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The IRGC in the Age of Ebrahim Raisi: Decision-Making and Factionalism in Iran's Revolutionary Guard

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Executive Summary

“The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC] has excelled in every field it has entered both internationally and domestically, including security, defence, service provision and construction,” declared Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi, then chief justice of Iran, in a speech to IRGC commanders on 17 March 2021.¹

Four months on, Raisi, who assumes Iran’s presidency on 5 August after the country’s June 2021 election, has set his eyes on further empowering the IRGC with key ministerial and bureaucratic positions likely to be awarded to guardsmen under his new government.

There is a clear reason for this ambition. Expanding the power of the IRGC serves the interests of both Raisi and his 82-year-old mentor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic. The ageing ayatollah is in the process of securing the foundations of a post-Khamenei Islamic Republic to ensure the survival of his hard-line Islamist regime after his death. To do this, Khamenei has been empowering the Guard, which has continuously demonstrated how far it is prepared to go to uphold Khamenei’s system (*nezam*). At the same time, the supreme leader has been laying the ground for his successor, who, according to all signs so far, will be his former student, the 60-year-old hard-line cleric Raisi.

Raisi’s election as president was a *de facto* appointment by Khamenei. The presidency is the perfect internship for the supreme leadership – a path Khamenei also followed before assuming the role. This is why expanding the IRGC’s power is in Raisi’s interest: he is seeking to consolidate his support base for when the moment comes to select Khamenei’s successor. Raisi is fully aware that if he is to become the next supreme leader, he will need the IRGC’s backing more than ever before – not least because antiregime dissent is surging in Iran and the IRGC is Khamenei’s iron fist.

The likelihood of Raisi's presidency further entrenching the IRGC across the government and state bureaucracy corresponds to the rising trajectory of IRGC power since the Guard's inception in 1979. Most recently, the 2020s have begun with the Guard expanding its power across the Iranian state on an unprecedented scale. In the process, the IRGC has effectively extended its grip over the visible state after taking control of the deep state. Critically for Khamenei and his successor, the IRGC will play a vital role in smoothing the transition to the next supreme leader. In short, the Guard can be the kingmaker.

Forty-two years on from the Islamic Revolution, what began as an Islamist (*hizbullahi*) militia designed to consolidate the clergy's grip over postrevolutionary Iran is now operating as a state within a state with its own economic, cultural, political and intelligence arms. The IRGC will be a critical element in any possible scenario for the Islamic Republic's transformation. It is no exaggeration to say that the future of the Islamic Republic is the IRGC.²

Understanding the dynamics of the IRGC's higher echelons is therefore of the utmost importance for appreciating both the Guard itself and Raisi's incoming administration. Western and international policymakers must be able to read the Guard's inner workings, identify its competing factional centres of power and dissect its decision-making nucleus to formulate effective policies to counter this rising challenge.

While there are a growing number of studies on the IRGC and its branches, there is a void when it comes to understanding and analysing the Guard's higher echelons, its decision-making and its internal factionalism. This paper puts forward a new model for understanding intra-elite rivalry in the IRGC, enabling governments and policymakers to identify and place IRGC ranks in the competing centres of power and determine their factional relationships and alliances. This model is also meant to forecast, as it allows observers to anticipate what kinds of policy priorities IRGC commanders are likely to pursue should they obtain key political appointments in the next government.

The Raisi Administration, the IRGC and the Creation of a New Islamic Government

For Khamenei and his hard-line Islamist allies, Raisi's election on 19 June 2021 not only brought about a new president in Iran's clerical regime. It also marked a transformation of the system and the beginning of the next stage of the Islamic Revolution that brought former Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini to power: establishing an "Islamic government".³

To understand this critical transformation, it is important to note that for Khamenei and his allies, the revolution that began in 1979 has never ended – a reality the West has struggled to recognise. This is because the revolution was never an end in itself. Instead, rooted in Shia Islamist ideology, the revolution is a means for the Shia clergy to prepare for the long-awaited return of the twelfth divinely ordained Shia imam and descendant of the Prophet Mohammad, who Shia Muslims believe was withdrawn into occultation by God in AD 874.⁴ Until his return, Iran's supreme leader is mandated to rule as his deputy and God's representative on Earth, a role enshrined in Iran's 1979 constitution.

To lay the ground for the imam's return, in the late 1990s Iran's supreme leader outlined five necessary revolutionary stages: an Islamic Revolution, an Islamic regime, an Islamic government, an Islamic society and an Islamic world or civilisation. According to Khamenei and his closest allies, Iran has achieved only the first two stages. It has been stuck on the third phase of establishing an Islamic government, which remains incomplete.⁵

To accelerate this process, in 2019 Khamenei launched a new manifesto to rejuvenate the regime and create the optimal conditions for the establishment of an Islamic government.⁶ At its core, the manifesto was about installing a generation of young Khamenei loyalists across all branches of the Iranian government, with the goal of watering down the republican aspects of the regime, such as elections and elected institutions. For the 82-year-old ayatollah, the purpose of this next stage of the Islamic Revolution is to further hegemonise the system and smooth the path of succession after his death,

ensuring his hard-line Islamist ideology and vision outlive him. Since 2019, Khamenei has been packing young, hard-line loyalists into key unelected and elected positions in the armed forces, the judiciary, parliament, religious organisations and the media.

The presidency was the final piece in the puzzle for Khamenei's ambition to advance this next stage of the Islamic Revolution. Indeed, in Khamenei's speeches, transformation (*tahavol*) is the central concept the supreme leader has repeatedly propagated since June 2020.⁷ The ayatollah has also explicitly outlined his demands for a "young and *hizbullahi* [ideologically hard-line] government" as the only means to "cure" Iran's socio-economic problems.⁸

Iran's June 2021 presidential election was, therefore, about more than just installing a new president. Rather, as declared by Mehdi Taeb, a hard-line cleric and close Khamenei aide, it was also about the "purification of the Islamic Revolution".⁹ This was reflected in unprecedented election engineering by the Guardian Council, the Khamenei-controlled body that vets the political and religious qualifications of candidates in the Islamic Republic's elections. That effectively ensured that only Raisi could become president and establish Khamenei's true Islamic government. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that even some in the regime's elite have called this transition an appointment rather than an election and speak openly about the transformation from an Islamic Republic to an Islamic state.¹⁰



Case Study: Who Is Ebrahim Raisi, the Supreme Leader's Protégé?

Sixty-year-old hard-line cleric Ebrahim Raisi is a former student and loyal follower of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.¹¹ Like his mentor, Raisi is a descendant of the Prophet Mohammad – as signified by his black turban. As such, he is respected in clerical culture and among Iran's Islamist class base, from traditional conservatives to the so-called downtrodden core (*mustazefin*) of the Islamist working class. Again like Khamenei, Raisi was born in the holy city of Mashhad and belongs to its famous seminary.

Raisi's father-in-law is another hard-line cleric, Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda, who serves as Khamenei's representative to Iran's eastern Razavi Khorasan province, home of the shrine to Imam Reza, the eighth divinely ordained Shia imam.

Raisi's career began in Iran's judiciary in 1981, when he was made prosecutor in the city of Karaj, a Tehran suburb. In 1985, he was promoted to the position of Tehran's deputy prosecutor general. Raisi's zealous

commitment to the regime's Islamist ideology and conviction for the use of executions as part of this role earned him a position on Iran's notorious Death Committee, set up by Khomeini to execute leftist dissidents and political prisoners en masse.¹² His central role in the 1988 mass executions, in which between 5,000 and 30,000 were killed on charges of apostasy, earned him the title of "executioner judge".¹³

Khamenei's appointment as supreme leader in 1989 catalysed Raisi's rapid rise through Iran's judiciary. The same year, Raisi was promoted to prosecutor general of Tehran, and in 2004 he was made first deputy chief justice of Iran. He became the country's attorney general in 2014.

