The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

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On April 8, 2019, President Donald Trump's administration designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist group. After almost 40 years since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran – a period of time that included the seizure of hostages from the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, IRGC support for Hezbollah terrorists who have killed numerous Americans, assistance to insurgents fighting American soldiers in Iraq, support for Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, sponsorship of Shi'ite militia movements across the Middle East, and support for terrorist attacks in Europe and Latin America – U.S. officials decided it was time to officially signify that the IRGC's malign activities against the United States and its allies were not to be tolerated any longer. More recently, IRGC forces played a key role in Iran's drone and missile attacks against Israel, in arming Houthi insurgents who have steadily attacked shipping in the Red Sea, and in reportedly trying to organize assassination attempts against various former U.S. officials associated with the American drone strike upon IRGC commander Qasem Suleimani in January 2020.

The IRGC is thus not merely a key bulwark of the Iranian regime but clearly a dangerous and destabilizing force in the Middle East and beyond. With Iran having assume such a prominent antagonistic role against the United States, it is imperative that Americans – and others in the West – understand the organization better. As Sun Tzu contends, after all,

> [h]e who knows the enemy and himself [w]ill never in a hundred battles be at risk; He who does not know the enemy but knows himself [w]ill sometimes win and sometimes lose.[1]

To help provide insight into these issues, this essay will draw upon strategic cultural analysis. Kerry Kartchner, Jeffrey Larsen, and Jeannie Johnson have defined strategic culture as a

> set of shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives, (both oral and written), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives.[2]

In the pages that follow, I will employ this definition, along with four perspectives or functions and their conceptual definitions that Kartchner proposes in his chapter on nuclear thresholds – identity, values, norms, and perceptual lens[3] – to investigate the strategic culture of the Revolutionary Guard.

Before exploring those four perspectives, however, it is useful first to outline the cultural sources of the IRGC's strategic mindset, drawing upon history, religion, geography, and the keeper of strategic culture.

Sources of IRGC Strategic Culture

History

According to one of the founding figures of the Revolutionary Guard, Mohsen Rafiqdoust, the Revolutionary Guard was created after the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 specifically in order to protect that revolution.[4] Since the ruling clerics and their Islamist commissars did not trust the monarchical organizational structure, including the *Artesh-e-Shahanshahi-e-Iran* (the Imperial Armed Forces of Iran) – that is, Iran's regular armed forces, previously loyal to the Shah – immediately after the revolution those clerics and commissars founded parallel organizations whose ideological tendencies could be assured. These parallel organizations were intended to defend the revolution and guarantee the clerics' own hold on power.

Ever since, the existence of such multiple power centers in Iran "renders the functioning of the regime opaque—even to many of its own members – making it especially difficult for outsiders to understand what is going on."[5] Today, there are in effect two militaries in Iran: the IRGC, an ideological military organization associated with the ruling regime, and the *Artesh*-e- *Jomhouri-e- Eslami-e-Iran*, the Islamic Republic of Iran's Armed Forces, a government force devoid of revolutionary ideology. Together, these two distinct military organizations exist in parallel within the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI).

Structurally, the IRGC is divided into five branches: the IRGC Ground Force (IRGCGF); the IRGC Navy (IRGCN); the IRGC Aerospace Force (IRGCASF); the IRGC Quds Force (IRGC-QF) focused on external subversive and paramilitary operations; and the Basij Organization of the Oppressed (BOO) focused upon domestic ideological policing.[6] The main impetus for the IRGC's transformation came as a result of the Iran-Iraq war. Immediately after the revolution, the IRGC had only been involved in purging counterrevolutionary enemies inside Iran and facilitating liberation movements outside. The IRGC's transformation into a fully-fledged military organization, however, occurred during the Iran-Iraq war, when "on a direct order from Ayatollah Khomeini, the IRGC was given the task of setting up its own army, navy, and air force units" in 1985.[7]

Religion

The influence of Islam in general – and the Shia denomination in particular – as the ideological engine for the IRGC can be seen in two ways: through the concept of jihad or war, and through those principles that IRGC members have been taught as an institution.

One important concept here is that of *jihad* – literally "struggle" – which can have multiple meanings, but which in the modern world is often associated with religiously-inspired violence or war. As Davood Feirahi has noted, "[t]he Shiite [*sic*] jurisprudents believe that *jihad* is one of the major religious obligations [to be discharged by the Muslims]."[8] However, who would decide on war is a matter of lengthy discussions. A *jihad* could be offensive or defensive, but some scholars

believe that in Shia Islam only a defensive *jihad* could be declared by a jurisprudent (a learned Shi'ite scholar-judge) since a decision to wage offensive *jihad* only rests with the infallible Imam, that ultimate successor to the Prophet Mohammad who – according to Shi'ite tradition – is currently in a state of Greater Occultation and not present in the mundane world.[9] Nonetheless, as the theoretical interpretations and actual practices of *jihad* in Shia Islam suggest both offensive and defensive *jihads* could be declared by jurisprudents even in the absence of that infallible Shia Imam.[10]

As an institution, members of the IRGC have been indoctrinated by the IRGC 's educational programs to believe in ten ideological principles that grow out of these traditions – namely, belief in: God (Allah); the Supreme Leader; the righteousness of warriors of Islam; resurrection; leadership of the infallible Shia Imam; divine victory; *jihad*; heavenly obligations; divine intervention; and fate[12] Militarily, under the influence of such Islamic traditions, emphasis is placed on five principles:

