A nalysts commonly depict Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, as the prime mover behind the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy. Khamenei is “the head of state, the commander in chief, and the top ideologue,” and Iran’s elected parliament and presidency “all operate under [his] absolute sovereignty.” So, too, does the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC): the paramilitary organization most responsible for executing the hardline domestic and foreign policies—civil suppression, missile development, and support for proxies—that the Islamic Republic’s critics find most odious.

Such depictions imply that factional politics matter little in forming Iran’s foreign policy; all blocs, moderate or radical, are limited to executing the tasks allocated by the Supreme Leader. Perhaps President Rouhani is “more inclined toward compromise,” favors foreign states to sectarian militias, and laments the financial burden of IRGC adventurism. But so long as Khamenei does not concur, gains by Rouhani and moderates like him will matter little.

This article will challenge this view, arguing that the IRGC both pressures and enables the Supreme Leader to adopt hardline policies through its influence on three aspects of the regime: first, its stability—compelling Khamenei to accommodate IRGC demands; second, its relationship with the United States—preserving an antagonism which necessitates a hard line; and third, its capabilities—which make hardline policies more immediately effective than moderate ones. Before substantiating the above, I outline the IRGC’s role in the Islamic Republic and its distinct interests regarding Iran’s foreign policy, which drive the IRGC’s activism and distaste for Rouhani’s moderation.

THE IRGC’S ROLE IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

The IRGC was established in 1979 as a deliberately ideological force that would protect the Islamic Republic more reliably than the Iranian army, which was historically loyal to the Shah. Article 150 of the regime’s constitution and a 1979 provisional law assign the IRGC three duties: first, to defend the country against foreign attacks and agents; second, to fight counterrevolutionary forces disrupting
internal security, gather intelligence on threats to the regime and execute judicial decisions; and third, to support global “liberation” movements.5

Today, the Guard numbers 150,000 and exists alongside but independent of the army. The exact scope of its duties is unspecified by Article 150 and its presence in the regime has expanded immensely since 1979. As an internal security force, the IRGC is peerless in Iran. While the army shares internal security responsibilities, it is based in garrisons outside populated areas—the IRGC, meanwhile, maintains hierarchically organized bases for every province, city, sub-district, suburb, and rural area.4 The Guard also maintains its own intelligence agency,7 and controls the Basij—a popular reserve force numbering around 300,000 and a cultural organization with chapters everywhere, from universities to villages, to factories and urban communities.8 With these faculties, the Guard is the regime’s primary security force: detecting, deterring and cracking down on dissident and reform-oriented civil-society activists; organizing counter-demonstrations; and censoring and countering subversive media.9

Similarly, while the IRGC and the army share responsibility for defense and foreign policy execution, the IRGC’s activities dwarf the army’s. During the Iraq War, the Guard established the Quds Force, an elite external IRGC branch through which Iran funds, trains and coordinates proxies.10 In Lebanon, Quds commanders helped organize Hezbollah, bringing militant Lebanese Shites together around Khomeneist ideology and violent opposition to Israel’s 1982-1985 occupation of Lebanon. The Quds Force continues to train, coordinate, and fund Hezbollah, creating a staunch Iranian ally with power rivaling that of the Lebanese state.11 In Iraq—most vigorously since the rise of the Islamic State—the Quds Force has granted vast military and financial support to Shiite, Iraqi state, and Kurdish forces; and moved thousands of IRGC and Basij soldiers into the country to coordinate operations, gather intelligence, and sometimes fight alongside Iraqi forces. Most significant has been the Quds Force’s leadership of and support for Iraqi Shia militias and parties, many of which were created by the IRGC in the decades before the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Using these groups to fight the Islamic State (ISIS), terrorize U.S. forces, and compete in Iraq’s formal political system, the Quds Force anchors Iran’s influence in Iraq.12 Finally, in Syria, the Quds Force is spearheading efforts to preserve the Assad regime. Beyond providing military and financial aid, hundreds of IRGC and Basij soldiers have been deployed in Syria. They both fight and help coordinate the efforts of Syria’s fractured security forces, and have trained thousands of pro-Assad militiamen, mostly from minority communities.13

The IRGC’s final role in the Islamic Republic is one neither shared by the army nor outlined in the constitution: it is Iran’s most powerful economic actor, controlling an unrivalled portion of the country’s GDP.14 After the Iran-Iraq War, then-President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani placated the largely demobilized Guard by granting it reconstruction contracts. Subsequently, the IRGC established several industrial and construction companies, gaining significant stakes in Iran’s agriculture, industry,
transportation, construction, and telecommunications sectors. The IRGC also advances its economic interests through bonyads, ostensible charity organizations that operate as large holding companies. The IRGC controls bonyads indirectly, using individual Guardsmen as privately appointed directors of these organizations. Notwithstanding the above, the IRGC only became truly omnipresent in Iran’s economy after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s 2005 election. As president, he awarded them billions of dollars in new, no-bid government contracts, and provoked an international sanctions regime that eliminated the Guard’s foreign competitors. Most notably, the IRGC became the sole contractor of the South Pars oil and gas fields and gained enough capital to establish thousands of small-scale front companies, expanding its economic hegemony to unprecedented levels.

