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<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 15-05-2020		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Masters Thesis		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> Aug 19 - May 2020	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> Lessons to be learned? What the IRGC Quds Force can teach us about Mission Command.				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b>	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Middleton, David, C.				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b>	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> Joint Forces Staff College Joint Advanced Warfighting School 7800 Hampton Blvd Norfolk, VA23511-1702				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>	
				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Approved for public release, distribution is unlimited					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> Not for commercial use without express written permission from the author					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> The IRGC Quds Force is essential to Iran's regional strategy and to the protection of the religious leadership of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The organization conducts a variety of overseas operations by using proxy forces to counter its adversaries. Such an approach limits direct commitment and has proved a popular way to achieve Iran's regional aims. Successful command concepts underpin the IRGC's networked relationships with its partners and display traits similar to mission command. An examination of the IRGC Quds Force outlines how the organization operates and identifies relevant opportunities to improve Western concepts of command.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> Iran, Mission Command, Proxy Warfare.					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>  Unclassified Unlimited	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b>
<b>a. REPORT</b>  UNCALSS	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b>  UNCALSS	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b>  UNCLASS			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code)</b>  757-262-5950

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**LESSONS TO BE LEARNED? WHAT THE IRGC QUDS FORCE CAN TEACH US**  
**ABOUT MISSION COMMAND**

by

**David Middleton**

*Lieutenant Colonel, British Army*

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By Lt Col David Middleton  
British Army

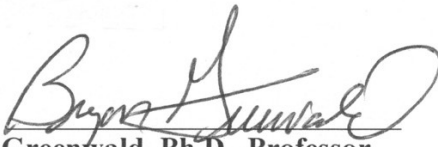
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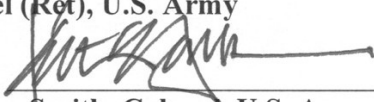
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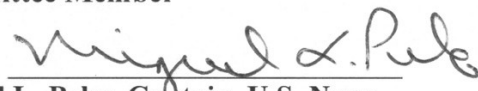
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Colonel (Ret), U.S. Army

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Committee Member

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### *Abstract*

The IRGC Quds Force is essential to Iran's regional strategy and to the protection of the religious leadership of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The organization conducts a variety of overseas operations by using proxy forces to counter its adversaries. Such an approach limits direct commitment and has proved a popular way to achieve Iran's regional aims. Successful command concepts underpin the IRGC's networked relationships with its partners and display traits similar to mission command. An examination of the IRGC Quds Force outlines how the organization operates and identifies relevant opportunities to improve Western concepts of command.

## ***Dedication***

Writing a thesis is demanding and would not be possible without much assistance and guidance. I am indebted to the JAWS faculty, especially my thesis advisors, who provided sage guidance and support as I developed this delicate subject. I am also indebted to those experts who provided addition detail to support my research. Finally, and most importantly, I am grateful to my family who provided unwavering support and assistance throughout this undertaking.

## **Table of Contents**

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: The Roots of the IRGC Command Concepts.....	6
Chapter 3: The Significance of IRGC Leadership.....	14
Chapter 4: Organizational Structure and Influence: IRGC Conduct and Control.....	22
Chapter 5: Wider Relevance – Recommendations and Observations .....	34
Chapter 6: Conclusion .....	46
Bibliography .....	48
Vita .....	52



## Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) inception shortly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the organization has been central to the preservation and principles of the Iranian regime. Formally known as *sepah-e pasdaran-e enqelabe-e eslame*, which translates as *Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution*, the IRGC has adapted and evolved to fulfil its role as the guarantor.<sup>1</sup> Acting as a modern-day Pretorian Guard, the IRGC command structure transcends the government to integrate civilian and military affairs in support of both the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the organization itself.<sup>2</sup>

The Iranian Revolution ended 2,500 years of monarchical tradition and saw a rapid transformation from a pro-Western, stabilizing actor to a regional antagonist. Such a profound change left the new Islamic Republic exposed to many conflicting interests and meant that the IRGC became vital to the Republic's protection. The formation of the Guard as a separate, trusted entity away from the regular army, or *Artesh*, is based on this principle.<sup>3</sup> The IRGC protects in two ways: internal safeguarding and exporting revolutionary ideals overseas, with the latter increasing the organization's freedoms and regional influence. Although this active position deters perceived threats to the regime, it has led to the Guard's proscription as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), explicitly referenced in the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Almna Keshavarz, "Hybrid Warfare: The Islamic State, Russia, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Threats, Challenges, and U.S. Policy Response." Order No. 10788052, The Claremont Graduate University, 2018. In PROQUESTMS ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, <http://search.proquest.com.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/docview/2043968546?accountid=12686> (accessed 1 November 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Steven Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces* (Washington DC: Georgetown Press 2008), 306.

<sup>3</sup> The Artesh were loyal to the Shah Revi Pahlavi.

<sup>4</sup> The IRGC designated a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) in April 2019. US Dept of State Fact Sheet, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2019), 1; Donald Trump, *National Security Strategy*, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, December 2017), 49.

The IRGC's influence now eclipses the responsibilities of the *Artesh*. It accounts for Iran's ballistic missile program (IRGC Air Force), internal security (*Basij* militia), patrolling of the Straits of Hormuz (IRGC Navy), offensive and defensive cyber capabilities, and overseas activities, exercised through the expeditionary Quds Force, or *Niru-ye Quds*. Deliberate expansion by the IRGC ensures an organization loyal to the Supreme Leader carries out key national decisions. Beyond the IRGC's military wing, its economic interests account for up to one-third of the Iranian economy, while significant representation in Iranian politics and social support, such as disaster relief to the April 2019 Golestan Province floods, all add to the Guard's standing.<sup>5</sup> The IRGC is therefore at the forefront of religion, politics, military, economic, and social matters demonstrating a sophisticated and mutually beneficial level of civilian and military integration.

The elite Quds Force is active throughout the Middle East and is central to the regime's preservation. As part of Iran's deterrence-based strategy, the Quds Force trains, funds, supplies, and partners with regional proxies in support of a hybrid approach to warfare that advances Iranian strategic ends.<sup>6</sup> Alongside Iran's Nuclear Program and control of the Persian Gulf, hybrid warfare completes a strategic triad that avoids direct conflict while preserving the regime's revolutionary principles.<sup>7</sup> The subject of hybrid warfare is well documented and this thesis accepts the consensus that it is a blend of irregular, conventional, and terrorist activities.<sup>8</sup> Given its reach, the IRGC Quds Force meets the Joint Special

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<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies," *Congressional Research Service*, Washington DC, (2017) <http://www.dtic.mil.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/docs/citations/AD1027350> (accessed 11 November 2019); Ariane Tabatabai "Syria Changed the Iranian Way of War," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no4 (August 2019).

<sup>6</sup> The use of missiles and the Navy to control the Straits of Hormuz are the other two components of this strategy. cited in Counter Extremism Project: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), [https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat\\_pdf/Islamic%20Revolutionary%20Guard%20Corp%20%28IRGC%29-07072019.pdf](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat_pdf/Islamic%20Revolutionary%20Guard%20Corp%20%28IRGC%29-07072019.pdf) (accessed 30 September 2019); Jack Watling, "Proxy Warfare: Iran" in *RUSI Strategic Trends to 2030 RUSI Occasional Paper* (2019), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 314.

<sup>8</sup> Alma Keshavez, *Hybrid Warfare*, 35.

Operations University (JSOU) definition of a hybrid organization that combines conventional and unconventional organizations, equipment, and techniques for strategic effects.<sup>9</sup>

The use of proxies in warfare is not a new concept, but beyond denoting that a client is acting in the interests of a patron, a comprehensive definition is challenging.<sup>10</sup> More helpful is an understanding of the strategic reasons why states establish proxies. In the case of Iran, the United States and Israel pose the main security threats and Iranian proxy activity in Iraq and the Levant act against both nations.<sup>11</sup> Proxies therefore provide military and political asymmetry to achieve battlefield parity, efficiency, and a deniability of action; Iran's success suggests their prevalence will increase.<sup>12</sup>

Iran does not employ a templated proxy model. Instead, an array of partnerships support Iran's interests. Examples are: a long, deep, and trusted relationship with Lebanese Hezbollah, which alongside the Sunni Hamas Movement targets Israel; support to various Shia militias in Iraq spreads Iranian influence inside its neighbor's borders; indirect support to Houthi rebels to degrade Iran's regional competitor, Saudi Arabia, in Yemen; and tactical control over other nationalities (Afghani, Pakistani, Lebanese and Syrian) to prop up its Syrian ally. Taken as a whole, this array of relationships supports the spectrum of modern-day hybrid warfare.

Syrian activity is especially significant as IRGC Ground Force, *Basij*, and *Artesh* personnel deployed overseas under Quds Force control for the first time since the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. Such a marked and overt reorientation has exposed Iranian activity far beyond traditional thresholds.<sup>13</sup> Through its Quds Force, Iran, a country with a per capita GDP

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<sup>9</sup> Timmy McCulloch and Richard Johnson, *Hybrid Warfare* (JSOU 13-4, JSOU Press, August 2013), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Jack Watling, "Proxy Warfare: Iran," 11.

<sup>11</sup> Jack Watling, "Iran's Objectives and Capabilities," *RUSI Occasional Paper* (2019), IV.

<sup>12</sup> Ariane Tabatabai "Syria Changed the Iranian Way of War," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no4 (August 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Paul Bucala, "Iran's New Way of War," *Institute for the Study of War* (February 2018)

[http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Iran%20New%20Way%20of%20War%20in%20Syria\\_FE\\_B%202017.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Iran%20New%20Way%20of%20War%20in%20Syria_FE_B%202017.pdf) (accessed 5 November 2019).

equivalent to Mexico and a population comparable to Germany, achieves disproportionate influence and frustrates the United States and its allies. Moreover, the IRGC approach neatly fulfills Colin Gray's difficult "reality of converting tactical military activity into strategic effect," much of which places the Quds Force in the lead.<sup>14</sup>

The Quds Force achieves command coherence through a holistically aligned structure and concept that efficiently meets Iran's aim to deter regional threats. A clear strategic purpose, along with operational freedom, supports a command concept that ensures meaningful tactical activity across all the IRGC's regional proxy relationships. An analysis of the factors that determine the IRGC's functionality explains how this malign actor operates and provides lessons to enhance Western command philosophies.

The IRGC appears to display a command philosophy akin to the Western concept of mission command, which provides a framework to analyze the key factors behind the approach. Specifically, mission command emphasizes a centralized intent executed in a decentralized manner and requires a supporting structure that balances the art of command with the science of control by employing trust, shared understanding, and a clear purpose.<sup>15</sup> Although Western philosophies emphasize this concept, first pioneered as *Auftragstaktik* by Helmuth Von Moltke, it is not always understood.<sup>16</sup> An imbalance favoring additional control often hinders operational success and reduces tolerance to risk.<sup>17</sup> The range of activity, geographic spread, and diverse partnerships show that Iran's philosophy displays a comparable methodology, underlining its potential value as a comparative study.

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<sup>14</sup> Colin Gray, *Tactical Operations for Strategic Effect: The Challenge of Currency Conversion*. (JSOU Special Report. JSOU Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>15</sup> ADP-Ops. *British Army Doctrine: Operations*. (Development Concepts and Doctrine Centre British Army Doctrine, 2010), 6-9; ADP 6-0 Department of the Army. "Mission Command," (Army Doctrine Publication 6-0. Washington DC: Department of the Army, 2012), 22-5.

<sup>16</sup> Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the US, British, Israeli Armies*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2011), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Maj Gen Stephen Townsend, Gary Brito, Doug Crissman, and Kelly McCoy. 2019. "Reinvigorating the Army's Approach to Command and Control: Leading by Mission Command (Part 2)." *Military Review* 99 (4): 6-11.