- Mobilization of the Public (*Basij omoomi*): the whole population should take part in war against the enemy;
- Military command: the commander should be trusted by his inferiors and should make a personal bond with them;
- Military Preparedness: the Islamic regime is under constant threat military preparedness at all times is essential;
- Retaliation: Retaliation should be contingent on permissibility by Islamic laws;[13] and
- Surprise: secrecy should be ensured so that the enemy is kept in ignorance of any military operations, and that enemy should be kept under surveillance until surprise can be achieved by one's own forces.[14]

Geography

Strategically, geography could be interpreted as a source of the IRGC's mindset. As Colin S. Gray has noted, "the evidence of the influence of geography can be located not only in the physical environment within which all strategy must be 'done,'" but also "in the ideas, which may inspire strategic behaviour, [and may be] invented to explain spatial relationships" such as heartland and rimland.[15]

The IRGC has inherited an Iranian geography whose feature of great significance for this organization is its access to the Persian Gulf. However, the geography of the imagination of the IRGC is very much influenced by the Iranian regime's geopolitical grand design and geopolitical ambitions, and is thus of broader scope. The regime's grand design is part of its revolutionary inheritance and draws upon Shi'ite religious eschatology, and relates to the way in which the Muslim population has spread across the Middle East, with special focus upon areas of Shi'ite habitation.

This means that the IRI aspires, through the IRGC, to expand its influence and lead the region and even the broader Islamic world, even though such Shi'ite messianism often leads to conflict with Sunni Muslim populations, and hence frequently undermines that goals by fueling unwanted sectarian conflict.[16] Perhaps more importantly, the IRI perceives its regional ambitions in ways that not only put the regime competition against other regional powers for regional leadership, but also against what are perceived as invasive outside powers, in a battle against the United States and Israel as well. Such thinking manifests itself in the IRI's proclaimed leadership role in an "Axis of Resistance" denoting an alliance between Iran, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, the Houthis, some Palestinian militants, and previously Syria against the United States and U.S. allies and partners.[17]

The Keeper of Strategic Culture

Also central to understanding the strategic culture of the IRGC is understanding the role of the person or persons who have shaped

and propagated key narratives about the culture's identity and values, in this case, the clerical leadership in Iran. The IRI's original Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989), who led the country after the revolution from 1979 until 1989, claimed for himself a special position as the interpreter of Islamic law and the central figure in a clerical regime in which all governmental institutions depended upon – and were subject to check and revision by – spiritual authority. Khomeini was, therefore,

> not simply one decision-maker amongst many. As the religious, political, and military leader of the country, he set ideological guidelines that influenced military decisions at various levels of command and in different areas of military activity.[18]

There are five ways in which Khomeini's ideas have helped shape the IRGC.

First, at a broad level, Khomeini's worldview was that the essence of the international system was a conflict between good and evil. He saw great powers, in particular the West and the United States, as well as their client states, as being evil, arrogant, and Satanic,[19] and as being fundamentally at war with the forces of good exemplified by Shi'a Islam and the IRI.

Second, and as a result of that first factor, Khomeini defined Iran's role as aiding Islamic and liberation movements against those evil powers,[20] extending the clerical regime's struggle and victory against the U.S.-backed Shah of Iran into the international arena in an ongoing revolutionary conflict. Third, it was assumed that making peace with the aggressor would only invite future aggression. No peace being possible, the only solution is for the armies of the perceived aggressors to be defeated and the evil foreign regimes responsible overthrown.[21]

Fourth, at a strategic level, Khomeini's perception of victory was not conventional and did not necessarily involve defeating the enemy on the battlefield. Rather, from his perspective, victory was about fulfilling the responsibility to fight God's enemies on earth,

irrespective of the outcome.[22] In order to improve the odds of victory, however, he advocated development of nuclear weapons. In a letter to Iran's military and political leaders soon after he agreed to the cease-fire that ended the war with Iraq, Khomeini gave his approval for acquisition of any weapons that would boost Iran's military power – including "nuclear weapons." Khomeini asserted:

> If we have 350 infantry brigades, 2,500 tanks, 3,000 artillery units, 300 fighter jets, 300 helicopters, and the ability to create noticeable quantities of laser and atomic weapons which are the requirements of war in this day and age, I can say that by God's will we could carry out an offensive operation.[23]

Perspectives or Functions of IRGC Strategic Culture

Proceeding from those ideological foundations, the strategic culture of the Revolutionary Guard can be understood through the four perspectives upon strategic culture as outlined by Kerry Kartchner. He defines those four perspectives as follows:

- *Identity*: These are character traits that a group assigns to itself, including the reputation it pursues, the individual roles and statuses it assigns to members,; and the distinctions it draws between group itself (us) and others.

- *Values*: These are deeply held beliefs about what is right, proper, and good, which serve as broad guidelines for social life. Such values include material or ideational goods, which are honored, or which confer status to members of group; values are secular and sacred.

- *Norms*: These are accepted, expected, or customary behaviors. They may be implicit or explicit, proscriptive or prescriptive, but they form the rules or laws that govern proper behavior, and can constrain

elite behavior, delimiting range of behavior necessary to maintain ruling legitimacy.

- *Perceptual Lens*: This factor refers to conceptual filters through which groups perceive or assess the relevance of facts about others.[24]

Identity

The IRGC is an ideological military force.[25] Therefore, the character traits that the Guard assigns to itself derive from what its ideology, rooting in revolution, religion, and Khomeinist thinking encourage. Accordingly, the IRGC sees itself as the guardian of the revolution, an unconventional military force, an organization which fights for the oppressed against the oppressors, and a military body that challenges Western influences and imperialism.