THE IRGC’S INTERESTS AND THE ROUHANI ADMINISTRATION

The IRGC has frequently criticized the Rouhani administration’s foreign policy positions, claiming they open the door for foreign intrusion into the Islamic Republic. Having discussed the IRGC’s activities, we can explore how these criticisms might derive from a conflict between the administration’s aims and IRGC interests. To begin, the IRGC, like any political actor, has an interest in maintaining its role in the regime. Rouhani’s emphasis on diplomacy—stressing “cooperation between states” and economic “development” over Shiite liberation or resistance to U.S. influence in the Middle East—threatens the IRGC’s importance. First, if implemented, it would gradually decrease the Quds Force’s importance for achieving Iranian objectives abroad, a major source of prestige. Iran’s support for Quds-cultivated proxies is a major obstacle to regional cooperation because Iran’s rivals—especially the United States and Saudi Arabia—see these groups as anathema to their interests, given their long-standing sectarianism and anti-Americanism. Furthermore, should Iran mend fences with its adversaries, the geostrategic rationale for proxies—deterrence against Western, Israeli and Saudi aggression—would fade. Therefore, if Rouhani succeeds diplomatically, support for proxies would likely decrease, draining much of the Quds’ importance.

Second, Rouhani’s emphasis on international cooperation and domestic economic development threatens to undermine the IRGC as the regime’s security guarantor. In Iran, the threat of foreign intrusion has long been used to “divert attention away from mundane, ‘bread-and-butter’ issues to questions of identity, existence, and principles,” legitimizing the regime as a bulwark against Western encroachment. If these internal fears were to subside, justifications for the regime’s authoritarianism would weaken and the discursive space for political reform would grow; calling into question the IRGC’s vast security apparatus. Rouhani’s decision to cut IRGC funding by 17 percent in May 2016—a causng an uproar from the hardline media—has only exacerbated this anxiety.

The IRGC’s next set of interests is economic. Rouhani ran for office promising to bring prosperity to Iran by liberalizing the economy and reopening it to international
The Guard, therefore, has strong material interests in opposing Rouhani’s foreign outreach, but its intransigence is probably also at least partly ideational. The IRGC’s perspective is rooted in an image of a world divided between two axes—“one of domination and one of resistance”—and of an Islamic Republic that, besieged during the Iran-Iraq War, again finds itself in combat with the same powers that supported Saddam: Israel, the United States, and Saudi Arabia.28 From this vantage point, the Guard’s security and economic power are crucial for resisting foreign corruption; supporting Hezbollah (and Assad, as an ally and land-bridge for aid to Hezbollah) to deter the United States and Israel;29 maintaining militias to protect Shiism from the Saudi-brewed Islamic State, and preventing another American-sponsored war.30 In prescribing cooperation, then, the Rouhani administration is either naive or traitorous.31 Though Guardsmen of course vary in their ideological fervor, the IRGC recruits and promotes based on such commitment. Ideology, therefore, cannot be dismissed in assessing its actions.22

THE REVOLUTIONARY GUARD, KHAMENEI, AND IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

There is undoubtedly a synergy of interests between Khamenei and the IRGC. This is likely, in part, ideational: Khamenei was a protégé of Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of the 1979 revolution, and helped topple the Shah in the name of Islamist anti-Imperialism.32 Their political interests, moreover, are also well aligned—both hold undemocratic power and require an atmosphere of perpetual foreign threat to maintain some degree of legitimacy. Neither would have pursued a nuclear deal with the West if the sanctions regime placed upon Iran did not pose them an existential threat, and neither is keen on extensive international cooperation.34

Yet this symbiosis does not rule out the possibility that the Revolutionary Guard exerts independent influence over Iranian foreign policy. To address this problem we must ask, first, whether Khamenei could easily pursue hardline policies if the IRGC were weaker; and, second, whether the IRGC’s activities themselves make a moderate foreign policy strategically untenable for Iran. My answer to both is yes, and I will put forth three arguments as to why.
DOMESTIC POWER AND FOREIGN POLICY

First, I will argue that the IRGC’s security apparatus and patron-client network, fueled by its wealth, allow it to counter Iranian moderates while pressuring Khamenei to adopt hardline foreign policy and giving him political cover for doing so. To be sure, the Supreme Leader has the most formal power in Iran. The Constitution allows him to set the general direction of government policy, preclude individuals from running in elections, and appoint senior state officials, including commanders of the IRGC. Furthermore, he appoints the Supreme National Security Council, which decides foreign policy, and he must approve of its decisions. But given the often-overlapping constitutional prerogatives of the Islamic Republic’s institutions—the President vs. the Supreme Leader, the IRGC vs. the army—it is its informal ability to co-opt or mobilize supporters that decides which institution is decisive. Informal networks are usually based on economic patronage, or shared social or political interests. Lacking Khomeini’s charisma, Khamenei is more dependent upon the IRGC’s informal power to maintain his significance.