While political and economic differences exist between Iran and the West, the overarching interplay between command and control defines an effective concept. When outlining such a concept, Israeli theorist Eitan Shamir stresses the importance of an “effective organizational culture and design” that minimizes friction and pursues organizational objectives.<sup>18</sup> This complements the assertion that command is both an organizational and cognitive function and that technology, by itself, is not the panacea.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, this thesis uses academic research to determine the factors that shape how the IRGC’s achieves command coherence.

Chapter Two analyzes the roots behind IRGC command concepts, specifically the social-cultural identity that shapes Iranian command, as well as the commitment and resources (political, military, and economic) that support such a philosophy. Chapter Three assesses the cognitive factors that underpin IRGC leadership, with the role of Qasem Soleimani, the former Quds Force commander, and the impact of social identity central to this assessment of the organization’s function.

Chapter Four examines the different IRGC Quds Force proxy relationships and how organizational theories, such as Network Theory, determine the Guard’s structure and inter-dependent regional relationships. Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen provide three case studies, while examples from Syria appear throughout the document. The final chapter draws together observations and recommendations from across the factors to identify the features behind the IRGC’s command concepts. In total, this study adds to the existing work on command and increases the understanding and functionality of the IRGC while also assessing traits and lessons for Western concepts to improve command effectiveness.

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<sup>18</sup> Eitan Shamir, *The Pursuit of Command*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> Carl Builder, Steven Bankes and Richard Nordin, *Command Concepts: A Theory Derived from the Practice of Command and Control*. MR/RAND Corporation: MR-775-OSD, (1999), 17.

## Chapter 2: The Roots of the IRGC Command Concepts

*“A Government of Military Men in Iran is a Childish Dream” newspaper headline shortly after the fall of the Shah.<sup>1</sup>*

Following any revolution, a power struggle often results from an environment lacking security and governance. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini quickly sought to channel the array of militant revolutionary committees, or *Komitehs*, to harness this revolutionary spirit, counter threats to his position, and enforce Islamic Law.<sup>2</sup> The newly assembled IRGC became the focal point to deal with Kurds, Marxists, or liberals threatening to usurp the Supreme Leader’s grasp on power. The creation of institutions and infrastructure, such as intelligence, barracks, and security all undermined the *Artesh*, and quickly provided a structure for the Guards to develop.<sup>3</sup> Granted a freedom of action and participation in politics, the IRGC took these decisive early steps to forge roots from which its concepts of command could dominate Iranian society.<sup>4</sup>

These founding structures supported a fierce independence that continues today. Despite regular attempts to reform or merge with the conventional military, the IRGC has circumvented change or argued against it. Organizational change after Ayatollah Khomeini’s death in 1989 supports this point, as merging the autonomous Guards Ministry did little to restrain senior IRGC leadership independence. Revolutionary zeal cascaded from the top of a command structure that resembled a conventional military formation, but with the freedom to bypass its supporting organizations.<sup>5</sup>

Such revolutionary foundations backup the interplay between religion, insecurity, and national pride that define Iran’s culture and shape its Armed Forces. With a heritage of militarism dating back to the Achaemenid and Zoroastrian Persian Empires, the

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed Hashim, “Civil-Military relations in Iran,” *Middle East Policy Council* (August 2018), 64.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 226.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>4</sup> Between 10-12 000 military personnel were purged in the aftermath of the revolution. *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam: Iran’s Revolutionary Guard* (Boulder: Westview, 1993), 104.

contemporary interpretation stresses the persecution of the Shia to heighten national sentiment and portrays martyrdom as a virtue.<sup>6</sup> Strong religious beliefs and ideological fervor are therefore central to the selection of Quds Force personnel.<sup>7</sup>

A history of insecurity regarding external influence permeates Iran's self-perception. In the twentieth century alone, meddling by Britain and the United States heavily influenced Iran with war-time alliances, oil, coups, and sanctuary for dissidents all contributing to internal anxiety.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, there is little difference between the pre- and post-revolution views. Furthermore, such sentiment serves as a rallying call within Iran. The "death to America" rhetoric that precedes sittings in parliament or is the chant of the street unifies Iranians, while simultaneously highlighting external mistrust and the virtues of religious piety.<sup>9</sup>

Regular and competing discourse between religious and national identities also profoundly shape Iranian politics. Under Ali Khamenei, Iran's serving Supreme Leader, an Islamic, or *Islamiyat* identity, dominates the national character.<sup>10</sup> This identity differs from the last Shah, Muhammad Reza's construct of *Iraniyat* that promoted positive nationalism. While both identities advocate national pride, it is the level of authenticity in each approach that dictates the maintenance of power.<sup>11</sup> Since the Islamic Revolution, Iranian presidential agendas have sought to maintain a balance within Khomeini's revolutionary setting. President Muhammad Khatami's attempted reform (1997-2005) and the limits placed on the serving President Hassan Rouhani show how this is problematic.<sup>12</sup> When an imbalance or threat to *Islamiyat* emerges, flexing the Guards ensures realignment. Support for President

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<sup>6</sup> Steven Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 312.

<sup>7</sup> Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 72.

<sup>8</sup> John Tusa, *Iran: A Revolutionary State*, BBC Podcast 2009.

<sup>9</sup> The full introduction is "In God we trust, Khamenei is our leader, Death to America." Global News, (8 February 2019). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6AG1OqeItI>

<sup>10</sup> Shabnam Holliday, *Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 156.

<sup>11</sup> Shabnam Holliday, *Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance*, 156.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Ahmadinejad, a former *Basij* member, who succeeded Khatami, helped tip the balance towards Islamism, benefitting the IRGC. Independence, anti-imperialism, and populism are all drivers that shape Iranian culture, but take an *Islamiyat* rather than an *Iraniyat* identity. It is within this context that the Guards' command concepts are set.

With a clear unifying purpose, the IRGC uses its independence to expand its position. As a contemporary hybrid actor, responsibility spans the diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME) levers of government with a dominance that it is loath to lose. Evolving from the first revolutionary principles, the IRGC expanded through a delicate mix of *Islamiyat* and *realpolitik*.<sup>13</sup> Influence beyond the military currently sees former Guards personnel occupying top political posts, benefiting from policies enacted during Ahmadinejad's hardline presidency.<sup>14</sup> The lineage of Iranian Defense Ministers with IRGC experience supports this point and provides freedom for Quds Force overseas activity.<sup>15</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei accelerated the IRGC's rise, and in return, the organization's loyalty provides a relationship that retains control when under internal and external pressure. This symbiosis is essential to the IRGC's place within Iranian hierarchy and to the preservation of the leader's power.<sup>16</sup>

The IRGC's posture within the political strata improves decision making, freedom of action, and awareness, but the most tangible benefits emerge from its economic ties. Forged through preferential treatment when bidding for contracts, IRGC economic activity exceeds more than \$12 billion, has links to over 100 companies nationwide, and accounts for up to

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<sup>13</sup> Afshon Ostovar. "Soldiers of the Revolution: A Brief History of Iran's IRGC," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no 2 (September 2016) <https://www-foreignaffairs-com.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/articles/iran/2016-09-07/soldiers-revolution> (accessed October 20, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>15</sup> Afshon Ostovar, "Soldiers of the Revolution: A Brief History of Iran's IRGC."

<sup>16</sup> Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Revolution: Religion, Politics, and Iran's IRGC* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 241.



one-third of the Iranian economy.<sup>17</sup> The IRGC's economic influence began with increased financial independence after the Iran-Iraq War when it seized prime business premises. The IRGC's own office for development, *Khatam al-Anbia*, spans the Iranian business sector acting with minimal competition under the pretense of the national interest and security.<sup>18</sup> Examples include contracting Tehran's subway construction and the closure of the Iman Khomeini Airport in May 2004 to counter a Turkish consortium's redevelopment bid.<sup>19</sup> Most of Iran's rapid privatization initiatives between 2005-09 occurred under the guise of greater IRGC control.<sup>20</sup> *Khatam al-Anbia*'s reach now extends to reconstruction in Iraq and Syria, where the Quds Force is primed to benefit from any economic openings.<sup>21</sup> Spanning telecommunications, finance, resources, construction, and services, IRGC financial growth rests on the interaction between security, economic, and political power and strengthens the IRGC's power base.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, to secure the idea of a resistance-based economy, Ayatollah Khamenei blocked President Rouhani's attempts to attract foreign investment in 2016.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the Guards' business interests afford a level of independence that reduces the reliance on other parts of the state. First encouraged during Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (1989-97), when the Iranian economy was recovering from war, the IRGC now generates vast funds that support its military lines of operation.<sup>24</sup> Such networked influence

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<sup>17</sup> Frederic Wehrey, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*. RAND Corporation Monograph Series. RAND National Defense Research (2009) Institute. [http://search.ebscohost.com.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat04199a&AN=ndu\\_291727&site=eds-live&scope=site](http://search.ebscohost.com.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat04199a&AN=ndu_291727&site=eds-live&scope=site) (accessed November 5, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> *Khatam al-Anbia* was a structural reform implemented after the Iran-Iraq War.

<sup>19</sup> Alma Kershavarz, *Hybrid Warfare*, 139.

<sup>20</sup> Ali Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guard is Turning Theocracy in Military Dictatorship* (Washington DC: AEI Press), 191.

<sup>21</sup> "Iran's Network of Influence in the Middle East," *The International Institute for Strategic Studies* (November 2019). <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-03-ch-1-tehrans-strategic-intent> (accessed November 12, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Counter-Extremism Project: *Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)* [https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat\\_pdf/Is%20Islamic%20Revolutionary%20Guard%20Corp%20%28IRGC%29-07072019.pdf](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat_pdf/Is%20Islamic%20Revolutionary%20Guard%20Corp%20%28IRGC%29-07072019.pdf) (September 20, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Alma Keshavarz, *Hybrid Warfare*, 150.

increases the IRGC's ability to operate in a timely and independent manner by providing material and funding to support its aims.

The Quds Force has maximized this economic expansion. Acting internationally, the group also developed ties to illicit activities in Latin America and Africa, where criminal activity provides financial opportunities and regional reach.<sup>25</sup> Such links create operational and logistical platforms that enhance IRGC functionality and help obfuscate its militant activity. Given their ability to operate clandestinely and independently, the Quds Force is well structured to benefit. A layered networked approach allows the group to utilize trusted partners, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, along with diplomatic posts and religious diaspora, to maintain a deep footprint outside Iran where fundraising and strategic influence combine socio-economic, political, and military activity.<sup>26</sup> Not only does this provide a way around United States sanctions, but the allure of the criminal-terrorist nexus could see criminality formalizing in hybrid warfare. The audacious 2011 attempt by the Mexican drug cartel, Los Zetas, to target Israeli and Saudi embassies in Argentina, reportedly on behalf of the Quds Force, offers an example of aligning criminal networks with strategic intent.<sup>27</sup> Just as it is difficult to define where this blend of military, diplo-economic, and illegal activity starts and finishes, responding to this amorphous threat is also a challenge.

Despite the breadth of IRGC activity, a military understanding is possible. Estimates suggest the Quds Force consists of approximately 15,000 personnel, with an overall IRGC ground force total of over 100,000. Figure 1 provides a detailed comparison to the conventional force.<sup>28</sup> While IRGC expansion risks limiting speed and effectiveness, the Quds Force continues to cut across governmental and military relationships. Most importantly,

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<sup>25</sup> Alma Keshavarz, *Hybrid Warfare*, 145.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

<sup>27</sup> Counter-Extremism Project: *Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps*; Charlie Savage and Scott Shane, "Iranians Accused of a Plot to Kill Saudis' U.S. Envoy," *New York Times*, October 11, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Council for Foreign Relations, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*.

direct access to the Supreme Leader circumvents parliament and allows this strategic force to obtain clear high level direction to maximize command coherence.