What makes the IRGC distinct from the other military forces – the *Artesh*, or the regular armed forces – is the Revolutionary Guard's special role in *guardianship of the revolution*. The *Artesh*'s primary role as a regular force is to counter external territorial threats. However, the IRGC is seen as being responsible for guardianship of the revolution and, by implication, the entire system of the IRI government. This is explicit in Article 1 of the IRGC's charter:

> The Revolutionary Guards [sic] is an institution under the Leader's supreme command. Its goal is to *protect Iran's Islamic Revolution and its achievements* and persistently struggle to achieve the divine aims, spread the rule of the law of God in accordance with the Islamic Republic of Iran's laws, and to fully strengthen the Islamic Republic's defensive foundations through cooperation with other armed forces and through the military training and organizing of popular forces.[26]

This identity trait of regime guardianship is so important to the members of the IRGC that it could be considered by IRGC members as their own personal predominant value as well. The members of the IRGC are generally recruited from Basij organization, which is

supposed to train students at a young age to protect the regime and the Ayatollah (*Vali-e-Faghih*). The indoctrination process starts before the military service actually starts at the age of 18, and recruitment is very rigid, making sure that new recruits fully support the regime. (Talents and other credentials are less important than full support for the Ayatollah and the regime: the main requirement is complete loyalty.) Its responsibilities are not solely external nor solely internal, but rather political and ideological. When the Revolutionary Guard senses that there is a threat to the system of government by any movement or faction, it assumes a political character and intervenes.[27]

The IRGC is also unique in that it "sees itself as an unconventional and revolutionary force, and has developed tactics and operational strategies to match."[28] Before the revolution, the early founders of the IRGC were trained by the Lebanese and Palestinians guerrilla fighters.[29] Still today, the Revolutionary Guard places a premium on

> asymmetrical, guerrilla-like tactics; the cultural and political role of the Basij; and the IRGC's close camaraderie with like-minded irregular armed forces outside of Iran.[30]

This focus upon unconventional methods has been a constant since the early days.

The idea of siding with the underprivileged and with victims of oppression receives immense attention in Shia Islam. This is because, first, the Shi'ites lived during much of their history under the shadow of the Sunnis, and second, the martyrdom of the third Imam Husayn, killed at the Battle of Karbala (630 C.E.) by those in power in the formative incident of the Shia tradition, has given Shi'ites a powerful reason to generally sympathize with the victim.[31] Influenced by this idea, the IRGC's image as an advocate of the oppressed is manifest, for example, in the membership of IRGC 's internal branch known as *Sazman-e- Basij-e Mostazafan*, meaning "Basij Organization of the Oppressed."

The creation of the Basij militia was decreed by Khomeini in 1979, and it was officially founded in 1980. The prime objectives of its creation were

> participating in homeland defense against any foreign aggression; protecting the Revolution and its achievements by countering internal enemies; participating in disaster relief; and maintaining the moral order of the country.[32]

Although the Basij was created as an independent militia, it was incorporated into the IRGC by the end of 1980. Today, the Basij "has the specific goal of confronting internal and external threats to the revolutionary regime."[33] However, the IRI mainly uses it "to tighten its control over Iranian society" by establishing "bases in every corner of society" to monitor and suppress the "others."[34]

Ralph Peters, an expert in irregular warfare, sees the threat from such combatants coming from the combination of warriors drawn from five pools. Three of those pools of irregulars are opportunists who benefit financially or otherwise from participation in war, patriots attracted to whatever nationalist struggle happens to be underway, and failed military men who cannot function in a traditional military environment but who nonetheless bring with them into such militias at least "the rudiments of the military art." However, the first two recruitment pools are the underclass and uneducated, who may be radicalized and drawn in to support irregular formations.[35] The Basij, in a similar vein, "relies on the inclusion of the lower social and economic classes as the major source of its membership."[36]

The Revolutionary Guard views itself as a revisionist military organization which opposes the West in a broad ideological and even spiritual struggle. From the beginning, "[t]he notion of combating imperialism, in all its forms, was central to the operations of the IRGC."[37] Today, a manifestation of this characteristic feeling of ideological mission are the political demonstrations that are regularly deployed by the members of the Basij and other like-minded groups either "in response to perceived foreign insults or to mark important events such as the anniversary of the revolution."[38]

Values

Of all the IRGC's values, the protection and defense of the Supreme Leader of the Revolution[39] – first Khomeini, and now Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – stands above the rest. Under Article 110 of the Islamic Republic, the Supreme Leader, who is also the chief commander of the military forces, retains the constitutional right to declare war and call for general troop mobilization. Additionally, he represents the Islamic system of clerical rule as it is personally embodied in a supreme religious jurist (*velayat-e-faqih*). Therefore, he is "both a political authority and a spiritual guide."[40]

Thus, the Supreme Leader is the central figure of the Islamic Republic. However, what makes the IRGC's devotion to the Supreme Leader different from, for example, the North Korean Army's devotion to Kim Jong-Un, is that this dedication stems from the organization's *raison d'être* which is the protection of the revolution; the leader is the embodiment of that revolution.[41] Hence, this devotion is an ideological devotion rather than a personal one.