In addition, Raisi is a member of the Assembly of Experts, a body of 88 clerics who, in theory, are empowered to designate and dismiss the supreme leader – but in practice are hand-picked by Khamenei himself. Since 2012, Raisi has also served as the prosecutor of the Special Clerical Court, which is responsible for prosecuting clerics for misdemeanours and silencing dissident clerics.

In 2016, Khamenei appointed Raisi chairman of *Astan Quds Razavi*, a Khamenei-run ideological-charitable foundation. Based in Mashhad, this hugely influential billion-dollar foundation manages the Imam Reza holy shrine. It is also a key ideological and economic partner of the IRGC, and it was during his time as the foundation's chairman that Raisi developed a very close relationship with the IRGC, its key commanders and the leaders of Iranian-backed militias.

Raisi's first entry into the political arena was Iran's 2017 presidential election, in which he stood against then President Hassan Rouhani on the basis of his "religious and revolutionary responsibility".¹⁴ While this bid was unsuccessful, Raisi did secure 38 per cent of the vote.¹⁵ His failed attempt to win the presidency did not stunt his career rise: in 2019, on Khamenei's orders, Raisi was made chief justice of the Islamic Republic. He was also promoted to the status of ayatollah – the highest clerical rank in Shia Islam – virtually overnight, much like Khamenei.

In the engineered 2021 presidential election – in which only 49 per cent of the Iranian population participated – according to official statistics, Raisi won 17.9 million votes and was declared president.¹⁶ Raisi's presidency should be seen as a further stepping stone in his likely eventual rise to become supreme leader of the Islamic Republic – a path established by Khamenei himself.

THE IRGC AS THE FOUNDATION OF RAISI'S ISLAMIC GOVERNMENT

Crucially, the foundation of the new Islamic government taking shape under Raisi will be the IRGC. Not only is the Guard the most dedicated and committed section of Khamenei's regime, but its members also hail from the segment of Iranian society that forms the bedrock of Khamenei's support base. The IRGC has always been at odds with the republican aspect and guise of the regime.

As Mohammad Reza Naghdi, a senior IRGC commander, asserted just days before the June 2021 election, although "some claim the goal of [Khomeini] was to form the Islamic Republic, not an Islamic state, [Khomeini's] goal was [in fact] to form an Islamic state".¹⁷ Similarly, the day after the election result, Abdollah Haji Sadeghi, the supreme leader's representative to the IRGC, reiterated that the June vote was about "moving in the direction [of the third stage]" and that "without this third stage we cannot reach the next stages, which are an Islamic society and Islamic civilisation". Sadeghi asserted that the IRGC would "certainly help the incoming government" so that it is "successful and transformative".¹⁸

Against this backdrop, the IRGC will form the foundation of Raisi's administration and the new Islamic government that he will lead. Thus, understanding the IRGC, its upper echelons, its decision-making processes and its centres of power is crucial for policymakers who seek to get to grips with the regime's new leadership.

There are three key reasons why the IRGC will be the engine of Raisi's Islamic government: the supreme leader's ambition to embolden the Guard, the IRGC's backing of Raisi's election campaign and the broader context of the Guard's historical evolution.

Khamenei's Goal to Empower the Guard

Khamenei and his hard-line circle regard the IRGC as the "main pillar of the Islamic Revolution" (*sotoon-e kheimeh-e enghalab*).¹⁹ The Guard is the only organisation in the entire Iranian system that Khamenei has never criticised. Instead, the supreme leader has always praised its vigilance in defending the clerical regime. In a landmark speech to senior IRGC commanders in October 2019, Khamenei not only declared that he was "100 per cent satisfied with the IRGC" but also asserted that he believed the IRGC could, and should, "grow and progress by up to 100 times based on the Guard's abilities and talents".²⁰

Since then, as part of his 2019 manifesto, Khamenei has awarded key positions to senior members of the IRGC and continued to push for an expansion of the Guard's activities across all fields. Accordingly, as Khamenei seeks to advance the regime to the next stage of the Islamic Revolution and establish his ideal

Islamic government, it is only natural that he will proactively ensure the continued prominence of the revolution's main pillar.

The IRGC as the Core Body Behind Raisi

The IRGC was the main institution behind Raisi's presidential campaign, with the Guard's members forming the new president's base. This was in part because IRGC members are drawn from the demographic groups that make up Raisi's core constituency, in terms of both socio-economic background and ideology. But it was also because although the IRGC is forbidden from involving itself directly in Iran's elections, its members, especially the volunteer Basij civil militia and affiliated institutions, were instrumental in driving Raisi's campaign.

The ties between the hard-line cleric and the IRGC are long-standing. This relationship was particularly strengthened when Khamenei appointed Raisi to chair the billion-dollar *Astan Quds Razavi*, a Khamenei-run ideological-charitable organisation and one of the Guard's leading economic and ideological partners.²¹ During his time as chair of the foundation, Raisi not only developed a strong bond with senior IRGC commanders in Iran but also cultivated warm ties with senior IRGC Quds Force ranks operating in the Middle East and the leaders of Iranian-backed Shia militias, such as Hizbullah's Hassan Nasrallah.²²

Since 2016, the IRGC has openly rallied around Raisi and his career rise. The Guard's commitment to the cleric was displayed explicitly during a meeting in May 2016 between Raisi and senior IRGC members, including Qassem Suleimani, Mohammad Ali Jafari and Mohammad Reza Naghdi.²³ This carefully choreographed session showed Raisi on the podium and the senior IRGC ranks at his feet (see Figure 1) – a format that is reserved almost exclusively for Khamenei. When Raisi ran as a candidate against Rouhani in the 2017 presidential election, the IRGC and its Basij de facto backed Raisi's campaign and threw their weight behind his candidacy.²⁴ Four years later, the IRGC was again quick to lend its support to Raisi's 2021 presidential bid.

Figure 1

AYATOLLAH EBRAHIM RAISI MEETS SENIOR IRGC COMMANDERS, MARCH 2016

Source: Javan Online

The Evolution and Transformation of the IRGC

Finally, the IRGC's position at the heart of Raisi's government is consistent with the historical trend of the Guard's expanding power.