Figure 1. Iranian Armed Forces.<sup>29</sup>

Increased IRGC control comes with both fiscal and cognitive commitment. Iran’s 2018/19 Defense budget saw a 53% real-term increase from 2014, totaling \$24 Billion, despite an anticipated economic contraction by 1.6%. However, this figure does not include wider IRGC economic or religious funding.<sup>30</sup> Despite Rouhani’s attempts at balance, investment into the new IRGC Central Command Center to control any outbreak of war shows how the Guards benefit from this increase.<sup>31</sup> Cohesiveness around a single empowered center is strategically sensible and replicates the IRGC model recently used in Syria to unify support to national resistance. Pragmatic doctrinal decisions again favor the Guards. The 2005 Mosaic Defense doctrine developed an indirect approach using Iran’s terrain, numbers, and irregular activity instead of aging conventional forces.<sup>32</sup> IRGC control over the *Basij* militia and the establishment of thirty-one decentralized regionalized command centers

<sup>29</sup> Council for Foreign Relations, *Iran’s Revolutionary Guard*.

<sup>30</sup> Jack Watling, *Iran’s Objectives and Capabilities*, *RUSI Occasional Paper*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Connell, “Iran’s Military Doctrine” *Iran Primer* (2010).

[https://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/default/files/Iran\\_s%20Military%20Doctrine.pdf](https://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/default/files/Iran_s%20Military%20Doctrine.pdf) (accessed November 11, 2019). Former IRGC leader, General Mohammed Jafari developed this doctrine.

resulted from this change and resembled the Quds Force's regionally aligned operating concept. Here, geographically distinct directorates, including Lebanon, Iraq, Ansar Corps (Palestine), North Africa, and Western nations (Europe and North America), work alongside cultural and intelligence branches, while Unit 400 operates across the directorates to conduct the most discreet activity.<sup>33</sup> Overall, Iran's asymmetric approach replicates doctrinal principles laid out by the Quds Force.

The Iran-Iraq War was perhaps the most significant event to shape IRGC's military thinking. As well as economic gain, the IRGC maximized the opportunity to reform following the costly war. Proxies and asymmetric tactics, present in support of Hezbollah in Lebanon, became established tactics under the newly formed Quds Force in 1990. Moreover, battle-hardened IRGC leaders proved comfortable aligning activity for political and economic goals; a trait still evident today. A simplified command chain also favored the IRGC as the *Artesh* suffered further purges, desertions, and degradation in equipment.<sup>34</sup> Individual bonds of leadership emanating from the war are the focus of the next chapter, but the cohesion of localized, like-minded brigades did much to shape the modern force. Despite the significant loss of life, the IRGC emerged from the war a cohesive and powerful force.<sup>35</sup>

Inherent to the IRGC's military functionality is the religious indoctrination that underpins its purpose. This concept is not unusual to a revolutionary organization, but respected Iranian expert Ali Alfoneh suggests the Iranian program increasingly focuses on a paranoid world view and the importance of politics.<sup>36</sup> While somewhat subjective and narrow, recruits learn about national interests and unifying purpose, key factors to achieving

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<sup>33</sup> Alma Kashavarez, *Hybrid Warfare*, 154; "The IRGC Quds Force," <https://iranwire.com/en/features/5750> (accessed February 25, 2020). Established in 2012 in response to pressure against Bashar Al Assad, Unit 400 conducts extra-territorial terrorist activity.

<sup>34</sup> Steven Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 297.

<sup>35</sup> Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 42.

<sup>36</sup> Ali Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled*, 150.

decentralized activity. Again, it is the Quds Force who receive the most rigorous ideological training, run from the holy city of Qom.<sup>37</sup>

The IRGC's prominence in events such as the Iran-Iraq War and recent Middle Eastern struggles reinforced the organization's position within Iranian society. In doing so, the Guards honed their cognitive foundations and expanded a supporting civil-military framework that benefits both the Supreme Leader and the organization. Such an approach coalesces around *Islamiyat* principles to provide a unified purpose that generates opportunities for the IRGC across the levers of national power. While unity allows command coherence to focus on resistance against its adversaries, increasingly, a pragmatic interpretation of this purpose enables the Quds Force to act towards its own interest.

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<sup>37</sup> Counter-Extremism Project: *Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)*:4  
[https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat\\_pdf/Islamic%20Revolutionary%20Guard%20Corps%20%28IRGC%29-07072019.pdf](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat_pdf/Islamic%20Revolutionary%20Guard%20Corps%20%28IRGC%29-07072019.pdf) (accessed November 1, 2019).

### Chapter 3: The Significance of IRGC Leadership

*“The humble leader’s steady hand has helped guide Iranian foreign policy for decades – and there is no denying his success on the battlefield. Soleimani is arguably the most powerful and unconstrained actor in the Middle East today.” Gen Stanley McChrystal<sup>1</sup>*

Eitan Shamir defines “leadership, decision making, and control” as the central components of mission command. As such, they provide useful criteria to assess the IRGC’s command concepts.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, leadership underpins an *Islamyat* identity and prevents any deviation from its unifying purpose or from undermining the IRGC. Loyalty to the Supreme Leader therefore provides leadership focus and generates mutual trust.<sup>3</sup>

The commander’s cognitive process influences leadership, which, alongside a supporting control system, generates effective command. By prioritizing the human element of command over the functionality of control, a concept emerges that supplies the commander with accurate decision-making information and shapes the leader’s intent.<sup>4</sup> Personality and vision are key to a clear concept and are the focus of this chapter. Inside Iran, frequent messaging by senior figures illustrates the importance of the leaders’ direct involvement in outlining their vision and support the IRGC’s effectiveness.

Ali Dastmalchian’s 2001 study of Iranian leadership emphasized the importance of vision and grace, described as an “otherworldly quality that engenders trust, commitment, and an irresistible desire to follow.”<sup>5</sup> While Dastmalchian’s work covers numerous professions, these attributes are evident in the IRGC. In Iran, the long-standing policy of

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley McChrystal, “Iran’s Deadly Puppet Master,” *Foreign Policy: Global Thinkers* (Winter 2019). <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019-global-thinkers/> (accessed November 10, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the US, British, Israeli Armies*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Counter Extremism Project: Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC): 3. [https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat\\_pdf/Islamic%20Revolutionary%20Guard%20Corp%20%28IRGC%29-07072019.pdf](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat_pdf/Islamic%20Revolutionary%20Guard%20Corp%20%28IRGC%29-07072019.pdf) (accessed November 1, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Carl Builder, Steven Bankes and Richard Nordin, *Command Concepts: A Theory Derived from the Practice of Command and Control*. MR/RAND Corporation: MR-775-OSD, (1999), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ali Dastmalchian, Mansour Javidan, Kamaran Alam, “Effective Leadership and Culture in Iran: An Empirical Study.” *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 50, 4 (2001): 537.

active deterrence shows how the IRGC, and specifically the Quds Force, act with a clear vision. Equally, without the constraint of an existing command system, a supporting structure developed where close relationships flourished to complement the overall regime goals. Such an approach compares favorably to the command culture outlined in Helmuth Von Moltke's *Auftragstaktik*, where a strategic outlook and hawkish culture formed a mind-set to support an effective command philosophy. The IRGC's cognitive ideals and shared understanding provide the basis for an Iranian equivalent.

The roots of the IRGC's leadership originated in the Iran-Iraq War. The war engendered trust and commitment among a cohort of influential leaders and serving veterans that include Hossein Salami (Head of the IRGC), Mohammad Ali Jafri (former Head of the IRGC), Mohammed Bagheri (Armed Forces Chief of Staff), Eshmail Ghaani (recently appointed Quds Force Commander), and his long-standing predecessor Qasem Soleimani.<sup>6</sup> The war profoundly shaped their ideology and reinforced anti-Western views. Experiences also promoted loyalty and a sense of purpose, while officers quickly understood the importance of strategic thinking and saw the Guards as a worthwhile career after the war.

A concentration of high-profile, likeminded leaders ensures decisions support IRGC interests. Analysis by Ali Alfoneh of two pieces of political correspondence highlights the cohesiveness amongst this trusted network of leaders. Alfoneh compared the documents' signatories to emphasize the closeness of Soleimani's wartime network, but differentiates between an inner and outer group of associates. In the outer group all but one of the 21 signatories to the letters were Iran-Iraq War veterans. However, five individuals who also signed the second, more prominent letter, had more distinct wartime experiences. Importantly, Ghaani, Jafri, and Bagheri are dual signatories and highlight the importance of

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<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Ali Jafri served as IRGC commander from 2007-2019.

certain leaders within the network.<sup>7</sup> This cohesion means that foreign policy decisions regularly favor the IRGC over President Rouhani's government, such as the 2016 decision to allow Russia to use the Hamandan Air Base despite contradicting Iranian constitutional law.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Guard's own privileged political and economic networks offset any shortcomings to meet the IRGC's objectives and project its influence.

The commitment of IRGC leaders' to fallen comrades further illustrates the importance of loyalty and shared experience. Pilgrimages regularly return to Iran-Iraq War sites while substantial war pensions support families of the deceased.<sup>9</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei and Qasem Soleimani's presence at state-level funerals for high ranking officers killed in Syria, such as war-veteran and Quds Force operator, Hassan Shateri, and Deputy Commander of the *Basij*, General Hossein Hamadani, show the camaraderie which underlines this loyalty.<sup>10</sup> The widespread, public displays of grief at Soleimani's funeral also demonstrates this togetherness. Overall, a framework, where trusted individual decision-makers are often more significant than institutions, promotes groups founded around family, kinship, or a shared history of service within the IRGC leadership.<sup>11</sup>

Wider relationships also benefit from close personal connections. Internal cooperation with the *Artesh* improved when Mohammad Bagheri, a close associate of Soleimani, appointed the prominent *Artesh* commander, Abdolrahim Mousavi, to be his Deputy Armed Forces Chief of Staff. This selection enhanced the *Artesh*'s role within Iran's Mosaic Defense

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<sup>7</sup> Ali Alfonch, "Iran's Secret Network: Major General Qasem Soleimani's Inner Circle," *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research*, no 2 (March 2011): 2.

<sup>8</sup> Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East, *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, (November 2019): 29. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-02-introduction> (accessed November 20, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, (Washington: Potomac) 87.

<sup>10</sup> Killed in 2013 and 2015 respectively. Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *The New Yorker*, September 23, 2013. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander> (accessed September 20, 2019); "Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, (November 2019), 27. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-02-introduction> (accessed November 20, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Counter Extremism Project, *Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)*, 3.



concept, while deployments to support the Quds Force in Syria were a shift from their traditional constitutional role. The pressure to release information about *Artesh* fatalities in Syria shows the sensitivities associated with such a decision, yet despite the risks, improved cooperation supports a unifying strategy that brings organizations within the grasp of the IRGC.<sup>12</sup>

Regional leadership connections pre-date the Iran-Iraq War and show a diverse and sympathetic network of significant actors. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and former Iraqi Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) Deputy Leader Abu Mahdi Muhandis are the most prominent relationships but others, such as with Palestinian leaders, also provided pre-revolutionary sanctuary from the Shah's rule.<sup>13</sup> Shi'ism forges one aspect of loyalty, but time and shared experience also engender Iranian support. In return, coercive measures such as bribery, intimidation, and even murder re-enforce the relationships.<sup>14</sup>

Until his death, Qasem Soleimani played a disproportionately significant role as head of the IRGC Quds Force. Soleimani assumed command in 1998 after a successful period leading anti-smuggling efforts on Iran's eastern border. His performance reinforced the loyalty and prowess he displayed in the Iran-Iraq War, combining fighting spirit, sincerity, and statecraft to exemplify Iranian leadership ideals. His credibility influenced the military's asymmetric redesign and his longevity in command strengthened Iran's unifying cause. Such a continuous tenure to enact his command vision would be the envy of most military commanders.<sup>15</sup>

Strong leadership reinforces Iranian dominance across their regional relationships. In Lebanon, "Soleimani had ultimate control of Hezbollah's military forces," and he reinforced the role of the IRGC after Hezbollah provoked an Israeli response that escalated into war in

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<sup>12</sup> "Iran's Network of Influence in the Middle East," 30.