Because the Supreme Leader is also the *velayat-e-faqih*, moreover, this ideological devotion also has overtones of religious duty. The Revolutionary Guard, being an ideological military organization, is founded on Islamic values. As the Article 11 of the charter of the Revolutionary Guard reads: "The training and education of members of the Revolutionary Guards [*sic*] [shall be] in accordance with Islamic teachings and values." However, as the article continues, it asserts "Islamic teachings and values" should be "based on the guidance of the *Velayat-e Faqih*."[42]

In other words, from the IRGC's perspective, the true interpretation of Islam is what the Supreme Leader endorses. Also, members of the IRGC are exposed to indoctrination with Shia beliefs through clerical supervision of the mullahs chosen by the leader and the educational courses these mullahs have set for the members.[43] Members of the Basij are also taught, through educational programs, that Shia Islam is superior "over other religious practices, especially Sunni Islam."[44]

The IRI and its ruling clerics have attempted to instill in their military forces the notion that martyrdom for the sake of Islam – an ideal that draws on the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn – is a religious duty.[45] During the Iran-Iraq war, clerical leadership and the IRGC command shared the view that

> technology, hardware, skills or training by itself are not sufficient enough to guarantee military success, if being used without proper implementation of human factor, decisively shaped by the *Islamic faith and ideology*.[46]

Therefore, they used members of the Basij, who believed that a martyr's death would give them the keys to heaven, as "human waves" to charge through Iraqi minefields, conducting "human de-mining" operations at terrible cost.[47]

Today, the value of martyrdom is constantly promoted by the IRGC and its domestic militia, the Basij, in an effort to weave their culture of war and culture of self-sacrifice into the very fabric of Iranian society. One example of such advocacy is a project called *Farhan-e-Isar*, or "Culture of Self-Sacrifice." Through this project, the "Council of Coordination and Supervision of the Promotion of the Culture of Martyrdom and Self-Sacrifice" – which is affiliated with the Basij – publishes news, monthly magazines, and books, and runs a website to promote those values.[48]

Although the IRGC is a military organization, it is not purely a military one, but also an increasingly powerful economic force in Iran. Indeed, the Revolutionary Guard's "growing economic clout" has become "both an end in itself and a tool to advance its other agendas."[49] At least three factors have contributed to making economic expansionism important to the IRGC. First, many of its economic activities broaden the IRGC's social popularity and support among people, especially among the rural population.[50] Second, economic activities enable the IRGC to increase its control over the Iranian economy and influence over Iranian society.[51] Third, such engagements often advance the financial interests of the organization,

providing a source of funding[52] – both for its official activities and (most likely) for the personal wealth of its leaders.

Norms

Since the early days of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini believed that his Islamic message had to be heard not just in Iran but in the wider world. He maintained that "God's vision was not to be confined to a single nation" and that "the notion of nationalism and territorial demarcation were relics of a discredited past."[53] At the same time, the early founders of the IRGC contended that liberation movements in *other* lands had to be aided in their fights against imperialism and Israel.[54] Therefore, the IRGC has since then seen its mission as being to "export the revolution," which Afshon Ostovar defines as "a form of revolutionary or radical internationalism, which, unlike other forms of internationalism (such as liberal or imperialist), sees international relations through the lens of conflict."[55]

This revolutionary internationalism can even be found in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. As it reads in the Constitution:

> In establishing and equipping the defense forces of the country, it shall be taken into consideration that faith and ideology are the basis and criterion. Therefore, the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Revolutionary Guards [*sic*] Corps will be formed in conformity with the above objective, and will be *responsible not only for protecting and safeguarding the frontiers but also for* the *ideological mission, that is, Jihad, for God's sake and struggle for promoting the rule of God's law in the world*.[56]

The IRGC arm particularly charged with this mission is the "Quds Force" whose commander reports, not to the IRGC 's Commander in Chief, but directly to the Supreme Leader of the Revolution himself, and whose single aim is to project the Islamic Republic's power outside Iran.[57]

The Revolutionary Guard not only perceives and approves of conflict as a norm but also uses violence to achieve political and

economic goals, and routinely draws upon "killing, kidnapping, and intimidation" to maintain power and advance its objectives.[58] For example, in December 2009, the Basij used violence in the streets to suppress protesters who objected to fraudulent results in the presidential election.[59] Outside Iran, in Iraq, moreover, over the first two years since the US invasion in 2003, the Quds Force assassinated a number of senior Iraqi officers and Iraqi Air Force pilots as retribution for their participation in the Iran-Iraq War and as an effort to neutralize future Iraqi military capability.[60]

Also, the IRGC has shown a tendency to cooperate with Sunni groups when such groups and the IRI form a relationship that is based on "shared enemies, common threats, and mutually beneficial goals."[61] Other cases in point include Iran's support for groups such as the Taliban to counter U.S. and Western influence, as well as ISIS-Khorasan in Afghanistan since 2007,[62] collaboration with Salafi-jihadist groups such as Ansar al-Islam against erstwhile Kurdish allies in Iraq, and cooperation with al Qaeda in Iraq during the U.S. occupation to keep "sectarian violence at a roil" and bloody American forces there.[63] These groups may have varying ideological and religious perspectives, but the IRGC is happy to support them out of convenience, against their shared opponents.

Economically, after the end of the Iran-Iraq War in in 1988 and as a result of the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani (between 1989 and 1997) –who encouraged the IRGC to have its own independent source of income by being involved in economic activities – the Revolutionary Guard started to establish its vast economic empire in the 1990s. Since then, the IRGC's economic activities have developed in several respects.