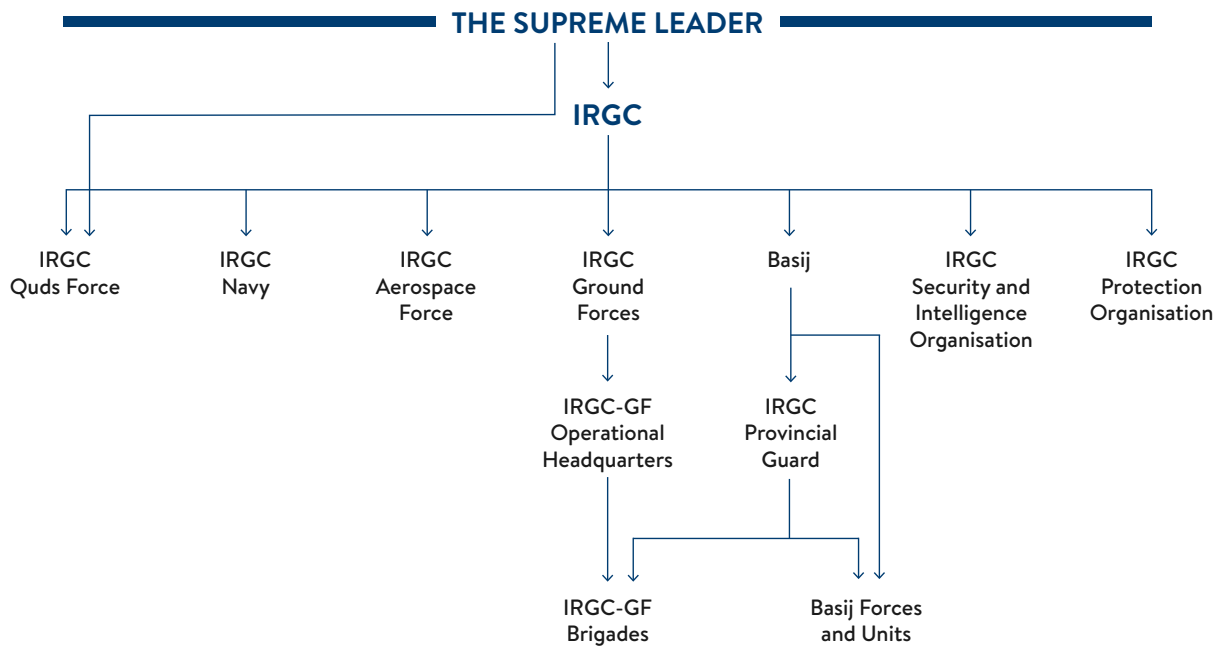
When the IRGC was formed, it began as an umbrella of Islamist militias that were mandated to protect Iran's clerical rulers and consolidate their power over postrevolutionary Iran. The Guard was also directed to advance the clerical establishment's goal of exporting Khomeini's Islamic Revolution overseas. Members of the IRGC were drawn from religious and conservative backgrounds as well as lower socio-economic segments known as the downtrodden class (*mustazefin*). These demographic groups form the religious or Islamist right in Iranian society.

The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 provided the IRGC with the perfect context to expand its remit as an organisation and transform itself into a professional military – or, perhaps more accurately, become an institutionalised militia. Boosted by the clergy's support, in September 1985 Khomeini instructed the Guard's expansion into three main branches: a ground force, an air force and a navy. This move paralleled the three branches of Iran's conventional army (*Artesh*) and intensified the rivalry between the two forces.²⁵

The end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 and Khomeini's death in 1989 did not put the brakes on the Guard's activities. On assuming the mantle of supreme leader, Khamenei expanded the IRGC into five branches. The new Quds Force would operate as the IRGC's extraterritorial arm, strengthening the Guard's hold over foreign affairs and doubling down on the clergy's commitment to export the Islamic Revolution. In addition, the Basij militia, which was made up mainly of young Islamist zealots, was transformed into a separate branch of the Guard and now counts 1 million volunteer members (see Figure 2).²⁶

Figure 2

THE STRUCTURE OF THE IRGC



Source: TBI analysis

In early 1990, the IRGC began to engage in nonmilitary activities. With Khamenei's support, the IRGC became heavily involved in the Iranian economy. The Guard established the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, an engineering and building conglomerate that led Iran's postwar reconstruction efforts. The IRGC simultaneously became strongly affiliated with several ideological-charitable foundations, known as bonyads, resulting in the Guard playing an expanding role in the provision of social services.

Beyond the economy, IRGC members occupied key unelected positions in the regime. For example, in 1992, IRGC commander Ali Larijani was appointed minister of culture and Islamic guidance, and Brigadier General Fereydoun Verdinejad was made chief of the official Islamic Republic News Agency. In March 1994, Larijani was appointed head of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, Iran's state television and radio broadcaster. His successor, Brigadier General Ezzatollah Zarghami, also came from the IRGC.

The late 1990s and early 2000s gave rise to the IRGC's involvement in politics and elected roles in the state system. The election of so-called reformist President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and the subsequent demand from Iran's youth for social liberalisation triggered the IRGC's political activities, with the Guard acting as the main bulwark against any kind of reform. In 1999, 24 IRGC commanders wrote a letter threatening to oust Khatami from power if he did not end the student protests against the supreme leader and hard-line institutions that followed the closure of a reform-aligned newspaper, *Salam*.²⁷ The incompetence of the so-called reformists in supporting the people's aspirations, as well as pushback from conservatives, led to disillusionment among the Iranian people, many of whom boycotted elections in 2003–2004. This resulted in a rapid increase of IRGC members being elected first as members of city councils in 2003 and then as members of the Iranian parliament in 2004.

The IRGC's consolidation of the political sphere reached new heights under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a member of the Basij.²⁸ A significant number of Ahmadinejad's provincial governors and political appointees came from the IRGC. While these appointees were entrenched in Iran's state bureaucracy, many were still working for the IRGC and continued to receive salaries from the Guard. During Ahmadinejad's first term in office from 2005 to 2009, at least nine out of 21 cabinet positions were occupied by members of the IRGC.²⁹ In 2008, the IRGC established its Provincial Guard, which operates across all of Iran's 31 provinces as well as Tehran city, to further consolidate power at the local level, decentralise the chain of command and increase grassroots Islamisation.³⁰

The antiregime Green Movement, which emerged after Iran's fraudulent 2009 presidential election, further accelerated the expansion of the IRGC's remit – this time in the fields of intelligence and national security. The IRGC's critical role in violently suppressing the protests resulted in Khamenei granting the Guard a new range of national-security privileges, directly challenging the authority of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security. On Khamenei's order, in October 2009, the Guard's Intelligence Directorate was upgraded to the Intelligence Organisation of the IRGC under Hojatolislam Hossein Taeb, a cleric and former head of the Basij.³¹ This placed the IRGC at the nucleus of decision-making on national security and intelligence issues.³²

The IRGC's rise was not impeded by the 2013 election of Rouhani, who ran on a so-called moderate agenda. During the Rouhani years, from 2013 to 2021, the IRGC continued to entrench itself in Iranian society – mostly through the Guard's provincial branches, which are mandated to control neighbourhoods, stymie potential protests and mitigate their spread to other regions.³³ The IRGC has invested heavily in social and cultural programmes, especially in rural areas – something that accelerated under Rouhani.

At the same time, the Guard made it absolutely clear that despite the portrayal of Rouhani and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to the outside world, the IRGC controlled the regime's foreign policy – not least in the Middle East. From 2011 onwards, the Guard used the Syrian civil war and, later, the emergence of ISIS to take control of Iran's regional policy and expand its presence across the Middle East. This regional role of the IRGC was acknowledged by Zarif himself, who, in a leaked recording, declared that the “military field” (*meydan*) – a euphemism for the IRGC Quds Force and its late commander, Qassem Suleimani – called all the shots in the region.³⁴