<sup>13</sup> Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 100.

<sup>14</sup> Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

<sup>15</sup> Gen. Stanley McChrystal, "Iran's Deadly Puppet Master," 38.

2006.<sup>16</sup> In 2012 his ability to convince Hezbollah to take the politically sensitive decision to fight inside Syria reinforced his influence. Soleimani's political power in Iraq perhaps went even further. Quds Force access enabled Iranian approval of Iraqi parliamentary candidates in 2010 and 2018 while gaining overflight and access rights supported the IRGC's Syrian strategy.<sup>17</sup> Individual leaders, supported by a robust diplo-military framework, provide a network that assists the overall IRGC decision making.

In war, effective leadership benefits from the placement of the commander and the Quds Force structural flexibility enables leaders to maneuver to the most influential position. In Syria, senior Iranian officers deployed forward to make key decisions, with the deaths of Hassan Shateri and General Hossein Hamadani demonstrating this active command approach. The direct role of senior leaders is notable for two reasons. First, organizational adaptability allowed individual skills to support specific problems, such as employing the *Basij* to develop a comparable Syrian force.<sup>18</sup> Second, the concentration of senior officers demonstrates a small and entrusted decision-making elite. This condition deviates from traditional decentralized command concepts, but retaining control among a select group emphasizes Syria's importance to Iran and fits with Ali Dastmalchian's wider finding of a deep authoritarian tradition within Iranian leadership.<sup>19</sup> The extensive Quds Force network provides understanding and assessment that support decision-making, while also managing the consequences of high-risk activity and decisions taken from inside Iran.<sup>20</sup> Historical high-profile examples that support this structure include the purported authorization to assassinate

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<sup>16</sup> Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 95.

<sup>17</sup> Tim Arango, James Risen, Farnaz Fassihi, Ronen Bergman, Murtaza Hussain, "The Iran Cables: Secret Documents Show How Tehran Wields Power in Iraq," *The New York Times*, November 18, 2019; Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander"; Jack Watling, "Iran's Objectives and Capabilities" *RUSI Occasional Paper* (2019): 27. A close relationship between Soleimani and former Transport Minister and new PMF leader, Hadi Al-Ameri, facilitated this decision.

<sup>18</sup> The Basij suppressed internal protests in Iran in 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Ali Dastmalchian, "Effective leadership and Culture in Iran: An Empirical Study," 548.

<sup>20</sup> Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 27.

Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 and Soleimani's control over EFPs in Iraq. Both took place without severe repercussions for Iran.<sup>21</sup>

Command presence coincides with the rise of Soleimani's public profile. In Syria, he oversaw key Regime-aligned successes, including the strategically important 2013 Battle for Qusayr along the Lebanese-Syrian border, and symbolized the wider regional Shia counter-ISIS response.<sup>22</sup> Between 2015-17, Soleimani made nine reported trips to Syria, influencing the war's outcome and emphasizing its importance to Iran.<sup>23</sup> Quds Force activity aligned with Iran's regional plan and helped to legitimize the group's role, reassure supporters, and further Soleimani's popularity. The conflict also demonstrated a shift away from his shadowy persona during the United States occupation of Iraq. In times of crisis, Soleimani exerted his leadership to personally oversee activities and reinforce his image of the Middle-East, exemplifying leadership in support of strategic objectives.

With approximately 800,000 Instagram followers and widespread mourning at his funeral, Soleimani had genuine social appeal.<sup>24</sup> Ebrahim Hatamikia, the director of the 2016 Iranian award-winning film, *The Bodyguard*, based the lead character on Soleimani, enhancing his profile and legitimizing the IRGC.<sup>25</sup> Throughout Soleimani's rise in popularity, he evoked *Islamiat* goals or Iranian struggles to emphasize the sincerity of his message. His public admission that the Quds Force played a direct role in the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War conveyed a positive ethnopolitical message to help unify an isolated nation.<sup>26</sup>

Individual prominence within the IRGC exhibits Social Identity Theory (SIT) leadership traits. SIT proposes that as people identify with a certain group, the perceptions of

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<sup>21</sup> Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 104; Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

<sup>22</sup> Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

<sup>23</sup> "Iran's Network of Influence in the Middle East," 20.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Hanna, "Soleimani: Mastermind of Iran's Expansion," *The Iran Primer*, (October 2019). <https://iranprimer.usip.org/index.php/blog/2019/oct/14/soleimani-mastermind-iran's-expansion> (accessed November 20, 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Ali Soufan, "Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Unique Regional Strategy," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no 10 (November 2018): 10.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Hanna, "Soleimani: Mastermind of Iran's Expansion."

leaders, evaluations, and endorsements become increasingly influenced by the group's prototypicality. The most archetypal members are more likely to emerge as effective leaders. Soleimani's virtue and operational success embodied Iran's social revolutionary identity and reinforced his charisma and influence.<sup>27</sup> His popularity and personalized approach to command demonstrated a clear leader-follower relationship, which enhance Dastmalchian's traits of vision and grace.<sup>28</sup>

It is not surprising that Soleimani's replacement, the long-standing Deputy Commander Esmail Ghaani, comes from a similar background. An Iran-Iraq War veteran of modest upbringing, Ghaani has also emphasized the importance of sacrifice during the war. Moreover, he described his closeness with Soleimani as "comrades on the battlefield and friends at home."<sup>29</sup> As a financier and organizer, Ghaani's outward charisma is less evident; however, the speed of his appointment demonstrates the organization's confidence and efficiency to transition from one prototypical ideologue to another.

Michael Hogg, a proponent of SIT, also outlines the risks with such an approach, suggesting that influence can lead to abuse of power, which is then open to abuse. He states:

*Conditions of high subjective uncertainty encourage the formation of very cohesive groups with clearly focused prototypes. These groups tend to be very extreme, but also to have a steep and rigid leadership structure with a highly charismatic leader. The leader exercises enormous power, often in deleterious ways.*<sup>30</sup>

Responses to civil unrest at the end of 2019 in Iran and Iraq support this point. The use of lethal violence and communications blackouts to regain control inside Iran differed from the softer response to tensions in 2009 and show the increased strain on the regime.

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Hogg, "A Social Identity Theory of Leadership," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 5, no 3 (2001): 194; Donelson Forsyth, *Group Dynamics* (Boston: Cengage, 2019), 282.

<sup>28</sup> Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 87. Soleimani reputation for taking a personal interest in the command of his men dates back to the Iran-Iraq War and was evident in his appearances in Syria's Civil War.

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Philp, "New Quds Force Leader Esmail Ghaani is cut from the same cloth as Soleimani," *London Times*, January 7, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Hogg, "A Social Identity Theory of Leadership," 200.

Moreover, Soleimani's presence inside Iraq suggested an attempt to export a similar tactic to protect Iran's regional power.<sup>31</sup> These internal pressures explain the appointment of Ghaani's new Deputy Commander, Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi. Although he lacks Quds Force experience, a background in developing the *Basij*, including the suppression of the 2009 uprising and service in Lebanon, show a prototypical appointment to manage the regime's two most-pressing challenges. Hejazi's strategic reputation for reforming the Basij, alongside his relationship with new IRGC head Hossein Salami, a fellow Isfahan native, suggests a politically astute appointment.<sup>32</sup>

Empowered and robust leadership binds the regime's functionality. A small IRGC cohort benefit from trusted relationships built around shared experiences and continuity that often exceeds the importance of the institutions themselves. This collectiveness allows a freedom of action and enables decision-making to support the regime's overall interest. In doing so, the IRGC command approach achieves many of the traits associated with mission command, such as a shared understanding, disciplined initiative, clear command intent, and acceptance of risk.

Quds Force leaders combine a blend of diplomatic statecraft and military expertise to integrate activity and hasten decision-making. While the effect emulates a Western philosophy, delivery differs because a tightly controlled, yet well-executed, command system reinforces the Supreme Leader's vision. Viewed positively, this strengthens a prototypical movement, but when threatened leads to additional, and often unlawful, assertions of control. The structure that supports this control is the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>31</sup> David Aaronovitch, *The Briefing Room: Middle East Youth-quake*, BBC Podcast (December 2019). <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000c4zy> (accessed December 20, 2019). At the time of writing Iraqi protest deaths are approximately 500. Accurate figures for Iran are difficult to obtain.

<sup>32</sup> Ali Alfoneh, "Iran's new al-Quds Force deputy experience repressing protests, helping proxies," *The Arab Weekly*, January 26, 2020 (accessed February 1, 2020).

## **Chapter 4: Organizational Structure and Networks of Influence: IRGC Conduct and Control**

*“Hezbollah is the offspring of the Revolution” Moshen Rafeeqdoost, senior IRGC Officer.<sup>1</sup>*

An effective control structure complements the commander’s vision and a range of actors support the organizational function of control to achieve Iranian deterrence. This assessment explains the levels of influence across the IRGC’s networks by focusing on the different Quds Force relationships and uses social science theories to support these connections. Examining the associations between the IRGC and their proxies identifies variations across the supporting structures.

Two inter-linked characteristics, the breadth of activity and network connections, underscore the IRGC’s organizational structure to demonstrate how the organization is adaptable, resilient, and well-established. The Guards ability to undertake new missions and increase its influence beyond the military aspect of power supports this agile approach to control.<sup>2</sup> The IRGC’s adaptation after the Iran-Iraq War set a precedent that has continued ever since, while relationships among senior leaders protect and prevent the emergence of unsanctioned control structures. Moreover, a networked approach helps manage the wide-ranging proxy relationships that align with Iran’s overall interest.

### **Structural Theories**

Before examining Iran’s networks, a theoretical understanding of the IRGC’s organizational form shows how structure supports its command concepts. RAND’s Chad Serena provides useful context by examining Iraqi insurgent networks to note that although

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<sup>1</sup> Almna Keshavarz, "Hybrid Warfare: The Islamic State, Russia, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Threats, Challenges, and U.S. Policy Response," Order No. 10788052, The Claremont Graduate University, 2018. In PROQUESTMS ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, 161.

<http://search.proquest.com.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/docview/2043968546?accountid=12686> (accessed 1 November 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *Warriors of Islam: Iran’s Revolutionary Guard* (Westview Press: Boulder, 1993), 71. Examples include transition from armed militia in 1982, operationalizing support to Lebanon, and expansion into reconstruction and finance after the Iran-Iraq War.

terror or asymmetric organizations are “decentralized and networked,” this does not acknowledge the complexity and reach needed to achieve broader goals.<sup>3</sup> Violence alone fails to account for the coordination and cooperation that sustains an organization. In the IRGC’s case, the leadership’s centralized control helps to manage the distal challenges and ensures the use of violence matches its long-term goals.<sup>4</sup>

A network is defined as a tie between socially similar individuals or groups that coordinate action based on shared values, norms, and trust, while decision-making and performance are functions of the connections within it.<sup>5</sup> Network Exchange Theory (NET), outlined by sociologist Barry Markovsky in 2005, refines networking’s broad concept to include the relationship components of Exchange Theory.<sup>6</sup> Applied to the IRGC, such a framework advances the organization beyond a simple terror network to capture its unique form and function across all its constituent parts.