The IRGC has become involved in commercial and business activities which range from chain stores to telecommunications, and from real estate to the Tehran Stock Exchange.[64] In another arena, the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, which is the IRGC's engineering division, undertakes industrial and agricultural construction projects. Khatam Headquarters is also the body which acts as the nexus to connect the IRGC and Iran's oil industry by

securing contracts with Iran's Oil Ministry in different industrial and construction fields.[65]

The IRGC also benefits financially from a close cooperation with the *Bonyads* (Islamic charity Foundations), which are economically powerful trusts and are controlled directly by the Supreme Leader.[66] In addition, the IRGC can rely on funds allocated by these trusts when needed.[67] Lastly, the Revolutionary Guard is heavily involved in Iran's underground economy and black market activities because of its control over Iran's borders and airports[68] and its access to countless jetties.[69]

Further, the IRGC has become involved in drug smuggling from Afghanistan to South America, as illegal narcotic activities have become important as a source of funding for the Islamic Republic and the IRGC, with the emergence of a "growing crime-terror nexus" helping support the IRGC – particularly the Quds Force and Basiji.[70] For example, Iran's control of the so-called Balkan Route facilitates the provision of Afghan opiates to Western and central Europe.[71] In another instance, the Quds Force – operating alongside the IRGC's satellite organization, Hezbollah – is involved in drug smuggling in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) in South America where the Brazilian, Argentinian, and Paraguayan borders meet.[72] The chief reason as to why the IRGC is involved in such narcotic activities is that these activities provide the IRGC with the financial and organizational ability to carry out its various activities, including terrorism.[73]

Considering the IRGC's involvement in economic activities and its comingling of economic activity, domestic political policing, and illicit commercial activity, some speculate that the IRGC has been able to increase its hold on the economy as a result of the dislocations caused by U.S. and other international economic sanctions.[74] This, however, is contested, and recent research by Foundation for Defense of Democracies on the impact of economic sanctions indicates that because of its coercive hold upon much of the Iranian economy, any *relief* from sanctions would yield economic and political benefits that empower the IRGC.[75] In either case, the IRGC clearly feels itself to have a special sense of ideological mission that permits it to use essentially any tools or methods it deems necessary.

Perceptual Lens

The Revolutionary Guard's perceptual lens as a military organization and an ideological entity as well, revolves around images of the Enemy. Animosity towards three enemies in particular – namely, the West, especially the United States (as the "Great Satan"), Israel (the "Little Satan"), and counterrevolutionaries inside Iran – has colored the worldview of the IRGC in important but varying ways.

The IRGC members view Western values as a threat, and consider Islamic and Western values to be diametrically opposed. For this reason, the IRGC works towards psychological indoctrination of its members against the West. For example, its Ideological-Political Training (IPT) programs, designed for the educational purpose of the members of the Basij – the IRGC's internal branch and the main source of future recruitments into other branches of the IRGC – "work to present Islam, particularly Shiism [*sic*], as not just a religion but also an ideology that stands in contrast to Western ideologies like liberalism."[76] Outside Iran, the Quds Force also provides "training, funding, and equipment for militias and political groups with common anti-Western ideologies and objectives."[77] Beyond just a generalized anti-Western viewpoint, however, the IRGC is particularly focused upon the United States, seeing U.S. interests as its main target in the Middle East, where it draws upon asymmetric warfare techniques to enable it to act while to avoiding direct confrontation.[78]

There are also powerful anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli elements in the IRGC worldview. As the leader of the revolution, "a distinct strand of anti-Semitism characterized Khomeini's perspective," as is clearly visible in his various writings.[79] Khomeini believed that Israel was "an *artificial Western construct* whose aim was to oppress Muslims, and he seems to have desired the annihilation of Israel not merely a political agenda but as a deep-seated anxiety.[80]

The destruction of Israel constitutes an official objective of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy to this day, and the IRGC and

Hezbollah are in charge of implementing that policy.[81] Specifically, it has been the duty of the Quds Force to support all militias (including both Shia and Sunni groups) which "share a common goal—the elimination of Israel and the punishment of its supporter, the United States."[82] Deep hostility towards Israel is explicit and persistent, such as phrasing that described Israel the "Cancerous Tumor" of the region.[83]

The idea of counterrevolutionary movements – that is, the enemy within – has also been important to the IRGC, providing a lens through which the Revolutionary Guard has viewed any act inside Iran disapproved of by the regime. The Revolutionary Council in the initial stages of the revolution tasked the IRGC with "assisting police and security forces in the apprehension or liquidation of counterrevolutionary elements."[84] Today, any activity, including cultural activities, which may result in diminishing the Islamic Republic or IRGC's power, or influence, or prestige will be considered as a counterrevolutionary act or movement. To this end, principally, the Basij is tasked with opposing perceived allegedly counterrevolutionary acts.[85]

Manifestations of IRGC Strategic Culture

Beyond simply its role within Iran, the IRGC has adopted different approaches to exert and expand its influence in the Middle East in particular, and around world more generally. In the following pages, I examine five main areas of military activities through which the Revolutionary Guard strategic culture manifests itself. These areas are: (1) creation and/or support for proxy paramilitary groups in the Middle East; (2) terrorism around the world; (3) pursuit of nuclear weapons; (4) employment of ballistic missiles; and (5) engagement in naval guerrilla warfare against perceived enemies.