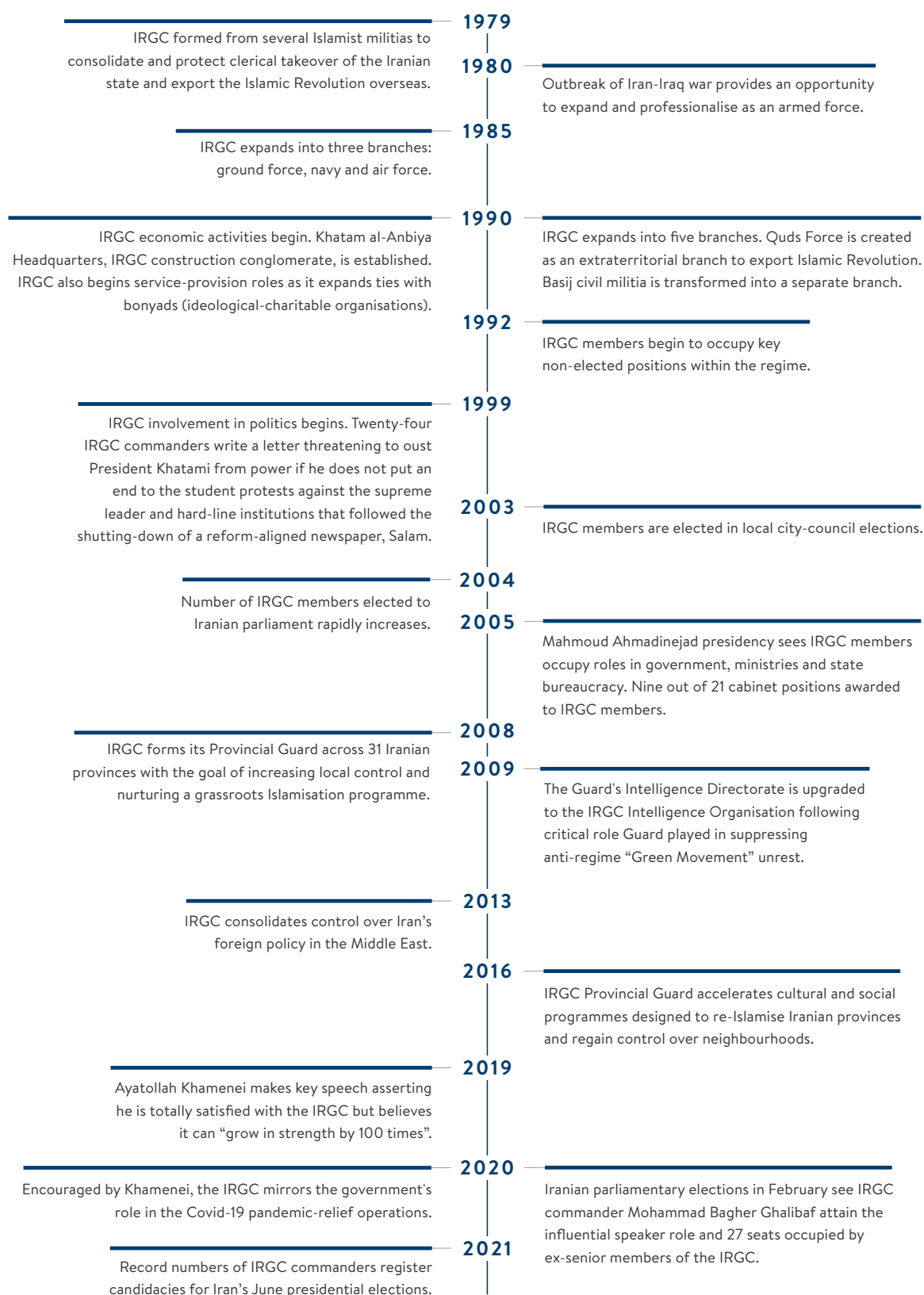
With the Iranian parliamentary election in February 2020, the IRGC enhanced its external presence, too. IRGC commander Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf gained the influential role of speaker of Iran's parliament, while senior IRGC members occupied at least 27 seats in the legislature.³⁵ At the same time, encouraged by Khamenei, the IRGC paralleled the government's role in Covid-19 relief operations, effectively overshadowing Rouhani's government.³⁶

This confidence was further reflected in the months building up to the June 2021 election, when the IRGC openly eyed the presidency with a record number of guardsmen registering their candidacies. While most failed to make the final list of nominees or decided to step aside in favour of Raisi, the registrations of these candidates underscore just how politically significant the IRGC has become.

All of these events have contributed to the IRGC's prominence across the Islamic Republic. What began as an armed Islamist militia in 1979 with fewer than 500 members would transform itself into a state within a state with its own economic, political and intelligence arms, all competing for greater power and authority (see Figure 3). This trend of rising IRGC influence will accelerate under Raisi's presidency, as the Guard is set to occupy Iran's deep state while entrenching itself in the visible state with the full backing of Khamenei.

Figure 3

TIMELINE OF THE IRGC, 1979 TO PRESENT



The Clergy and the Guard: An Inseparable Bond

In the lead-up to Iran's June 2021 presidential election, a record number of IRGC officials registered their candidacies.³⁷ Of the leading registered candidates, seven were from an IRGC background, including Mohsen Rezaei, Hossein Dehghan, Alireza Afshar, Rostam Ghasemi and Saeed Mohammad. But apart from Rezaei, all IRGC candidates were either directly or indirectly rejected by the Guardian Council.

Why did the council reject the candidacies of all military nominees bar Rezaei? Why was Rezaei allowed to run? Is the relationship between the Guard and the ruling clergy at an inflection point?

The answers to these key questions can help achieve a better understanding of the dynamics between the IRGC and the clergy and the Guard's future direction. Many international observers of Iranian domestic politics have misinterpreted the implications of the "IRGC-isation" of the clerical regime – a misreading that has often led to false assumptions about the Guard's commitment to Iran's clerical establishment, ideology and ambitions as a result of its rising power in the country's system. Crucially, the Guardian Council's decision to reject the candidacies of all IRGC commanders except Rezaei does not contradict the Guard's importance in Iran's next government. The IRGC is working not to unseat the clerics from power but to bolster them.

NO COUP IN SIGHT

Initially, observers saw the registration of these IRGC candidates as a sign of the increasingly military nature of the Islamic Republic. Western commentators have interpreted the IRGC's expansion across Iran's economy, politics and national security as the militarisation of the Iranian state, in which the Guard will eventually take over and replace clerical rule. Some have even gone as far as to forecast an inevitable IRGC military coup against the clerical regime as the Guard continues to rise in power.³⁸

The timing of this interpretation is ironic, as 2021 marks 100 years since Reza Khan, an Iranian Cossack brigadier, carried out a coup against the Qajar Dynasty in 1921. Four years later, Reza Khan announced himself as king. There are also many similarities between Iran's situation before Reza Khan's 1921 coup and the current status quo: not least economic turmoil, rising external tensions and a global pandemic.

As Mohammad Ali Foroughi, a respected Iranian politician, wrote in 1919, "the unstable situation cannot continue. There will be war again, or the status will change quickly, and the page will turn."³⁹ A century on, the same factors, coupled with the IRGC's rising power, have led many Western commentators to conclude that the Guard is firmly on the path towards a military coup against Iran's clerical leaders, with the IRGC's seizure of power being a question of when, rather than if.⁴⁰ While such conclusions may seem logical through a West-centric lens, they are based on a fundamental misreading of the bond between the Guard and the clergy.

Despite much speculation, it is important to underscore that the IRGC is still heavily under clerical control. The Guard does not have the willingness or the capacity to undertake a coup against Khamenei and his regime. The IRGC is, in fact, the Islamic Republic's core centre of power, and the increasing number of IRGC presidential candidates in the June 2021 race was an indication of the Islamic Republic's natural transformation to an Islamic state. This transformation is based on the IRGC's own Shia Islamist ideology, which is centred on the idea of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist), the principle that gives Iran's supreme leader authority over Shia Muslims.⁴¹

What is consistently overlooked in mainstream Western analyses is that far from being a step towards a military coup against Iran's clerical establishment, the IRGC's rising power is encouraged by Khamenei himself. This is because the IRGC makes up the supreme leader's core – and most loyal – constituency. Over the years, Khamenei has used various mechanisms to ensure the Guard's utmost commitment to the clerical regime and the ideological concept of clerical superiority.