NET focuses on the nature of the exchange and the power it yields. Increased opportunities for exchange enhance the actor’s control within the structure of the network.<sup>7</sup> The theory accepts that power is a social phenomenon and thus supports earlier findings. The opportunities and exchanges relate to the construction of the network, and the IRGC’s cohesiveness affords a dominant position from which it benefits.

In the case of Iran, mutual geopolitical interests align exchanges with proxies, while internal networks based on shared social values benefit IRGC members. RUSI analyst Jack Watling suggests that these interests can be quite narrow, as relationships with Hamas or ephemeral links to Al-Qa’ida and the Taliban testify, but it is the long-term relationships that

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<sup>3</sup> Chad Serena, *It Takes More Than a Network*, (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2014), 140.

<sup>4</sup> Chad Serena, *It Takes More Than a Network*, 140.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> George Ritzer, *Modern Sociological Theory*, (McGraw-Hill, New York, 2008) 305. Network Theory provides a model for structure, but definition of the constituent relations is vague. Exchange Theory provides a strong model for the relations, but a weak model for the social structures within which they operate.

<sup>7</sup> George Ritzer, *Modern Sociological Theory*, 306.

are crucial to Iran's success.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, organizational coherence avoids an artificial construct and provides a structural tie around which it can coalesce.<sup>9</sup> Within the geopolitical framing of the Middle-East, Iran's interests outscore the cohesion of its regional adversaries.<sup>10</sup> It is here that a common, and increasingly prominent, Shia ideology provides the most significant bond.

Along with social coherence, the IRGC benefit from several other factors that translate theory into practice. First, the low turnover of personnel and the Supreme Leader's consistent messaging provide structural durability that endows the network with resilience to limit external friction.<sup>11</sup> Doctrinal changes, integration of additional forces, and relative decentralization during the re-structuring in the mid-2000's all cemented the Guards position.<sup>12</sup> Second, the mix of overt and covert activity provides additional defenses by allowing parts of the network to disregard legal and normative constraints in a similar way to illicit organizations. Wider political structural support provides a final factor as informal relationships, or *ravabet*, built around a web of personalities and influences, hold significant influence inside Iran. This informality appeals because politicians can avoid decision making accountability, obfuscating IRGC activity even further.<sup>13</sup>

The IRGC's networked approach limits contextualizing command and control by traditional models. A 1999 RAND study highlighted how common Western command representation, through unit or nodal levels of command, risks descriptive inaccuracies by

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<sup>8</sup> Jack Watling, "Proxy Warfare: Iran," *RUSI Strategic Trends to 2303 RUSI Occasional Paper (2019)*:16; Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, (Potomac Books: Washington, 2012), 83,110.

<sup>9</sup> Chad Serena, *It Takes More Than a Network*, 140.

<sup>10</sup> "Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, (November 2019), 43. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-02-introduction> (accessed December 12, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Chad Serena, *It Takes More Than a Network*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> The establishment of the internal *Basij* and improved relationship with the *Artesh* provide two examples.

<sup>13</sup> Hamid Yeganeh, *Making Sense of Iranian Society, Culture, and Business* (Business Expert Press: New York, 2015), 80.



misrepresenting a node's function or the complexity of humans within the construct.<sup>14</sup> The IRGC's emphasis on the commander's cognitive process and the Supreme Leader's delegated authority reduces the risk of nodal models and explains why a clear structural representation of the IRGC is challenging.

### **Proxy Networks**

Iran's cultivation of proxies crosses the boundary between terrorism and irregular warfare.<sup>15</sup> Terror activities, first practiced in Lebanon during the 1980's, give the Quds Force a non-state dimension to the IRGC's military structure.<sup>16</sup> Although terrorism is a high profile way to achieve Iranian ends, a semi-formal network built around diplomatic, charitable, or religious and cultural institutional relationships complement traditional military work.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, other methods such as diplomacy and reconstruction support an integrated approach to Iran's geopolitical activity. Ties to diaspora in Northern Europe, South America, and West Africa also reinforce the breadth of the network and provide a global, non-violent dimension to the Quds Force. Religion fosters the closest partnerships, but not all proxies share Iran's ideology as networks also coalesce around economic interests, training, and logistics. Pragmatism therefore underscores many relationships and fluctuates to meet Iranian interests; since the mid-1990's partnerships outside the Middle East, such as in the Balkans, Turkey, and Africa, have all varied in importance.<sup>18</sup>

Before the strike on Qasem Soleimani, proxy force activity rarely elicited a forceful response and increased its appeal.<sup>19</sup> Deniability, together with a desire to keep violence below

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<sup>14</sup> Carl Builder, Steven Bankes and Richard Nordin, *Command Concepts: A Theory Derived from the Practice of Command and Control*. MR/RAND Corporation: MR-775-OSD, (1999), 9.

<sup>15</sup> Alma Keshavarvez, *Hybrid Warfare*, 151.

<sup>16</sup> "Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East," 17. IRGC linked terror attacks include: Lebanon: U.S. Embassy in 1983; Argentina: AMIA building in 1994; Saudi Arabia: Khobar Towers in 1996; Iraqi occupation: 2003-14.

<sup>17</sup> Alma Keshavarvez, *Hybrid Warfare*, 154.

<sup>18</sup> Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 83.

<sup>19</sup> The 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq did not lead to direct responses against Iran.

the level of traditional war, reinforces the attractiveness of proxy forces and Iran is a leader in its implementation. Gen. Richard Barrons, the recent British Joint Forces Commander, describes proxy war as “the most successful kind of political war being waged by our generation,” and global indicators suggest its draw will continue.<sup>20</sup> The IRGC’s progression from revolutionary agent to pragmatic foreign policy implementer keeps pace with the needs of its proxies because a networked approach adapts to information and technological advances more easily than most military responses. Improved connectivity transcends traditional boundaries to provide opportunities to outpace conventional organizations. Adjusting to these challenges supports an indirect approach without large scale commitment. The Quds Force’s management of a variety of proxies is possible because of a proficient command concept and an ability to span the political and military spheres.

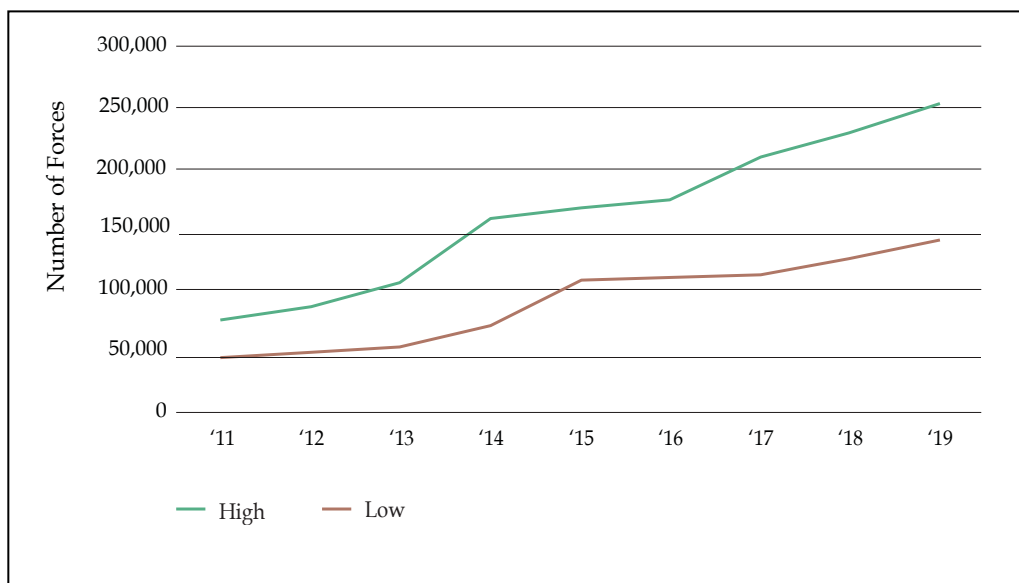


Figure 2. Estimated rise in IRGC Proxy Forces.<sup>21</sup>

Overall, the IRGC’s organizational structure displays a networked approach to align common interests. Within these social exchanges, the Guards are the most powerful partner among relationships that range in importance. The emphasis on networks and social

<sup>20</sup> Jack Watling, “Proxy Warfare: Iran,” 11.

<sup>21</sup> Seth Jones, “Containing Iran,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 11.

interaction ensures the IRGC avoids gravitating toward traditional or formulaic command and control structures. The second part of this chapter examines the relationship between the Quds Force and its partners. While networks stretch from Pakistan to Gaza, the relationships with Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and Yemeni Houthi provide specific examples that illustrate the different levels of involvement.

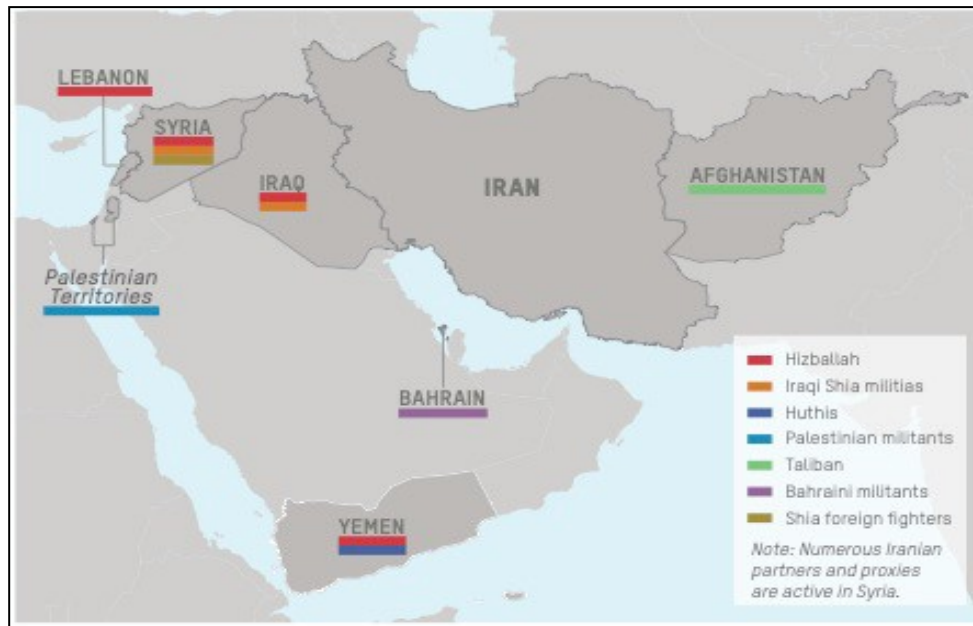


Figure 3. Iran’s Proxy Forces.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Lebanese Hezbollah***

As the IRGC’s first proxy, Hezbollah’s close interpersonal and organizational relationship dates back to 1982. While Iran hedges its regional proxy support elsewhere, its unwavering commitment to Hezbollah far exceeds any comparable Middle Eastern military relationship nurtured by any other nation.<sup>23</sup> Such a long-term commitment fosters a trusted partnership that operates as a political, social, and military force, and provides a force ideally suited for the challenges of contemporary operations.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> “Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regional Survival and Regional Dominance” *Defense Intelligence Agency*, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2019), 59.

<sup>23</sup> Steven O’Hern, *Iran’s Revolutionary Guard*, 99.

<sup>24</sup> Rupert Smith and new war theorist Mary Kaldor provide detailed descriptions of the modern operating environment.