The IRGC has given a great deal of military and financial support to paramilitary groups throughout the so-called Axis of Resistance, starting with Hezbollah in the 1980s. The most important of such groups founded by the Quds Force in this axis include the Badr organization, Asaib Ahl-al-Haqq, Kataib Hizballah, and 'Popular Mobilization Units' in Iraq; "National Defense Forces" and Afghan

and Pakistani Shia militias, who fought to defend Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. The Quds Force has also supported Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories.[86] The Houthi group in Yemen, which has received considerable Iranian support – including in the form of long-range missiles it has fired against Red Sea shipping and against Israel – might also be considered part of the Axis.[87]

Iran has shown its willingness and ability "to use terrorism to strike at its adversaries in the region and globally."[88] The organization in charge of supporting (or carrying out) terrorist acts is the IRGC, especially its Quds Force,[89] and the primary target of the IRGC's terrorist attacks has been the United States.[90] Furthermore, the IRI has carried out terrorism via Hezbollah against Israel and America.

Among other things, the Quds Force carried out terrorist attacks on many occasions, including: "strikes on the Israeli Embassy (1992) and a Jewish community center (1994) in Argentina, as well as the 1996 Khobar Towers attack [against American forces based in in Saudi Arabia."[91] In April 1983, the IRGC and Hezbollah also worked together spearheading a deadly attack against the U.S. Embassy in Beirut that killed 63 people. In October of the same year, they also led the bombing of the U.S. Marine encampment at the Beirut airport that killed 241 U.S. Marines, sailors, and soldiers serving as peacekeepers. Virtually simultaneously, the IRGC and Hezbollah bombed the French paratroopers' headquarters located in the West Beirut performing the same mission that resulted in 58 French deaths.[92] Therefore, as one account summarized things, as "[t]he epitome of state-sponsored terrorism, the Qods [sic] Force will relentlessly seek opportunities to undermine or strike the USA."[93] The IRGC executes such assaults against the United States and Israel through its proxies wherever it is able to do so,[94] and there has as yet been no sign of moderation.

As a powerful organization and the "chief custodian of sensitive weapons system," the IRGC exerts its influence in national security and nuclear-related decision-making in Iran.[95] It is not, however, an entirely independent one, and the stance of the IRGC generally accords with that of the Supreme Leader to whom the organization

reports. The IRGC publicly supports an unconstrained nuclear program, however, which is seen "to promote an image of strength and deter Iran's regional adversaries."[96] The IRI leadership seems to view the acquisition of nuclear weapons as being desirable for four reasons:

- [It will enable clerical leaders] to solidify their hold on power and stall the fortunes of those [who] would liberalize [*sic*] Iranian society and economy.

- It will fulfil the leadership's ambition to make Iran the Islamic world's preeminent power and its role as regional hegemon [will be satisfied].

- It secures the continued existence of a legitimate Islamic government until the return of the hidden twelfth Imam Mahdi.

- [It] would prevent meaningful U.S. opposition to their domestic and foreign policy agendas.[97]

The IRGC is also important to nuclear-related issues because of its role in Iran's missile capabilities, which are run by the Revolutionary Guard's Aerospace Force (IRGCASF). (The Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force [IRIAF] and the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Defense Force [IRIADF], both under *Artesh*, operate Iran's air defense and combat aircraft, but the IRGC monopolizes the missile force.) As a primarily unconventional military organization, the IRGC has attempted to expand its missile capability, which comprises "Iran's primary means of conventional power projection."[98] Since Iran lacks a modern air force, ballistic missiles are used as a means of deterrence to dissuade Iran's adversary in the region from attacking Iran.[99] Moreover, in a conflict, it is the IRGC that would be able to "launch salvos of missiles against large-area targets such as military bases and population centers, throughout the region to inflict damage, complicate adversary military operations, and weaken enemy morale,"[100] as well as attacking energy infrastructure and other critical economic targets.

Aspects of the IRGC's strategic culture can also be seen in its naval presence in the Persian Gulf. The IRGC 's approach to naval warfare is unconventional, in that "[it] emphasizes speed, mobility, large numbers, surprise, and survivability and takes advantage of Iran's geography with the shallow and confined waterways of the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz."[101] The IRGC avoids becoming engaged in large conventional confrontations against any blue-water navy, seeking instead to threaten conventionally superior adversaries through its asymmetric approach to naval warfare by using small, fast boats armed with guns, rockets, torpedoes, and missiles. (The Revolutionary Guard has also taken measures to build up its coastal defense by using cruise missiles, mines and other counter naval platforms.[102])

These tactics can be very costly to the boat crews involved, of course, but the IRGC uses ideological and religious indoctrination to prepare its sea warriors in advance – even to the point of martyrdom. For example, while recruiting students into its naval forces, "the IRGC encourages these students to prepare themselves for suicide attacks in potential naval warfare."[103] In this way, the organization's revolutionary and religious strategic culture acts as a facilitating factor for its irregular, asymmetric tactics.

Conclusion

The most important components of the IRGC strategic culture can be summarized in five points.

First, the IRGC's *raison d'être* has always been the protection of the revolution – its ideas, its leadership, and its expansion – but *not* of Iran as a country, nor even the Iranian people. Because the revolution is itself expansionist in its ideology and feels itself to have a *world* mission not merely a national or even a regional one, this inclines the IRGC to have an expansive notion of security in that threats to the revolution are perceived to be ubiquitous which, in turn, induces the Revolutionary Guard to act aggressively to eradicate such perceived threats.

