alia</i> Europe)		Palestinian Islamic Jihad	HAMAS
			Kurdish groups

<i>After Invasion of Iraq 2003</i>			
<i>regular</i>	<i>international (deployed in Syria)</i>	<i>partners (axis of resistance)</i> <i>ideologic strategic</i>	
65 NOHED (Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen)	<i>Abulfazl al-Abbas</i> (Arabs)	<i>Badr</i> organisations (Iraq)	Syria
<i>Qods</i> RG/TS (regional, esp. Syria)	<i>Fatemiyyun</i> (Afghans)	Popular Mobilisation Units (Iraq)	HAMAS
<i>Saberin</i> RG (Syria)	<i>Zeynabiyyun</i> (Pakistanis, Indians)	Palestinian Islamic Jihad	<i>Ansarullah</i> (Houthis)
<i>Fatehin</i> RG / <i>Basij</i> (Syria)			
Ministry of Information			

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Biography

Dr. **Walter Posch** is a trained orientalist and works as Middle East expert at the Institute for Peacekeeping and Conflict Management at the National Defence Academy in Vienna. His research covers conflicts and conflict actors such as armies, militias, underground movements and proxies in the region, with a special focus on Iran, Iraq, Turkey, the Kurdish issue. In previous assignments, he worked at the German foundation SWP in Berlin (2010-2015) and at the EU Institute for Security Studies in Paris (2004-2009).

The Western public perceives the Iranian security apparatus primarily through the Revolutionary Guard and its role at home and in the region. However, this overlooks the fact that the “Corps of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution” is part of an elaborate security apparatus whose stable institutional foundations were laid a century ago. Even a dramatic event such as the Islamic Revolution of 1979 led at the institutional level primarily to adaptation and adjustment to the new circumstances, and not to a revolutionary break with the state institutions, which were supplemented by “revolutionary” institutions such as the Revolutionary Guard.

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