

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard and the Qods Force

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When the Islamic Revolution occurred in February 1979 with the return to Iran of the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a political earthquake in the Middle East very visibly began. Until this year, the Iranians had only experienced the rule of an emperor, shah (شاه) in Persian, and with the advent of the guardianship of the jurist (velayat-e faqih) established by Khomeini, the 2,500-year imperial tradition of Persian came to an end.

The Revolution was the culmination of opposition to the progressive modernization and centralization of the country under the last *shah*, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979). The *shah* succeeded his father Reza Shah in 1941 and ruled uninterruptedly until 1953, when after a brief exile, he was brought back by means of a coup planned and orchestrated by the British and Americans, a coup known as Operation Ajax by the West and the 28 Mordad coup d'état by the Iranians. Following his installment, his rule became more and more subject to the Americans, to the point where he relied solely upon them for military equipment and even drew closer to the Israelis, something which the religious authorities repeatedly condemned. The damn broke in 1979 in a flood of support for the returning Ayatollah, and this led quickly to a movement to depose the Shah and his entire government.

The Ayatollah Khomeini instituted a form of government called the *velayat-e faqih*, or guardianship of the jurist, a form which he quite openly declared to be a preparation for the return of the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi. The purpose of the Iranian government now became clearly religious and eschatological, the very opposite of the secular purpose of serving as a Cold War American ally in the Middle East to maintain a military parity against Soviet Union which Muhammad Pahlavi saw as befitting the country. Ayatollah Khomeini removed his country from such earthly concerns and directed its whole purpose towards preparing for the Return of the Mahdi, thus reinstating a clear moral order for the state.

As with the Turks, the Shah's military was dedicated to the secular form of government and was a key foundation in maintaining the Shah's rule. Hence, with the success of the Revolution, Khomeini and the new leadership decided that for that very reason it could not be trusted. Many officers, if they could not leave the country, were either imprisoned, dismissed from their posts, or in the worst cases executed by revolutionary tribunals. However, because the country could not do away entirely with its military force, Khomeini decided to create a force dedicated to the new movement, to counter any remaining secular tendencies in the armed forces as well as residual opposition to the new order, and to further protect the ideological purity of the government. This organization was named the *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami*, the Corps of Guardians of the Islamic Revolution (IRGC). Founded in May 1979 as a consolidation of the various paramilitary bodies which had formed upon Khomeini's return, it soon became organized along military lines during the long and hard-fought Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), called the Holy Defense by the Iranians.

Although Khomeini very vocally directed both the Artesh and the Sepah to abstain from any organized and direct involvement in politics in his last testament, Article 150 of the IRI Constitution names the Sepah collectively as “the guardian of the Revolution and its achievements”. This splendidly vague phrase invited a debate within Iranian politics after the death of Khomeini, with reformers and moderate elements – including the Ayatollah’s son Hassan Khomeini and the present president Hassan Rouhani – rejecting politicization; Conservatives and Principalists favor a close collaboration. Active members of the IRGC do not sit in the Majlis, but many former members do, especially since the 2004 election when the Principalist factions actively sought ought veterans to run for Majlis seats. Although the Sepah do not claim any one party as its own, an example of strong indirect influence is the Resistance Front of Islamic Iran, founded in 2011 by Mohsen Rezaee, a former intelligence officer and former head of the Sepah. The party strongly professes adherence to the *velayat-e faqih* form of government and is in the umbrella alliance of other Principalist parties called the Principalists Grand Coalition. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) joined the Sepah in 1985 during the War of Holy Defense, and created his first cabinet almost exclusively from IRGC members; his two administrations marked a strong upswing in the influence the Sepah has exercised since the end of the War of Holy Defense. Since the election of Rouhani in 2013, their influence has lessened although the president has made public expressions of support for the Sepah; although he is a critic of their involvement in politics, he does realize their power as a body and of certain individual former members.

Economically, the Sepah is arguably the largest owner of interests in the Iranian economic, through either direct holdings or through subsidiaries. After the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC sought to expand its influence in the economy partly to aid its many veterans in obtaining employment, partly to maintain the high level of influence which it had attained during the war. The Sepah collectively has a great presence in the defense, engineering, construction, aerospace and automotive industries. In addition, they exert control over several *bonyads*, charitable foundations directed by high-level Shiite clerics: two very important *bonyads* with clear Sepah links are the Mostazafan Foundation of the Islamic Revolution (بنیاد مستضعفان انقلاب اسلامی) and the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs (بنیاد شهید و امور ایثارگران).