Second, the IRGC, born out of the Islamic Revolution, is a revisionist military organization whose identity and values are seen as opposed to those of the West. Therefore, its guiding principle is enmity towards the West, above all the United States and Israel, as well as the proponents of Western culture and values cultures inside Iran.

Third, the IRGC has adopted an unconventional character in its approach towards warfare. Since throughout its history, the IRGC has been fighting as a perceived underdog and because the enemies it has set for itself have been militarily superior, it has drawn upon unconventional tactics to accomplish its agenda.

Finally, there is no divide between war and peace in the IRGC's strategic culture: there is only war. The Revolutionary Guard has been continuously involved in a combat against one perceived enemy or another from the very beginning of its creation, both at home and abroad. This can be seen in IRGC's establishment of the Quds Force for external adventures and the Basij militia for internal combats, illustrating that the IRGC strategic culture is deeply wedded to an essentially borderless concept of armed struggle.

In 2012, Stephen O'Hern once asked whether America would continue to "sleep while the supreme leader and his Revolutionary Guard plan its destruction."[104] President Trump's designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization in 2019 provided a partial answer to that question, making clear that the United States understood the nature of the IRGC and was determined to stand up to it. In light of what we have seen about the Revolutionary Guard's strategic culture, it is perhaps surprising that this U.S. response took as long as it did.

* * *

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Notes:

(1) Sun Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, trans. Roger T. Jones (Ballantine Books, 2013), 80-81.

(2) Jeannie L. Johnson, Kerry M. Kartchner, & Jeffrey A. Larsen, "Introduction," in *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Culturally Based Insights into Comparative National Security Policymaking*, eds. Jeannie L. Johnson, Kerry M. Kartchner, & Jeffrey A. Larsen, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 9.

(3) *See* Kerry M. Kartchner, "Introduction: Sociocultural Approaches to Understanding Nuclear Thresholds," in *Crossing Nuclear Thresholds: Leveraging Sociocultural Insights into Nuclear Decisionmaking*, eds. Jeannie L. Johnson, Kerry M. Kartchner, and Mailyn J. Maines (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 9-16.

(4) Saeed Alamian, ed., *Baraye Tarikh Migouyam: Khaterat-e-Mohsen Rafiqdoust* [I say it for History: A Memoir by Mohsen Rafighdoust] (Entesharat-e-Soureh Mehr, 1398/2019), 63-64.

(5) Michael Eisenstadt. "The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Religion, Expediency, and Soft Power in an Era of Disruptive Change," *MES Monographs*, No.7 (November 2015): 3.

(6) Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), *Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance* (U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2019), 27.

(7) Daniel Byman et al., *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era* (RAND Corporation, 2001), 35.

(8) Davood Feirahi, "Norms of War in Shia Islam," in *World Religions and Norms of War*, eds. Vesselin Popvoski, Gregory M. Reichberg and Nicholas Turner (United Nations University Press, 2009), 259.

(9) Feirahi, 259.

(10) See Assaf Moghadam, "The Shi'a Perception of Jihad," *Al Nakhlah*, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 1-8.

(11) The Twelve Imams are those individuals that are considered as the rightful spiritual and political successors to the Islamic prophet Muhammad in the Twelver branch of Shia Islam. Apart from Ali, the first one, they never succeeded in obtaining political leadership, despite their spiritual leadership. The twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, will return at the end of times to spread justice in the world by conquering evil forces.

(12) Mohammad Raoufi Nejad, *Naghshe Amouzeh haye Eteghadi va Nezami Eslam dar Doctorin Amaliati Sepah Pasdaran Enghelabe Eslami dar hasht sal defa Moghadas* [The Role of Islamic beliefs and military teachings in Operational Doctrine of the IRGC over eight years of the holy defence] (Markaze Entesharate Rahbordi, 1398/2019), 203-4.

(13) Nejad, *Neghshe Amouzeh*, 213-14.

(14) Nejad, 215, 144.

(15) Colin S. Gray, "Inescapable Geography," in *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy*, eds. Colin S. Gray, and Geoffrey Sloan (Routledge, 2013), 161-65.

(16) J.Matthew Mclnnis, *The Future of Iran's Security Policy: Inside Tehran's Strategic Thinking* (American Enterprise Institute, May 2017), 8.

(17) Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), *Iran Military Power*, 15 & 16.

(18) Kamran Taremi, "Iranian Strategic Culture: The Impact of Ayatollah Khomeini's Interpretation of Shiite Islam," *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 1 (March 2014): 5.

(19) Taremi, "Iranian Strategic Culture," 7.

(20) Taremi, 7-8.

(21) Taremi, 14.

(22) Taremi, 18.

(23) Quoted in Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard: The Threat that Grows While America Sleeps* (Potomac Books, 2012), 166.

(24) *See* Kerry M. Kartchner, "Introduction," 9-16.

(25) Ali Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guard Is Turning Theocracy into Military Dictatorship* (Washington, DC: American International Institute, 2013), 150.

(26) "Constitution of the Revolutionary Guards," last modified September 7, 1982 (emphasis added), *available at* https://irandataportal.syr.edu/constitution-of-the-revolutionary-guards.

(27) Daniel Byman et al., *Iran's Security Policy*, Xiii.

(28) Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15.

(29) Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 70.

(30) Ostovar, *Vanguard*, 15.

(31) See Moghadam, "The Shi'a Perception of Jihad," 1-8.

(32) Quoted in Saeid Golkar, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran* (Washington, DC, and New York: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Columbia University Press, 2015), 14.