Iran's relationship with Hezbollah is based on several unique factors. The Lebanese Civil War helped champion a likeminded revolutionary cause before Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah advanced the link by pledging loyalty to the Iranian Supreme Leader; an act made easier by the fragility of Lebanon's state sovereignty. Support also engaged the IRGC in the region's enduring Palestinian-Israeli conflict giving the organization a stake in a preeminent issue to the United States and Israel.<sup>25</sup> Support to Hezbollah, and Sunni Palestinian groups such as Hamas, promotes Iran as a regional advocate for Palestinian rights, a central tenet to its deterrence policy. Genuine solidarity with Teheran also reinforces the relationship. Although religion is a strong factor, historical, cultural, and social similarities bind this link. These factors contribute to the strongest IRGC exchange, where success advances Hezbollah's legitimacy inside Lebanon, strengthens the Quds Force's ability to shape foreign policy, and creates a cadre of exportable Hezbollah operatives.

Direct control over Hezbollah means it acts as the nucleus for Iranian militancy throughout the Middle East. As a Hezbollah commander acknowledged after the 2016 battle for Aleppo, "we are with the Iranians...we have no other choice...we are under their command."<sup>26</sup> For Iran, this capable partner buffers the Quds Force to act as the conduit to tactically coordinate proxies towards their regional aims.<sup>27</sup> In exchange, Hezbollah obtains significant financial and technological assistance. Estimated at between 100-200m USD per annum before U.S. sanctions, direct assistance augments Hezbollah's own extensive funds.<sup>28</sup> Income supports a notable network of social-welfare services that exist outside, or in a loose partnership with, the Lebanese state and NGO's. While focused in Shia areas, services also have wider appeal and exploit the dearth of state-run facilities. Hezbollah's flagship *Jihad al-*

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<sup>25</sup> Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 236.

<sup>26</sup> Hilal Khashan, *Hizbullah, A Mission to Nowhere* (New York: Lexington, 2019), 106.

<sup>27</sup> Common estimates suggest Hezbollah commitment of approximately 8,000 fighters to Syria.

<sup>28</sup> Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 73.

*Bina* development institution provides infrastructure, education, agriculture, mosques, and medical clinics, which surpasses much of the IRGC's own social apparatus. Hezbollah's principles of war emphasize the importance of social behavior and draw similarities with Mao Tse-Tung's revolutionary focus on structure and perceptions of the population.<sup>29</sup> Hezbollah capabilities neatly span warfare through to welfare and complement the IRGC's navigation of the contemporary environment.

Technical training such as IED construction and sharing of Iran's cyber capability sharpen Hezbollah's prowess to a level that allows the group to lead in some areas of expertise. Indirectly, this further increases the dependency placed upon it by the Lebanese state.<sup>30</sup> On the battlefield, Iran's need for Hezbollah support in Syria enhanced the group's ability to operate as an expeditionary force that conducts complex coalition operations with actors as diverse as the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>31</sup> Such military proficiency is a boon to Iran's overall arsenal and demonstrates an effective exchange. Hezbollah's competence, built around trust, longevity, and strong mutual interests, provides the benchmark by which, in the words of Ayatollah Khamenei, to "establish Hezbollah cells all over the world."<sup>32</sup>

### ***Iraqi PMF***

Iran's strategy relies on its ability to replicate its proxy successes. While Hezbollah's achievements provide encouragement, it is the networked methodology rather than recreating Lebanese proxies that is most transferable. In Iraq, Iran's influence varies across the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), or *al-Hashd al Shaabi*, an umbrella term for more than 40 militia groups that support Iraqi security. However, the strength of Iran's political network offsets the uncertainty of engaging with such a varied force.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hezbollah's Principles of War include: The Population is a treasure, nurture it.

<sup>30</sup> "Iran's Networks of Influence is the Middle East," 33.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>32</sup> Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguards of the Iman*, 235.

<sup>33</sup> Jack Watling, "Iran's Objectives and Capabilities," *RUSI Occasional Paper* (2019), 30.

The PMF's size and impact have grown exponentially since 2010.<sup>34</sup> The dissatisfaction with the U.S. occupation, ISIS, and Shia political dominance all contributed to the militia's rise to approximately 60,000 personnel who operate with command independence and receive federal financial support.<sup>35</sup> The IRGC see the PMF as a bulwark against United States' and Saudi Arabian influence and was integral to its expansion. Before his death in January 2020, Iran's political network benefited from a direct relationship with Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, the influential Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC) Deputy Leader.<sup>36</sup> The PMC coordinate PMF activity, and Muhandis exemplified Iran's close relationship. Through Iranian parentage and time in Tehran, Muhandis developed an alliance with Qasem Soleimani and worked against both Saddam Hussein and the United States.<sup>37</sup> The PMC distributes Iranian support, and Muhandis' organization, Khatib Hezbollah, is the principal benefactor.

Variations in the competence and allegiance within the PMF make senior political engagement the most effective way to achieve Iran's goals by increasing legitimacy while limiting direct commitment. The positioning of IRGC personnel in ambassadorial posts, such as in Baghdad, shape senior Iraqi decisions and appointments such as Muhandis testify to a strong diplo-military network.<sup>38</sup> Compared to the United States' commitment to Iraq between 2003-14, Iran's indirect approach provided an efficient way to achieve its foreign policy objectives.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, training PMF in Iran, or by culturally aligned Lebanese Hezbollah Arabs in Iraq, reduces an IRGC footprint.

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<sup>34</sup> The PMF is approximately 15 times larger than in 2010. Capitulation of the Iraqi Army and Ali Al-Sistani's Fatwa to take up arms against ISIS legitimized the growth.

<sup>35</sup> Garret Nada and Mattisan Rowan, "Pro-Iran Militias in Iraq," *Iran Primer*, (April 26, 2018), 1. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2018/apr/26/part-2-pro-iran-militias-iraq> (accessed September 30, 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis died alongside Qasem Soleimani on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis was a suspect in the Beirut Embassy attack in 1983. Garret Nada, "Pro-Iran Militias in Iraq," 5; Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 100.

<sup>38</sup> "Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East," 20. Serving Iranian Ambassador to Iraq is Brigadier-General Iraj Masjedi.

<sup>39</sup> Efficiencies in manpower, casualties, finances, and material.

The differences within the PMF complicate Iranian control because not all forces align with the Supreme Leader. Iraqi nationalism and the guidance of Iraq's senior Shia cleric, Ali al-Sistani, remain important factors.<sup>40</sup> Sistani rejects direct clerical participation in politics, which differs from Iranian doctrine.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, ideology, a range of forces, and the PMC's role as an outsourcing distributor, all affect the exchange with Iran. With less control across the groups, the IRGC accepts some tactical risk to its political network. Despite these factors, Iranian development of the PMF ensures its freedom and influence.<sup>42</sup>

Groups closest to Iran include the Badr Corps, and burgeoning groups such as Khatib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Khatib Ali Iman Ali, but these only make up one-third of the PMF.<sup>43</sup> Established links to Badr Corps date to 1982 and provide the PMF with useful logistical and organizational support. However, Badr is a partner rather than an outright Iranian subsidiary.<sup>44</sup> Led by parliamentarian Hadi Al-Ameri, the new PMF Deputy Leader, the group may now rise in prominence. Previously, the size of Badr led Iran to focus control on smaller, ideologically aligned, groups to aid the supply of specialized equipment and met Ayatollah Khamenei's desire to "establish Hezbollah cells."<sup>45</sup> The firing of missiles from Iraq into Saudi Arabia in September 2019 to support Yemeni Houthi's demonstrates the sophistication with which these groups can operate.<sup>46</sup> However, overt sectarianism and favoritism risk tarnishing the PMF's generally popular image, and unlike their Lebanese counterparts, it lacks widespread social and financial support.<sup>47</sup>

The IRGC's backing of the PMF is how Iran realizes its interests in Iraq. According to Iraqi lawmaker Raad al Dahlaki, the organization's growth "constitutes something that

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<sup>40</sup> Jack Watling, "Iran's Objectives and Capabilities," 27.

<sup>41</sup> Known as *velayat-e faqih* and emphasises the role of clergy in decision making.

<sup>42</sup> "Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East," 18.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 7 (August 2019), 2.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia in Iraq," 7.

<sup>45</sup> Jack Watling, "Iran's Objectives and Capabilities," 29. Hadi Al-Ameri did not receive Iranian backing in the 2018 Parliamentary Election.

<sup>46</sup> Seth G Jones, "Containing Tehran," 14.

<sup>47</sup> In part this is because illicit activity does not match Lebanese Hezbollah.

looks like its own Revolutionary Guard.”<sup>48</sup> To Iran, it is the structure and individuals that overcome the PMF’s lack of homogeneity. Within this structure, Iran focuses on groups that it can cast in its own image to attempt to replicate its Lebanese proxy. While these capabilities and political foundations are less advanced, they still provide utility for Iran inside Iraq. Although the death of Soleimani removed an established personal relationship in Iraq, a reduction in Iranian influence is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

### ***Yemeni Houthi***

Iranian support to Yemeni Houthi rebels, or *Ansar Allah*, engaged against Saudi-backed government forces represent the least developed IRGC network within the region. Yet despite its limitations, Iran has taken advantage of an opportunity to fix a regional adversary and gain a position on the strategically important Bab el-Mandeb waterway.<sup>49</sup>

While Houthi leaders express admiration for Iranian revolutionary ideals, they do not share the ideological subservience evident elsewhere.<sup>50</sup> As practitioners of Zaidi Shi’ism, a less distinct religious affinity reduces their social tie and like Sunni Palestinian groups, the exchange developed from pragmatic opportunism. Yemen provides Iran with a low cost, yet rewarding environment to enact its strategic deterrence, while enhancements to the Houthi arsenal and legitimacy occur in return. Consequently, both parties benefit from this exchange.

Iran accepts limited leverage over the Houthi network and takes risks with the supply of sophisticated Iranian weaponry, such as UAV’s or the extended-range Qiam Short Range Ballistic Missile (SRBM). The relationship lacks the logistical architecture of Iraq or Lebanon and operates in a traditionally de-centralized manner. A smaller Quds Force presence relies on Lebanese Hezbollah trainers to aid propaganda production and weapon use inside Yemen. Iran accepts this risk because the war’s outcome is less critical to its overall

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<sup>48</sup> Garret Nada, “*Pro-Iran Militias in Iraq*,” 1.

<sup>49</sup> Seth G Jones, “Containing Tehran,” 14. Approximately 5m barrels of oil per day pass through the Bad el Mandeb.

<sup>50</sup> Jack Watling, “Iran’s Objectives and Capabilities,” 24.



survival and meets its interests without direct involvement or formal leverage over Houthi doctrine or command and control.<sup>51</sup> Lacking a direct ability to shape the war's outcome like in Syria, a modest financial commitment into a protracted conflict undermines Saudi Arabia and ensures Iran will play a role in the war's conclusion. Tentative exchanges into areas such as Oman and the Horn of Africa also provide opportunities to expand regional networks. Support to the Houthi's in Yemen represents a third, and distinct, approach to the way Iran operates.

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<sup>51</sup> "Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East," 38.

## Chapter 5: Observations, Recommendations, and Wider Relevance

*“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles”  
Sun Tzu, The Art of War, c.500 BC.*

The previous chapters have shown how the IRGC takes on many different forms. Institutionally, it encompasses the military, security services, politics, socio-cultural forces, covert operations, major economic institutions, the media, and mechanisms of foreign and strategic policy.<sup>1</sup> The IRGC achieves integration between the different branches by its extensive and established network. Success derives from clearly defining the organization’s overall function as guardian of the revolutionary ideals. The Supreme Leader oversees each branch of the IRGC and a small cohort of leaders unifies the different strands of activity.

Although Iranian and Western political structures differ, the IRGC’s overarching command concept captures a clear unifying purpose and supports its organizational structure. In this way, the IRGC balances the art of command and the science of control that often challenges Western militaries.<sup>2</sup> The 2019 revision to ADP-6 “Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces” aimed to reinforce the Army’s command concepts because of such complications.<sup>3</sup> Analysis of the IRGC provides opportunities to compare and improve Western approaches, while also exposing the IRGC’s vulnerabilities.