Khamenei controls Iran's conventional armed forces and, in particular, the IRGC using several strategies, including indoctrination, co-optation and repression.⁴² Indoctrination is undertaken through massive clerical networks in Iran's military that comprise Khamenei's representatives, who work in a similar way to political commissioners in Marxist-socialist regimes. Such ideological-political training has accelerated in the past few decades, with the aim of radicalising all IRGC members with the regime's extreme Shia Islamist ideology, which places clerical rule and superiority at its core.

Co-optation is achieved through the IRGC's expanded but managed involvement in the Iranian economy, with guardsmen reaping financial rewards to maintain satisfaction with the status quo. Finally, repression is embedded in Iran's armed forces through a large-scale counter-intelligence network, which carries out monitoring and surveillance of the military.⁴³ Through these combined mechanisms, Khamenei has been able to control Iran's armed forces, including the Guard.

UPHOLDING CLERICAL SUPERIORITY AND PRESERVING RELIGIOUS LEGITIMACY

Confident that the Guard is under his control, Khamenei has asserted his intention to grow the IRGC's capacities by up to 100 times and expressed his 100 per cent satisfaction with the Guard. Given that an IRGC presidency would have been a major boost for the Guard's capacities, why did Khamenei put the brakes on this scenario in the June 2021 election?

There are two key factors in the answer to this question: upholding clerical superiority and preserving religious legitimacy in the regime's support base.

To preserve the clergy's superiority, Khamenei has sought to maintain the IRGC's current role as the guardian of the Islamic Republic under clerical control. While the supreme leader fully supports the IRGC's expanding power and the Guard will undoubtedly occupy key positions in the next government, Khamenei wants to preserve the external clerical face of the regime. As the speaker of the Iranian parliament is IRGC commander Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and the parliament includes around 27 former IRGC members, an IRGC presidency could, in theory, risk changing this equilibrium, particularly as the executive is more powerful than the legislative branch because of its administrative roles and control of the country's budget.

For Khamenei, preserving the exterior clerical shell of the regime is critical as he does not want the IRGC to be seen to be in the driving seat.

Equally important is preserving the regime's religious legitimacy among its core support base and its regional network of Shia Islamist militias beyond Iran's borders. The entire system of the Islamic Republic is based on the idea of the superiority of the clergy, rooted in the doctrine of the Imam and the Ummah and *velayat-e faqih*. These concepts provide a religious mandate for Iran's supreme leader to rule as God's representative on Earth and on behalf of the twelfth divinely ordained Shia imam, who Shia Muslims believe will one day return.⁴⁴ An IRGC president – akin to a military presidency – could undermine the regime's religious basis and legitimacy.

Seen through the lens of the clergy, an IRGC presidency would also complicate the creation of an Islamic government, society and civilisation and, by extension, the return of the Twelfth Imam.

This scenario could have delegitimising implications for the regime's ideological project in the wider region, undermining its self-proclaimed authority over receptive Shia communities. As well as arming, training and financing a network of IRGC-manufactured proxies – from Hizbullah in Lebanon to the Afghan Fatemiyoun in Syria and the Heydarioun in Iraq – Iran's clerical regime has invested a significant amount of capital into radicalising its fighters.⁴⁵ These militants are indoctrinated with the concept of the Imam and the Ummah, under which these men are soldiers of the Twelfth Imam and, until his return, of his representative, Iran's supreme leader. This clerical legitimacy could be undermined if the Islamic Republic's exterior looked more like a military dictatorship under an IRGC president. That, in turn, could affect the Guard's ability to recruit and radicalise young Shia men to fight for the revolutionary cause across the Middle East.

Beyond the region, an IRGC presidency could also cause problems for Khamenei's ability to negotiate with foreign governments, given that the IRGC is listed as a terrorist organisation in several countries including the US.

This is why the IRGC's Political Bureau, which is under the control of the supreme leader's representative to the IRGC, Abdollah Haji Sadeghi, and headed by Yadollah Javani, was against the Guard commanders' decisions to run in the 2021 election. Sadeghi's position was clear: the IRGC does not get involved directly in politics. This reluctance was also rooted in Khamenei's concern with keeping the IRGC in line and under control, not least after his death. The next supreme leader will have problems controlling the IRGC if the Guard continues to expand its grip over the elected roles in the Iranian system.

But why did the Guardian Council not reject Rezaei's candidacy? He was approved after several discussions in the council over his health. Reports suggest that the council initially rejected Rezaei but then reversed this decision after a recommendation from the supreme leader. Rezaei's disqualification was a red line for both Khamenei and the Guard. The approval of Rezaei – the IRGC's longest-serving commander, with 16 years' service – was intended as an explicit sign that the IRGC is trusted by both the system and the supreme leader. Also, Rezaei's candidacy was never considered a real threat to the regime's plan for the creation of a young and *hizbullahi* administration, given his lack of popularity among the regime's support base: he has averaged only a few million votes in his past three election campaigns.

For Khamenei, then, a Raisi presidency not only preserves the clerical shell of the regime, which is important in terms of its legitimacy, but also allows the supreme leader to expand the IRGC's power and activities. The IRGC's enthusiastic reaction to Raisi's presidency further underlines that the Guard will form the engine and foundation of his administration. It is for this reason that understanding the IRGC's decision-making and inner workings is more important than ever before.

The Importance of Understanding the Guard

A better understanding of the IRGC, as the foundation of a new Islamic government, is vital. In the past 42 years, the Guard has transformed into an economic, political and security-intelligence heavyweight in the Islamic Republic – from the expansion of its economic activities in the early 1990s to its increasing interference in politics since the late 1990s to its growing hold over security and intelligence after the 2009 Green Movement unrest.

At the same time, just as the Guard did not begin as a monolithic organisation, subtle factional divides, competing centres of power and priority differences exist in the IRGC today. This is despite the fact that the Guard is absolutely committed to the clerical regime – as has been reinforced through rigorous indoctrination.

As the “IRGC-isation” of the Islamic Republic is set to continue under Raisi’s new government, understanding its decision-making processes and internal competition is of the utmost importance for policymakers. This is particularly the case for governments in the West and Iran’s neighbourhood, given the rising threat the IRGC poses to their interests and national security.

As a first step to better understanding the IRGC and its ranks, it is essential to note that the IRGC is not a conventional armed force. Rather, the Guard operates more like a parallel state, and it sometimes overlaps with the visible Iranian state. It also has massive economic and intelligence organisations.

Unlike in conventional armed forces, the upper echelons of the IRGC never retire from the Guard. They frequently move between the visible and the deep state and the various branches of the IRGC. For example, in the past five years, IRGC commander Esmaeil Kowsari has gone from being a member of parliament to deputy commander of Tehran’s Sarallah Headquarters – the most important security headquarters in times of unrest – and back to being a member of parliament again.⁴⁶

SHORTCOMINGS OF EXISTING APPROACHES TO THE IRGC

The IRGC's 180,000-plus full-time personnel belong to different factions and groups.⁴⁷ Policymakers and experts have used various models to divide and categorise these members – not least their senior ranks – as a way to better understand the Guard's workings, priorities and loyalties. However, all of these frameworks have fallen short.

The most conventional approach to distinguishing among IRGC factions is to identify their political leanings within the Islamic Republic: reformist, conservative or neoconservative (or principlist). Although IRGC personnel are not allowed to be formal members of the Islamic Republic's political factions, they can have political preferences. For example, in the 1997 presidential election, 73 per cent of Guard members voted for Khatami, the reformist candidate who was not Khamenei's first choice.⁴⁸ This prompted the IRGC to intensify its recruitment and indoctrination efforts to ensure its members were more ideologically homogeneous.