(33) Golkar, *Captive Society*, 13.

(34) Gokar, 193.

(35) Ralph Peters, *Fighting for the Future: Will America Triumph?* (Stackpole Books, 1999), 34-37.

(36) Golkar, *Captive Society*, 179.

(37) Ostovar, *Vanguard*, 60.

(38) Golkar, *Captive Society*, 3-4.

(39) The title which is used for the leader by the academics and the media in the West is the "Supreme Leader of Iran". This use of this title is seriously misleading as the Iranian media use the "Supreme Leader of the (Islamic) Revolution" to refer to the leader. This difference in the meanings is consequential in that title the "Supreme Leader of the (Islamic) Revolution" points to the ideological aspect of the leadership, the revolutionary ideology that can be exported beyond Iran 's border whereas the "Supreme Leader of Iran" does not refer to the Islamic Revolution implying that the leadership has a role confined to Iran with its geographical boundaries.

(40) Ostovar, *Vanguard*, 11-12.

(41) Ostovar, 11.

(42) Iran Data Portal, "Constitution of the Revolutionary Guards."

(43) Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled*, 152-56.

(44) Golkar, *Captive Society*, 64.

(45) Jahangir Arasli. "Obsolete Weapons, Unconventional Tactics, and Martyrdom Zeal: How Iran would Apply its Asymmetric Naval Warfare Doctrine in a Future Conflict," *The Marshall Center Occasional Paper Series*, no. 10 (April 2007): 14.

(46) Arasli, "Obsolete Weapons," 14 (emphasis in the original).

(47) Arasli, 14.

(48) Frederic Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (RAND Corporation, 2009): 51, 101.

(49) Emanuele Ottolenghi et al., *How the Nuclear Deal Enriches Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps* (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2016), 7.

(50) Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, 55.

(51) Wehrey et. al., 71; also Golkar, *Captive Society*, 155.

(52) Ostovar, *Vanguard*, 147.

(53) Takeyh, *Guardians*, 18.

(54) O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 44.

(55) Ostovar, *Vanguard*, 103.

(56) Quoted in Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), *Iran Military Power*, 4 (emphasis added).

(57) O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 85.

(58) O'Hern, 42.

(59) Golkar, *Captive Society*, 189.

(60) O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 98.

(61) Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), *Iran Military Power*, 33.

(62) DIA, *Iran Military Power*, 63.

(63) Eisenstadt, "The Strategic Culture," 17.

(64) Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled*, 169-75, and 179-89.

(65) Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, 60-63.

(66) Wehrey et al., 57-59.; also Ostovar, *Vanguard*, 146-47.

(67) Mclnnis, *The Future of Iran*, 118.

(68) Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled*, 189-191.

(69) Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, 64-66.

(70) *See* Paulo Casaca, and Siegfried O. Wolf, "Waging Jihad by Other Means: Iran's Drug Business and its Role within the International Crime-Terror Nexus." *South Asia Democratic Forum*, no. 5 (Jun 2017): 1-26.

(71) Casaca & Wolf, 9.

(72) Michael Wigginton et al., "Al-Qods Force: Iran's weapon of choice to export terrorism," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 10, no. 2 (November 2015): 157.

(73) Casaca & Wolf, "Waging Jihad by Other Means," 1,20.

(74) Casaca & Wolf, 71.

(75) Ottolenghi et al., "How the Nuclear Deal," 34.

(76) Golkar, *Captive Society*, 64.

(77) DIA, *Iran Military Power*, 8.

(78) O'Hern, *Iran 's Revolutionary Guard*, 194.

(79) Takeyh, *Guardians*, 63.

(80) Takeyh, 63-4 (emphasis added).

(81) Mclnnis, *The Future of Iran*, 9.

(82) O'Hern, *Iran 's Revolutionary Guard*, 74.

(83) Takeyh, *Guardians*, 64 & 154.

(84) Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, 21.

(85) Golkar, *Captive Society*, 79.

(86) Eisenstadt, "The Strategic Culture," 9.

(87) Mclnnis, *The Future of Iran*, 21.

(88) Willis Stanley, "Iranian Strategic Culture and its Persian Origins," in *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Culturally Based Insights into Comparative National Security Policymaking*, eds. Jeannie L. Johnson, Kerry M. Kartchner, and Jeffrey A. Larsen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 139-40.

(89) Wigginton, "Al Qods Force," 155.

(90) O'Hern, *Iran 's Revolutionary Guard*, 43.

(91) Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled*, 232.

(92) For detailed account of the attacks and the role of IRGC and Hezbollah, see O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 51-59.

(93) Wigginton, "Al Qods Force," 163.

(94) See Wigginton, "Al Qods Force."

(95) Nima Gerami, "Iran 's Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Policy," in *Crossing Nuclear Thresholds: Leveraging Sociocultural Insights into Nuclear Decisionmaking*, eds. Jeannie L. Johnson, Kerry M. Kartchner, and Mailyn J. Maines (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 71.

(96) Gerami, "Iran's Strategic Culture."

(97) Stanley, "Iranian Strategic Culture," 153.

(98) Mclnnis, *The Future of Iran*, 14.

(99) DIA, *Iran Military Power*, 30.

(100) DIA, 31 & 32.

(101) DIA, 51.

(102) Mclnnis, *The Future of Iran*, 66; also Arasli, "Obsolete Weapons," 22.

(103) Golkar, *Captive Society*, 128.

(104) O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 186

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