### **Overarching Command Concepts: A Unifying Purpose**

Despite the lack of transparency to the IRGC, drawing out key organizational points is possible. Reinforcing the revolutionary ideals, delivered under the banner of *Islamiyat*, provide the conceptual *raison d’etre* by which the organization functions. While the regime expounds its revolutionary roots, application now focuses on the challenges and threats posed

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<sup>1</sup> Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 237.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. Stephen Townsend, Gary Brito, Doug Crissman, and Kelly McCoy, “Reinvigorating the Army’s Approach to Command and Control: Leading by Mission Command (Part 2),” *Military Review* 99:4 (July/August 2019), 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*,

to it. According to Iranian expert Afshon Ostovar, “this dynamic of conflict... has defined the IRGC’s mission of safeguarding the revolution.” The IRGC is a product of conflict, molding the organization since its inception.<sup>4</sup> A strategy of deterrence builds on a conviction that the regime is constantly under threat and unifies the IRGC.

The mutual relationship between the Supreme Leader and the IRGC is essential to the successful application of this purpose. The Guards benefit from Ayatollah Khamenei’s patronage, and although subservient to him, a malleable blend of religion and politics aids both parties. Expeditionary asymmetric successes increase the confidence of a pragmatic interpretation to the purpose of safeguarding the regime. Where the IRGC has not directly exported its revolution, strategic convergence occurs through a blend of ideological affinity, political expediency, and transactional exchanges that permeate networks beyond Iran’s borders.<sup>5</sup> In its purest form, Iran acts clearly within its national interest. Such clarity guides the Quds Force to operate at reach and with an uninterrupted command chain, supporting the strategic purpose by which to employ specialized forces. Clear articulation of Iran’s strategic ends set the framework under which command structures form.

### ***Command Cohesion***

The IRGC benefits from continuity of command. A cohort of likeminded commanders, bound by shared experience and personal gain, form a cohesive cadre who function as the organization’s resilient core. This established group enables timely decision making, a confidence in action, and provides security to their decisions. Iranian boldness and expediency would not be possible without such cohesion.

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<sup>4</sup> Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Iman*, 235.

<sup>5</sup> Iran’s Network of Influence in the Middle East, *International Institute for Strategic Studies* (November 2019), 197. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-02-introduction> (Accessed 15 December 2019).

The importance of key individuals supports Social Identity Theory's (SIT) recognition of prototypical leaders. Iran's tightly knit commanders, combined with loyalty to the Supreme Leader, mean future leadership candidates are likely to possess compatible ideological traits that fit within this structure. The appointments of Eshmail Ghaani and Mohammed Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi show how future leaders are the most prototypical, not necessarily the most eminent personalities. Retaining cohesion is critical to the IRGC and the emphasis on religious piety to nurture young cadres preserves this process. The next generation of senior leaders are likely to be effective mid-level commanders from the United States occupation of Iraq, cohered together like the Iran-Iraq War veterans. Loyalty, matched with effectiveness, enables decision making and so oversees Iran's networks of influence.

### ***Networks of control***

The IRGC's supporting networks provide a complementary control system constructed around its asymmetric concept of warfare. Within this arrangement, the leadership retains decision-making authority, but can act quickly because of the network's sophistication. This condition allows hierarchical exchanges to support traditional military processes, while horizontal exchanges integrate wider organizations. The recent cooperation with the *Artesh* demonstrates how the network is adept at expanding IRGC influence when opportunities emerge. In return, the participants receive a share of the benefits, but it is the IRGC who strengthen their control by acting as the senior partner. A networked form does not reflect Western layered command and control, but functions because authority, matched with clear guidance, supports established procedures that minimize any operational lethargy. Without excessive bureaucracy or constraining layers of control, and reinforced by extensive experience, the organization identifies opportunities or threats to Iran's overall standing.

Ayatollah Khamenei's call to "avoid bureaucratic obstacles" in his November 2019 guidance to deal with protests inside Iran emphasizes this point.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Adaptability***

At the macro level, control varies across the network. Simultaneous operations display different characteristics that adapt to the strategic environment. Limited control built around mutual interest in Yemen differs from the direct Iranian political involvement in Lebanon. Both these examples, and others across the region, demonstrate a flexible approach to control.<sup>7</sup> Increasingly, Shi'ism is the medium for this exchange, with sectarian resilience consumed into *Islamiyat* to promote Iranian influence. Religious allegiance to the Supreme Leader, as emerging practices in Iraq show, is the optimal way to exert control, but more limited methods also exist.

This adaptability is a hallmark of the IRGC's balance between command and control and supports comments by General Townsend, the recent Head of U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Center, that "good leadership continuously employs a philosophical approach that is adaptable and effective in every context."<sup>8</sup> Acting in a similar way, the IRGC can prioritize, accept risk, and apply command presence when it is most needed. Complemented by an effective network, the Guards adapt to maximize the regime's interests.

### ***Implementation***

The adaptable balance between command and control supports Iran's concept of Mosaic Defense and ascribes Iranian strengths of identity and mass at the appropriate place.<sup>9</sup> The focus on injustice or Shia iconography helps this mobilization with the integration of

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<sup>6</sup> Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's speech (November 22, 2019). <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/multimedia> (accessed December 19, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> "Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, (November 2019), 198. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-02-introduction> (accessed December 12, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Gen. Stephen Townsend, *Reinvigorating the Army's Approach to Command and Control*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> The term *Basij* translates as Mobilization Resistance Force.

500,000 veterans after the Iran-Iraq War into the new IRGC structure providing the clearest example of this doctrine.<sup>10</sup> Overseas, the Quds Force uses its environmental awareness to direct resources to specific problems. The formation of the Syrian National Defense Force by the *Basij* provides a focused response and offers a more nuanced solution than recent Western efforts at security sector reform.

Implementing specific solutions within the strategic environment is another Iranian strength. In Iraq, the Quds Force expansion of the PMF outside the conventional command structure maximizes Iran's influence. Such structural freedoms were not possible in Syria, yet Iran adapted to operate inside the Syrian military structure, while in Lebanon, dedicated investment supports a proxy that militarily and politically outperforms the state. Finally, the emerging, informal relationship in Yemen offers a further alternative. Iran's appreciation of the environment demonstrates a considered approach to command relationships and political engagement that ensures it influences key decision-makers. An adaptive network aims to maximize Iranian influence through the development of independent proxies, but accepts less complete solutions when autonomy is not possible.

### **Comparable Lessons**

In the search to enhance command and control, IRGC practices offer useful lessons for our own force. Contemporary complications such as the span of activity, imprecise command relationships, working with alliances, and control enhancing technologies all risk undermining an effective framework from which activity takes place.<sup>11</sup> Implementing approaches that meet tenets such as unity, intent, structure, risk, and strategic thinking would improve command coherence and achieve benefits similar to the IRGC.

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<sup>10</sup>David Aaronovitch, "Iran's Revenge," *The Briefing Room*, BBC Podcast, (9 January 2020).

<sup>11</sup>Historic examples include Allied Command issues during Op TORCH in North Africa in 1942 and caveats that restrict modern alliance operations such as in the Balkans and Afghanistan.

Appraising the IRGC demonstrates the importance of an intent that facilitates decision-making and timely activity. A clear intent reduces ambiguity and ensures Western command structures do not mispresent individual responsibilities or overemphasize layers of control. The complexity of multi-domain operations and availability of information can expose command processes to unnecessary layering that restrict a principled approach based around a clear intent, directives, or simple mission orders. Although the IRGC sometimes lacks the decentralized decision making of mission command, a clear intent allows for timely execution, which ensures subordinates act to a common goal.

Opportunities exist to promote a shared understanding from which leaders can craft a clear intent. First, exchanges and attachments to other governmental agencies improve organizational understanding, expand the networks of influence, and enhance strategic thinking. Such unification develops solutions that emphasize all the levers of power and improve integration. This action would achieve an effect like the IRGC practice of placing members into key diplomatic roles. Second, extending the length of command tours would reduce turnover and ensure command direction has time to evolve in meaningful ways. The longevity of command is an organizational strength of the IRGC as settled commanders espouse their intent and personality. Finally, despite criticism from some quarters, a regulated, but close relationship with the commercial defense industry encourages an understanding of the environment and ensures an operational purpose to match the unifying end state. This would provide a realistic alternative to the IRGC's dubious commercial conglomeration. Reinforcing relationships would develop a shared understanding that aligns with the vision of the National Defense Strategy.

Command structures that adjust to the environment enhance operational effectiveness. General Townsend outlines how levels of control are a fundamental responsibility that allow "leaders to adapt the amount of guidance they provide and control they exert to the specific

conditions.”<sup>12</sup> General Soleimani’s presence at critical times underlines how proximity can support specific command decisions. Despite the availability and appetite for information, the importance of decision-making, not the volume of information available, must determine command placement. A clear intent, exercised through mission command’s virtues of decentralized execution, and underwritten by trust, would prevent overbearing command structures or unnecessary changes to command direction. Iranian support to Yemeni Houthis shows how to execute operations in such a manner. While technology has altered physical aspects of war, the cognitive element of command is more resistant to technological enhancement, especially when a command concept provides plain guidance that reduces the need for unnecessary control.<sup>13</sup>

The IRGC gives further insights into how a lean, but trusted, structure achieves the desired outcome. It limits formulaic command and focuses on trusted individuals who thoroughly understand the decision-making process to implement successful operations. This structure reinforces the need for trust as a core tenet of mission command. The Western operational experience provides a similar unifying cohort of senior officers able to make quick decisions based on their close cognitive vision and procedural understanding. At the operational and tactical level, trusting subordinates to enact directives can ensure decisive outcomes that outpace an adversary.

A link exists between decision making, trust, and the acceptance of risk. As Western armies re-emphasize mission command, accepting risk is fundamental to empowering subordinates. Recent encouragement by senior leaders for subordinates to take risk during training now needs sensible application within the sphere of operations.<sup>14</sup> IRGC practices demonstrate how trust and shared understanding complement a risk calculus and reward the

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<sup>12</sup> Gen. Stephen Townsend, *Reinvigorating the Army’s Approach to command and Control*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Carl Builder, Steven Banks and Richard Nordin, *Command Concepts: A Theory Derived from the Practice of Command and Control*. MR/RAND Corporation: MR-775-OSD, (1999), 124.

<sup>14</sup> Gen. Stephen Townsend, *Reinvigorating the Army’s Approach to Command and Control*, 9.



organization by achieving effects with limited resources. Consequently, this leads to operational unpredictability and surprise from which Iran disproportionately benefits. The reward for implementing mission command is the unequal benefit that taking prudent risk can bring.

Finally, the investment by the Quds Force in proxy partners provides a lesson for capacity building programs. A long-term approach that accepts broad strategic alignment enables a range of partners and exchanges that complement regional objectives. Despite environmental nuances, practices are transferable across programs so shared learning and a network that understands specific environments are important to maximize partnerships.

The modest cost, deniability, and lower personal risk highlight the growing popularity of proxies. Coupled with a desire to avoid full-scale war, capacity building partnerships are likely to increase in demand. Importantly, transitioning a training relationship to a surrogate operating on behalf of its patron requires a conscious policy commitment to hybrid warfare. According to Jack Watling, such a decision requires “careful escalation management” to include “whole of government ...secrecy...and moral ambiguity.”<sup>15</sup> Without these attributes, Western states are likely to struggle in this domain and should focus on deterrence efforts.<sup>16</sup> Labeling groups criminals or terrorists aids deterrence efforts, but requires significant resources to implement a response without guaranteeing an end to all proxy activity.