High-ranking members of the IRGC who were close to reformists have been purged three times: in early 1990 after Khamenei became supreme leader, in the late 1990s after Khatami took office as president and after the 2009 unrest, in which some IRGC members supported the Green Movement. Such methods paid dividends for the Guard, as today the vast majority of IRGC personnel support the conservative and principlist factions. While it can be safely assumed that some IRGC members back the reformist faction, open support is a major taboo and effectively a red line within the Guard, including the Basij. In fact, any guardsman who shows such support will immediately be excluded and, in some cases, fired. A categorisation based on IRGC members' political leanings is therefore of limited use in seeking to understand the divisions among the Guard's senior ranks.

Dividing the IRGC along generational lines is another approach policymakers and experts have used to make sense of the Guard. Some analysts divide IRGC and Basij members into three generations. The first consists of those who fought in the Iran-Iraq War, known as the "battlefront and war guys" (*bacheh-ha-ye jebbeh va jang*).⁴⁹ Members of the Basij who joined in the 1990s and were instrumental in the organisation of postwar cultural campaigns are regarded as the second generation. The third generation comprises those who joined the Basij from 2005 onwards, the year Ahmadinejad became president.

Others, meanwhile, identify four generations based on the IRGC's recruitment changes – an approach that also reflects the four decades of the Islamic Revolution.⁵⁰ In this model, the first generation entered the IRGC between 1979 and 1988, the period from the Guard's inception to the end of the Iran-Iraq War.

This cohort of guardsmen is regarded as the most ideological. The second generation joined in the 1990s; members of this group came from conservative backgrounds but lacked the ideological zeal of the first wave. The third generation joined after 1999, when the IRGC decided to focus recruitment on the religious right within society, with the goal of creating a more ideological Guard. This selection process is reflected in the Guard's fourth generation, which began in the 2010s and is considered zealous in its commitment. This is seen in the high number of guardsmen from this cohort who volunteered to fight in Syria and Iraq under the ideological notion of defending the holy Shia shrines.

However, these generational models are also of little use in trying to identify and make sense of the factional and ideological divides between the IRGC's senior commanders. This is because, 42 years after the Guard's establishment, all top commanders belong to the first generation, which is regarded as the most ideologically zealous cohort. In contrast, most second-generation members have been either encouraged to retire or deliberately kept in the lower ranks because of their lesser ideological commitment to the regime. The third generation is on the rise but still serves in lower ranks, such as the IRGC's provincial command.

Some Iran observers divide IRGC personnel into the rhetorically disciplined and undisciplined. The disciplined "professionals" are more pragmatic than the undisciplined "hotheads", who act emotionally in this view.⁵¹ However, this is a very vague distinction, since almost all IRGC members use radical rhetoric because an informal culture dominates the Guard.

Another way to categorise IRGC members is to divide them based on their geographical and provincial connections and identities. Tribal and provincial politics is fundamental in traditional societies, including Iran's. The Guard began in a very localised way, with each Iranian province having its own IRGC militia or circle (*hasteh/halgheh*) independent of the others. Based on this model, the circle that includes the most senior IRGC positions holds the centre of power and decision-making in the Guard.

The IRGC's commanding officers belong to several regional circles or connections, the most important of which include:

- the Khuzestan circle, which dominated IRGC decision-making during the Iran-Iraq War: Mohsen Rezaei, secretary of the Expediency Council and former IRGC commander-in-chief; Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and former defence minister; and Gholam Ali Rashid, commander of Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters, the highest combatant command in Iran's military;

- the Esfahan circle: Rahim Safavi, senior military adviser to Khamenei and former IRGC commander-in-chief; Hossein Salami, IRGC commander-in-chief; Ali Fadavi, IRGC deputy chief commander; Mohammad Hejazi, former deputy Quds Force commander; and Hossein Dehghan, senior military adviser to Khamenei and former defence minister;
- the Khorasan circle: Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, speaker of the Iranian parliament; Esmail Qaani, IRGC Quds Force commander; and Alireza Afshar, former Basij commander;
- the Yazd and Kerman circle: Mohammad Ali Jafari, former IRGC commander-in-chief; and Qassem Suleimani, former IRGC Quds Force commander;
- the Hamden circle: Morteza Rezaei, former IRGC commander-in-chief, former chairman of the IRGC's *Bonyad-e Taavon-e Sepah* – the IRGC's investment arm – and a former head of the IRGC's Counter-Intelligence Organisation; Hossein Hamdani, Quds Force commander in Syria; and Jamal Aberoumand, adviser to Ghalibaf and former chairman of the board of *Bonyad-e Taavon-e Sepah*;
- the Tehran circle: Esmaeil Kowsari, Iranian parliamentarian and former deputy commander of Tehran's Sarallah Headquarters; Saeed Mohammad, former head of Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters; and Hassan Hassanzadeh, commander of the IRGC Tehran Provincial Guard; and
- the Fars circle: Ahmad Vahidi, former IRGC Quds Force commander; Gholamhossein Gheybparvar, former head of the Basij Organisation; Rostam Ghasemi, the head of economic affairs of the IRGC Quds Force and former oil minister; Hossein Nejat, deputy head of the Sarallah Headquarters and former deputy head of the IRGC Intelligence Organisation; Mohammad Reza Falahzadeh, deputy commander of the IRGC Quds Force; and Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr, former IRGC deputy commander-in-chief.

It is worth noting that Raisi's entry into office now means the president, the speaker of the parliament, the commander of the Quds Force and the supreme leader all come from the Khorasan circle. However, despite the importance of tribal and local identity in IRGC policymaking, this model is becoming less significant because of the Guard's rapid modernisation and professionalisation.

A New Model for Understanding the IRGC's Intra-elite Factionalism

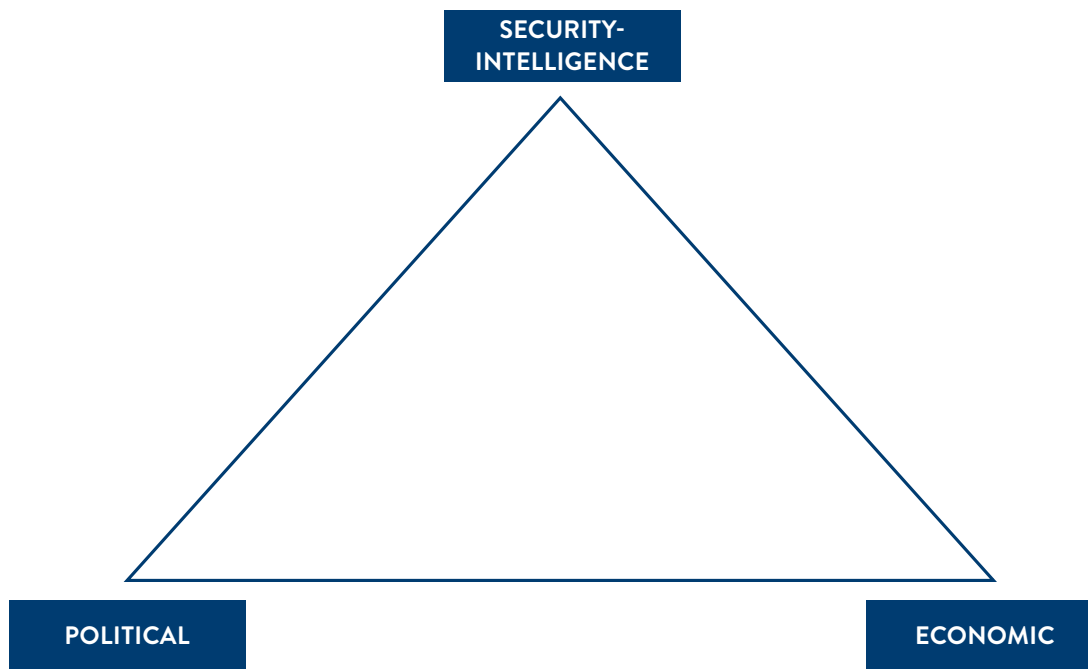
The new model presented here offers a framework to identify the allegiances, factions and alliances among IRGC commanders and determine the competing policy priorities and interests within the Guard. It also introduces the subtle differences in political ideology that exist in the social base that makes up the IRGC.