In terms of manpower, the Sepah counts between 120,000 and 125,000 active members, divided between the Ground Forces, the Aerospace Force, the Navy and the Qods Force. Overall control of the Sepah is exercised by Ayatollah Khamenei, but direct command is held by Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari. The Ground Forces, commanded by Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour, numbers, as far as can be known, 100,000 men and are divided between 32 provincial commands and the Tehran City Command. They can best be described as mobile armored infantry, as the Sepah utilizes armored personnel carriers and has little or no tanks. The provincial commanders have command over the local Basij paramilitary units as well. The Aerospace Forces, commanded by Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, possess an inventory of attack and transport fixed wing aircraft and helicopters, but their mainstay is their arsenal of missile forces, a collection of thousands of short- and intermediate-range rockets which the Iranian Government continues to develop as a regional and national deterrent to possible Israeli or American attacks. Thus, the Aerospace Forces are tasked with a political task of great importance. The Sepah Navy, commanded by Commodore Alireza Tangsiri, is tasked with maintaining defense of the shoreline and territorial waters of Iran in the Persian Gulf; it performs this with a large number of high-speed coastal patrol boats and an arsenal of anti-ship missiles. Lastly, the Organization for

Mobilization of the Oppressed (سازمان بسیج مستضعفین) - known as the Basij - acts as a paramilitary force to complement the regular military organization of the Sepah. Officially it counts 11.2 million members, with 600,000 available at any one time for service, and engages in the suppression of internal dissent, aids the police in law enforcement, and also provides social services and organizes religious activities. It has branches in nearly every facet of Iranian public life, and is the chief means whereby the revolutionary government educates society about the political ideals and goals of the *velayat-e faqih*. It is currently commanded by Brigadier General Gholamhossein Gheybparvar.

The remaining element of the Sepah is the least understood but also the one which continues to appear with the greatest frequency in the Western press, due largely to the ongoing Syrian rebellion: the Qods Force. The Qods Force is the corps within the Sepah which engages in irregular and clandestine warfare outside the borders of the Islamic Republic, and is tasked with both direct military action and with advising and supplying its allies' militaries. Its commander, Major General Qassem Soleimani, is by far the most well-known officer of the Sepah, and he shares the same rank as Sepah commander General Jafari, an indication of the importance of the Qods Force to the Iranian Government.

The Qods Force carries the mission of ensuring the geopolitical (i.e. territorial) security of the Islamic Republic by pushing the front line of confrontation with the Zionist enemy as far from its borders as possible. Further, it also serves the purpose of recalling by its name and its operational efforts against the Israelis the Shia eschatology which is built around the capture of Jerusalem by the Muslims as a preparation for the return of the Twelfth Imam, Mohammad al-Mahdi, whom the Iranians believe is currently in the last days of his Great Occultation. This latter purpose remains largely unknown in the West except to those who pay close attention to the oppositional religious ideologies which serve as foundational beliefs for Israel and Iran. Jerusalem plays a central part here, and a further explanation is needed.

All Jews reject Jesus Christ as their Messiah, and many see in the successful formation and defense of the State of Israel as a prelude to his appearance; further, although this is not widely discussed in Israeli society, it is believed that upon his coming, he will rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, thereby permitting the reestablishment of temple sacrifice and the fulfilment once again of the Law of Moses. The question of who controls Jerusalem thus holds a central importance to religious Jews. Further, the recent victory in the Knesset elections of Benjamin Netanyahu, whose position as prime minister depends upon the Ultra-Orthodox parties, means that we will probably see a move to officially annex East Jerusalem as well as all Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Likewise, Jerusalem holds great significance for Muslims because of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, the place of the Ascent of Muhammad. According to the Book of al-Jafr, which the Shia attribute to the Sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, Jerusalem must come under Muslim control as a precursor to the return of the Twelfth Imam, Mohammad al-Mahdi. The Ayatollah Khomeini saw in the establishment of his political *velayat-e faqih* the only true Muslim government in the world, and believed because of its success in the face of Western opposition that this heralded the coming of the Mahdi. Therefore, he preached the spread of the Islamic Revolution to all Muslim societies in general, but specifically directed attention to Jerusalem, which he viewed, as do all Muslims, as being under unjust occupation by their Jewish enemy. The control of both the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock - both of which stand on top of the foundations of the Second Temple - are a particular scandal to them. Hence, there is no surprise that both General Mohammad Ali Jafari and his deputy

Brigadier General Mohammad Salami have stated in clear terms that Jerusalem is the object of the Islamic Republic's *jihad* and that the war in Syria has begun the end times.

On the battlefield level, the Qods Force operates mostly at the level of advising foreign militaries on the use of irregular tactics. They have most prominently helped form and direct the popular mobilization units (PMUs) in Iraq which successfully turned back the Islamic State when the American-formed and supplied Iraqi Army disintegrated. In Syria, they have aided President Bashar al-Assad's Army in forming similar units to keep order in areas recently cleared of Salafi rebels. Oddly enough, much of what they do was developed by the Soviet military theorist Alexander Svechin, in which he called the 'Operative Art' of irregular warfare: whereas the American approach to the war has failed, the Iranian – and also Russian – approach has been, in agreement with Svechin, 'suitable, feasible and at an acceptable cost'.

The Sepah continues to be the shield of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and will assuredly be both the nemesis and strategic foil of the Israelis and the Americans for many years to come.

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