### **Identifying Vulnerabilities, What’s Next?**

Despite a command concept that supports Iran’s ambitions, vulnerabilities exist that challenge the IRGC’s hold on power. The unpredictability of the Middle-East and a regime nervously balancing on the edge of over-extension, expose the IRGC to several stresses.

Applying pressure on Iran’s strategic foundations, operational effectiveness, and empowering

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<sup>15</sup> Jack Watling, “Proxy Warfare: Iran,” 18.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Watling, “Proxy Warfare Iran,” 18. The UK approach to Dhofar tribes in Oman provides an isolated western success (1962-75). Whereas the CIA’s reluctance to cross certain thresholds limited its effect against Soviet forces in Afghanistan (1979-89).

alternatives could all add to the uncertainty of a post-Soleimani-era. Unchecked, Iran will continue to shift from religious theocracy towards military dictatorship.

At the strategic level, a reduction in hostilities diminishes the IRGC's legitimacy and challenges its underlying principles. As Afshon Ostovar comments, "peace is a problem for the regime," and protests inside Iran against the IRGC compound this dilemma.<sup>17</sup> Peaceful demonstrators, met by a violent IRGC response, combined with Iranian interference in Iraq and Lebanon, undermine self-determination and do not support revolutionary ideals. Without legitimate conflict, the IRGC risks misusing power and popular dissatisfaction challenges its *Islamiyat* identity and reinforces the dangers outlined in Social Identity Theory (SIT).

Internal pressures complicate the close relationship between the IRGC and the Supreme Leader. Regime reform risks ceding control and exposes its structural coherence, while differences of opinion undermine solidarity and could reduce the IRGC's operational freedom. Therefore, few options exist to counter discontent without significant and unappealing socio-economic change. Instead, actions serve the IRGC rather than its support base, further deviating from its revolutionary principles. Despite difficulties in obtaining information from inside Iran, additional exposure of such practices would further discredit the organization. Under pressure, this narrow, likeminded circle of decision-makers is susceptible to unconscious bias and Groupthink that restricts alternative solutions.<sup>18</sup> The Supreme Leader is left with his trusted, but violent, IRGC tool, and risks political, military, and strategic over-stretch. As Khamenei briefed IRGC commanders in October 2019, "do not build walls around yourself and stay within those walls," yet as the largely symbolic military response to Soleimani's death demonstrates, expansion has its limits.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Iman*, 235.

<sup>18</sup> Developed by Irving Janis, Groupthink suggests deeply involved cohesive groups override realistic alternative courses of action.

<sup>19</sup> Alex Vatanka, "Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has long kept Khamenei in Power," *Foreign Policy*, (October 2019). <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/29/iran-irgc-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-kept-supreme-leader-ayatollah-ali-khamenei-power/> (accessed January 6, 2020).

The West could exploit Iran's reduced room to maneuver by empowering individuals, organizations, and methods that counter IRGC influence. At the state level, Russian engagement with Saudi Arabia and Israel shows the transactional, rather than ideological, nature of Iran's only significant ally. Increased Russian regional hedging would exacerbate this problem further. Inside Iraq, support to the Iraqi Counter-Terrorist Service (CTS), or separating nationalist aligned PMF loyal to Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, would counter IRGC backed forces. Exploiting differences within the PMF would also provide opportunities to engage with Iraq's Shia community. Gulf States have developed relations with influential figures including Muqtada Al-Sadr, who has tense relations with the IRGC, and their brokering could help draw away nationalist forces from Iran.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, preventing IRGC influence in minority Shia communities such as Bahrain would constrain Iranian ambitions and limited rises in sectarianism. Within Lebanon, continued assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) supports a long-term counterweight to Hezbollah, and commitment to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Afghan Security Forces serve a similar purpose. Even inside Iran, differentiating the Foreign Ministry and individuals, such as Foreign Minister Javad Zarif or President Rouhani, from the IRGC is helpful. Overall, empowering alternatives actors deconstructs the Guards' narrative as the sole guardian of Iran's interests. This could boost ongoing economic sanctions, that if targeted effectively, can pressure the exchanges between the IRGC and its proxies.

These activities would intensify the regime's long-term challenges. Unwavering commitment to Syria comes with significant sacrifice, as the purported 30 Quds Force operatives killed in the opening weeks of the Battle of Aleppo and a financial commitment exceeding \$16 Billion demonstrate.<sup>21</sup> As yet, Syrian forces lack the independence of

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<sup>20</sup> Seth G Jones, "Containing Tehran," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, (January 2020), 18.

<sup>21</sup> Seth G Jones, "Containing Tehran," 17.

Lebanese Hezbollah and over-extension risks undermining the IRGC's asymmetric approach. Set against a shrinking economy that requires at least \$20 billion to balance its next budget, economic realities are acute.<sup>22</sup> Internal succession planning for the aging Ayatollah Khamenei also jeopardizes organizational control. Central to the IRGC's effectiveness, any successor will require the Guards blessing, but also risks alienating the pro-democratic electorate even further. A disruptive appointment would resemble Khamenei's succession exacerbating current tensions without the guarantee of a close future partnership.<sup>23</sup> Set against internal strains and high levels of corruption, the IRGC must balance its commitment against its own strategic outlook.

Organizational issues unsurprisingly focus on the unexpected challenge of replacing Qasem Soleimani. His charisma far exceeded the power of a commander in the traditional sense. A highly capable strategic thinker and experienced Arabist, Soleimani's absence challenges both the IRGC's proxy cohesion and the timeliness of the organization's decision-making. The immediate announcement of Eshmail Ghaani, his prototypical and experienced successor, reinforces the functionality of the IRGC, a system Ghaani fully understands. In this regard disruption is likely to be marginal. However, while Ghaani's experience and trust mirror his predecessor, his freedom to make decisions and relationship with the Supreme Leader are less clear.<sup>24</sup> Any differences could affect the timeliness and autonomy of Quds Force operations, ceding speed, opportunism, and unpredictability. Ali Alfoneh summarizes that "while Soleimani was a charismatic leader mobilizing masses, Ghaani attended to the organizational needs of the Quds Force in the shadows."<sup>25</sup> Ghaani will need to evolve to meet Ali Dastmalchain's criteria of Iranian leadership if he is to emulate his predecessor.

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<sup>22</sup> Ali Alfoneh, "Beyond the shadow of war, next US-Iran moves to foster illusions of a deal," *The Arab Weekly*, February 2, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Scheduled Parliamentary Elections due February 21 2020 will indicate the level of regime control.

<sup>24</sup> Eric Cunningham, "Iran's New Quds Force Commander," *The Washington Post*, January 4, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Ali Alfoneh, Twitter, January 19, 2020.

Specifically, Ghaani lacks the personal network and gravitas across the Middle East. In a region where personal relationships matter, this might encourage proxies to act independently. Without capable partners the IRGC risks losing its tactical agility and asymmetric edge. Indications in Iraq, supported by Iranian-aligned Hadi Al-Amari, suggest Iranian loyalty will endure, but this is only one part of its regional network. Internal pressure to restrict Quds Force freedoms and conform to a traditional structure present another challenge without Soleimani's ability to rebut any advances. Despite the inevitability of some adjustment, prolonged atrophy will reduce the network exchange and erode the effectiveness of the IRGC's leadership, while the uncertainty of another U.S. response challenges Ghaani's freedoms as he attempts to limit any malaise.

Eshmail Ghaani's experiences present clues as to how the IRGC could evolve. His previous work in Afghanistan and as an IRGC financier provide two indications of future focus. Influential in committing Afghan *Fatemiyoun* and Pakistani *Zeinabiyoun* Shia to Syria, Ghaani now has personalized proxies to re-deploy regionally or to challenge U.S. interests in Central Asia. Meshing financial and criminal networks to evolve asymmetric influence into less regulated and concealed environments such as West Africa provides another opportunity. Expanding IRGC reach and increasing revenue to offset economic sanctions offers an incentive to move from a saturated and war-weary Middle-East. Ghaani's involvement in arms shipments to Gambia in 2013 demonstrates how the new leader could maximize distal and covert networks to match Soleimani's strategic acumen and translate opportunities into long term effect.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> John Ogunsemore, "New Iranian Chief linked to shipment to Nigeria," *The Herald* (January 4, 2020). <https://www.herald.ng/new-iranian-military-chief-linked-to-arms-shipment-to-nigeria/> (accessed January 29, 2020).

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

The IRGC is underpinned by a highly effective command concept. Unified by a shared understanding and clear intent, the organization achieves regional effects that outperform its rivals and sets the benchmark for proxy operations. An established network of influence has become Iran's way of war and the Quds Force is at the forefront of this approach.

The ease with which the Quds Force operates at the political-military level, along with a long term, networked philosophy enables a strategic outlook that supports a variety of exchanges throughout the Middle East. Operating indirectly, the IRGC's asymmetric doctrine provides an efficient and unpredictable method to achieve its regional goals, and until the killing of Qasem Soleimani was advancing unchecked. Relations with Hezbollah represent Iran's most developed network and is integral to the Quds Force approach. This partner is militarily proficient, well-organized, and deployable across the Middle-East. Characterized by Quds Force advisors alongside Hezbollah specialists to train, weaponize, and supply materiel that complements soft power, the organization integrates a range of capabilities to support Iran's hybrid approach to operations. This blend of skills effectively meets contemporary challenges by operating below the threshold of traditional war and allows Iran to develop similar forces to act on its behalf or, if necessary, introduce its own military force. Increasingly, Shi'a solidarity enables partnered exchanges; however, Iran has a history of aligning partners with broad national interests.

The IRGC's approach to command shares similarities with mission command. The Guards benefit from a shared understanding and clear intent by emphasizing the protection of the regime's revolutionary ideals and are fundamental to the commander's overall vision. With a trusted cadre of senior officers, prudent risk, timely decision making, and some

decentralization all take place. A networked approach operates across Iran's relationships and range from higher risk and decentralized activity such as in Yemen, through to a highly personalized commitment in important locations such as in Syria. Centralized decision-making by senior Guards officers is the most notable deviation from mission command, but functions because command placement and the Quds Force network affords secrecy, access to information, and clear operational parameters.

The IRGC's networked structure does not resemble traditional nodal command models. Instead, personalized relationships enhance the timeliness and effectiveness of decisions and explain the significance of Qasem Soleimani's death. Such a meaningful intervention is testament to the effectiveness of relationships within the organization and while the way the Quds Force function is unlikely to change, it adds to internal Iranian pressure that perhaps presents an operational challenge not seen since the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Preservation of control will require continued cohesion between the IRGC and the Supreme Leader, especially as Iran's revolutionary principles indicate that any rapprochement is unlikely.

For the West, dissecting IRGC components of command supports efforts to improve Western practices, while also exposing the organization's vulnerabilities. In an age of increased information and constraint, the IRGC demonstrates how applying the principles of a clear intent, trust, and cohesion help to align geographically distinct forces and achieve a unified strategic end. On an increasingly decentralized battlefield, where independence and data abound, such traits will help set command structures that successfully manage these future challenges.

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## **Vita**

Lieutenant Colonel David Middleton was educated at the University of Newcastle, studying Geography and Surveying, graduating in 2003. He attended the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst later that year and commissioned into the Parachute Regiment.

In command, he has served multiple tours of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Northern Ireland and has exercised extensively in Europe, U.S., Africa, and the Middle East. He attended the UK's Intermediate Command and Staff College in 2013/14 before working in the Ministry of Defence (MOD) as a planner for UK global operations. In 2016 he commanded A Company, 2 PARA, as part of the UK's High Readiness Air Mobile Battle Group (AMBG) before returning to the MOD.

Upon graduation from JAWS, Lieutenant Colonel Middleton returns to the UK's MOD.