Intra-elite competition and collaboration are important drivers of stability or instability in all political regimes, so studying the IRGC's factions will aid efforts to forecast the future of the Islamic Republic. The new model offered here has a predictive capacity that will be useful for governments and policymakers attempting to foresee the clerical regime's future direction of travel.

This new model distinguishes between three major competing centres of power in the IRGC, based on the Guard's three vertices: economic, political and security-intelligence (see Figure 4). By studying the connections of key IRGC members and commanders with these three vertices, it is possible to place them on this model to determine which factions they belong to and are influenced by.

In turn, this new model will enable governments and policymakers to foresee what kinds of policy priorities IRGC commanders are likely to pursue if they attain key political appointments in the next government. What is more, the factions' relative numbers of senior positions – in both the IRGC and the government – are an indication as to which group holds the upper hand in the Guard.

Figure 4

A NEW MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING THE IRGC

Source: TBI analysis

THE ECONOMIC VERTEX

The IRGC's economic activities have expanded since Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency in the early 1990s and are primarily concentrated under the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters. The Guard's economic dimension also includes the plethora of bonyads that are affiliated with the IRGC, from the directly controlled *Bonyad-e Taavon-e Sepah* to those with indirect ties to the Guard, such as the Martyrs Foundation, which provides financial support to the families of those killed in military operations.

IRGC ranks connected with this vertex are mostly interested in Iran's economic issues and the Guard's interventions in domestic and overseas economic activities. Saeed Mohammad, Rostam Ghasemi and Parviz Fattah, director of the Foundation for the Oppressed and the Disabled (*Bonyad-e Mostazafan*), are good representatives of this group. In the run-up to his failed 2021 bid for the presidency, Mohammad's foreign policy platform focused primarily on the IRGC's economic expansion in the countries of the so-called resistance axis of Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.⁵²

THE POLITICAL VERTEX

The IRGC's political engagement is embedded in the office of Khamenei's representative to the Guard (see Figure 5), with sub-branches in the office of the IRGC's political deputy. The Guard's political activities increased after the 1999 student movement, in which IRGC commanders threatened Khatami and reformists.

Figure 5

THE SUPREME LEADER'S REPRESENTATIVES TO THE IRGC, 1989 TO PRESENT



Source: TBI analysis

The main priorities of the IRGC's political section are to advance the Guard's political interests and strategic communications and to promote the political vision of IRGC commanders. Given that the Guard's political arm is extremely closely aligned with the Office of the Supreme Leader (*Bayt-e Rahbari*), this group also seeks to advance, preserve and protect Khamenei's interests in the IRGC. Abdollah Haji Sadeghi and Yadollah Javani are good examples of Guard members close to the political vertex.

THE SECURITY-INTELLIGENCE VERTEX

The IRGC has been involved in security and intelligence operations since its inception. However, the Guard's domestic intelligence units were disbanded in 1984, when the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (VAJA) was established to incorporate several security and intelligence organisations under one roof. During Khatami's administration, the IRGC's internal intelligence branch became active again on Khamenei's orders due to the 1998 purge of the VAJA after the so-called chain murders of Iranian intellectuals by VAJA personnel.

Today, the IRGC's security-intelligence vertex is embedded in the Guard's Intelligence Organisation, which was officially created in 2009 after the antiregime Green Movement riots. Hard-line cleric and IRGC member Hossein Taeb was appointed as the head of this new body. The IRGC's most central security commanders in Iran, including Hossein Nejat, belong to this centre of power. Like the Guard's political arm, the security-intelligence vertex is strongly aligned with the Office of the Supreme Leader. Hard-line cleric and IRGC member Hojatoleslam Gholam Hossein Ramazani, head of the Counter-Intelligence Organisation in the Office of the Supreme Leader and former head of IRGC counter-intelligence, is a perfect example of someone who belongs to the IRGC's security-intelligence vertex.

The main priorities of the Guard's security-intelligence focus are to repress dissidents, maintain political order and safeguard Khamenei's regime. Of all three vertices, it has become the most important and influential in collaboration with the security and intelligence department of Khamenei's office.

CHARTING IRGC COMMANDERS' POSITIONS ON THE NEW MODEL

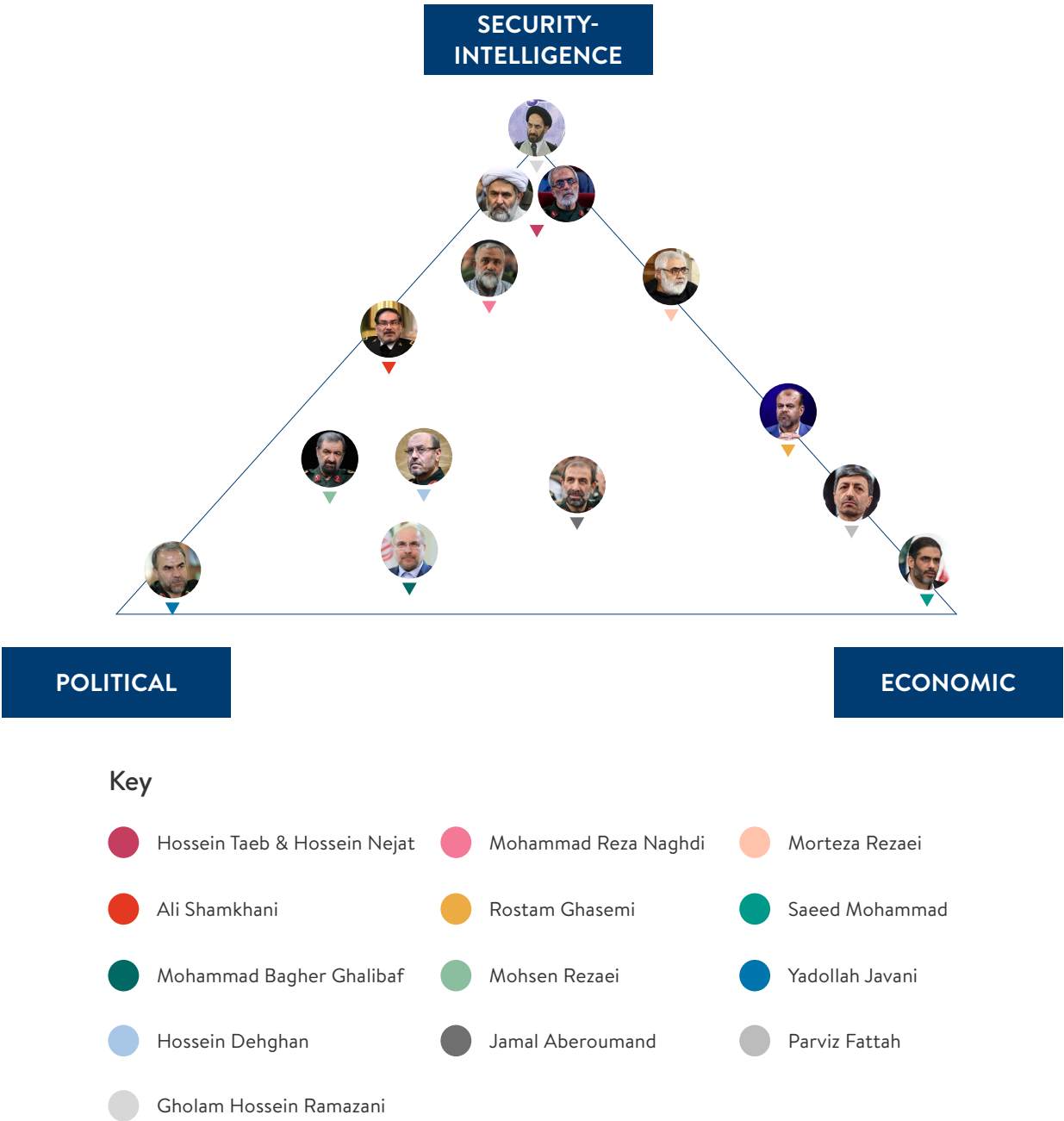
Using this model, one can divide current and former military commanders based on their connections and relationships with these three vertices to determine which centres of power they are closest to in the Guard (see Figure 6).

For example, Mohsen Rezaei, Hossein Dehghan and Ali Shamkhani lie along the axis between the political and security-intelligence focal points. Meanwhile, Yadollah Javani is firmly tied to the political vertex, and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf sits on the political-economic axis.

Located at the security-intelligence vertex are Gholam Hossein Ramazani, Hossein Taeb, Hossein Nejat and Mohammad Reza Naghdi, deputy coordinator of the IRGC and former head of the Basij. Morteza Rezaei, meanwhile, can be found along the economic-security axis. Similarly, Jamal Aberoumand sits close to the political-economic axis, while Saeed Mohammad and Parviz Fattah are located near the economic vertex.

Figure 6

SELECTED IRGC COMMANDERS' POSITIONS ON THE NEW MODEL



Source: TBI analysis

Since the IRGC is not a monolithic organisation, there is competition among these centres of power, which sometimes becomes clear despite the regime's attempts to show it is an ideologically unified armed force. The internal dispute within the Guard that surrounded Saeed Mohammad's June 2021 presidential bid, which caused much confusion for outsiders, can be better understood using this model as a clear example of competition between the IRGC's political and economic ambitions.

SHADES OF ISLAMISM: THE IDEOLOGICAL SPECTRUM IN THE IRGC

In addition to this new model, another layer that can assist policymakers in determining the worldviews of key IRGC members and commanders is a categorisation based on ideology. While the IRGC is a hard-line organisation that is absolutely committed to the Islamic Revolution, a subtle ideological spectrum exists within the Guard, rooted in ideological nuances among the core constituency that makes up the IRGC's recruits.

In broad terms, the IRGC's social fabric consists of the Islamist or religious right of the regime's support base – the *hizballahi* constituency. Within this base, one can identify three main political ideologies: regime protectors, followers of Khamenei's cult of personality and so-called Islamist justice seekers.

Regime Protectors

Preserving the regime and its interests is the most important goal for religious-right regime protectors. Individuals in this category defend the regime regardless of its structure, policies or leaders. This group is perhaps best described as Islamist Machiavellian, with the means always justifying the end of preserving the holy system (*nezam-e moghadas*).

As a result, of all the ideological strands of the Islamist right, this group is the most pragmatic and opportunistic. For example, despite being on the hard-line Islamist right, members of this group are prepared to deal with the US – as with the 2015 international agreement on Iran's nuclear programme – if it is in the interest of preserving the regime. This strand of political ideology is visible among the IRGC's ranks and senior IRGC commanders, including Shamkhani.

Followers of Khamenei's Cult of Personality

The most prevalent political ideology among IRGC members, not least the Guard's senior ranks, is based on Khamenei's cult of personality. Followers of this ideology support the regime on the basis of clerical superiority and the idea of *velayat-e faqih*. This strand is centred on absolute devotion to the supreme leader as God's representative on Earth and the deputy of the Twelfth Imam.

As such, for this group, following the practical, day-to-day commands of the supreme leader is more important than any other priority. Absolute obedience to Khamenei's orders always comes first for members of this group, even if implementing those orders puts the regime's existence at risk. These members' support or criticism of any policy purely reflects Khamenei's views and decisions.

A July 2021 recording of a speech by IRGC Quds Force commander Esmail Qaani best captures the mindset of followers of Khamenei's cult of personality: "We must stand only under the flag of Khamenei. [This means] even if someone is a very good person, prays regularly and is an experienced worker in the system... if they are not followers of the supreme leader, their place is in the trash can."⁵³ Through rigorous indoctrination and selection processes as well as lucrative rewards for loyalty, including promotions within the ranks, this strand of political ideology is most prevalent among senior commanders of the Guard, including the late Qassem Suleimani and Hossein Salami.

Islamist Justice Seekers

The so-called Islamist justice seekers (*edalat khahan-e eslami*) are perhaps the smallest but most fanatical group of the IRGC's religious-right constituency.⁵⁴ As ideological purists, those who subscribe to this strand of political ideology support the regime because of its Islamist policies and what they consider to be just. From their point of view, the supreme leader and the regime are legitimate as long as they follow and implement Islamic sharia law, most importantly in terms of justice.

For these ideological purists, advancing these policies, which they consider to be rooted in religious scripture, is the most important goal, higher than protecting the interests of the regime and the supreme leader. There are no visible examples of followers of this strand of ideology among the IRGC's senior ranks because rigorous mechanisms ensure that only absolute Khamenei and regime loyalists are given senior positions. However, given that Islamist justice seekers have a strong following among the socio-economic class from which the IRGC's members are drawn, this political ideology can be expected to exist in the Guard, albeit tacitly.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic is an interwoven network of clerical factions and security organs.⁵⁵ The June 2021 election of Raisi as Iranian president marks the first step towards the creation of an Islamic government. The foundations of this government will be the IRGC and the Basij. As the most loyal and foundational pillar of the Islamic Revolution, the Guard is trusted by both Khamenei and Raisi.

Against this backdrop, it is highly likely that IRGC members, who are drawn from the section of Iranian society that provides the bedrock of Khamenei's support, will come to occupy key ministerial roles that are up for grabs in the next administration and many of the 874 senior government-appointed positions across Iran's ministries and state bureaucracy.⁵⁶ As a result, the IRGC will occupy the Iranian deep state while further entrenching itself in the visible state, increasing its access to resources and power as it did during Ahmadinejad's 2005–2013 presidency.

Because the IRGC is not a monolithic organisation, there is competition among the economic, political and security-intelligence centres of power, which sometimes becomes clear despite the regime's attempts to show it is a unified ideological armed force. It is not yet clear which of these three power centres will have the upper hand during the Raisi administration and occupy the majority of political positions. Based on the new model presented in this paper, the centre of power with the most members in the administration gives an indication to policymakers as to the policy priorities Raisi's government is likely to pursue.

Competition and collaboration among the Guard's factions and elites will shape the future stability of the regime. The model presented here enables governments and decision-makers to recognise these intra-elite dynamics so as to identify emerging threats, challenges and opportunities – and produce effective policy responses.

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