Khamenei’s first major use of the IRGC in domestic politics came after the 1997 election of Reformist Mohammed Khatami, who aimed, to Khamenei’s chagrin, to liberalize Iran’s political system and foreign policy. Over eight years, Khamenei allowed the Guard to set up a parallel security apparatus to block reforms, bloody uprisings. Khamenei, seeing its benefits, let the Guard’s political encroachment continue, culminating in Ahmadinejad’s 2005 election.

Since then, however, the IRGC’s power has grown to rival Khamenei’s, mostly because of its economic expansion under Ahmadinejad. The Guard can co-opt politically moderate elites into its business network and mobilize support amongst the underclasses by offering, through the Basij, job training, scholarships, rural projects, and other financial incentives. This has helped Khamenei in the short-term, having used the IRGC’s network to counter the 2009 Green Movement. But in the long-term it means Khamenei must take great account of the Guard in deciding policy. This was apparent when the IRGC closed the newly built Imam Khomeini airport, after it was slighted for the contract; when Khamenei disqualified every non-IRGC shareholder of the Telecommunications Company of Iran; and, some speculate, when Khamenei disqualified Rafsanjani, whom the Guard despises, from the 2013 elections.

The IRGC’s political influence also allows it to affect foreign policy directly. First, the reason moderates hold little sway in foreign policy production is because the Guard’s informal power dwarfs their own. If the Guard were weaker, Khamenei would have to accommodate moderate foreign policy positions—curtailing, for example, ballistic missile development—regardless of his opinion of them. Second, supposing that Khamenei would like to moderate parts of Iran’s foreign policy, he would be pressured not to do so because it would weaken him, empowering himself to take full credit for foreign policy achievements.

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moderates and incurring IRGC anger. The policymaking process in Iran is largely opaque, making it difficult to know for certain how often Khamenei is compelled to support policies he opposes. But certain moves—blocking the reduction of IRGC privileges, placing Hossein Abdollahian, a powerful IRGC representative, in Rouhani’s Foreign Ministry—seem without intrinsic benefit to Khamenei and, therefore, likely to be concessions.44

SABOTAGING U.S.-IRAN RELATIONS

The Guard can also influence foreign policy by deliberately provoking the United States, and thus forcing hardline responses. The Quds Force’s activities, as discussed, are intended to assert Iran’s regional authority and, in particular, deter perceived American aggression. And if the United States becomes convinced of Iran’s antagonism, it is more likely to act in ways that vindicate hardline, deterrence-based Iranian policy and render moderation infeasible.

Before Rouhani, Rafsanjani also attempted to moderate Iranian foreign policy. His attempts at courting the United States and the European Union were shattered by several IRGC operations: the 1991 assassination of the Shah’s last Prime Minister, Shahpur Bakhtiar, in Paris, shortly before Rafsanjani’s scheduled visit; the 1992 slaughter of a Kurdish opposition group in Germany; and the 1994 bombing of a Jewish center in Buenos Aires.45 Khatami, too, sought to ease tensions with the West, cooperating extensively in post-9/11 counterterrorism and building support for the American-composed post-Taliban constitution. The United States later discovered that the Guard had, in 2001, given refuge to al-Qaeda members fleeing Afghanistan, let Hezbollah coordinate operations from Tehran, and delivered explosives to the Palestinian Authority, prompting Iran’s inclusion in the “Axis of Evil”45 and the Americans’ development of detailed plans for war. All of this happened despite the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate claiming that Tehran was not developing nuclear weapons.46

When the war plans were leaked, one IRGC general warned: “If the Americans show madness and attack us we will not defend ourselves only within our borders. We have a long and powerful arm, and we can threaten American interests anywhere.”47 The Guard could now argue that Quds-Force deterrence against the United States, especially in Iraq, had become Iran’s only feasible policy.

It seems today that the Guard intends to sabotage Rouhani’s outreach, too. While it is difficult to differentiate between deliberate provocation and standard IRGC operations, some of the Guard’s actions since the nuclear deal have been conspicuously exhibitionist. The Guard broadcasts itself testing ballistic missiles moderates and incurring IRGC anger. The policymaking process in Iran is largely opaque, making it difficult to know for certain how often Khamenei is compelled to support policies he opposes. But certain moves—blocking the reduction of IRGC privileges, placing Hossein Abdollahian, a powerful IRGC representative, in Rouhani’s Foreign Ministry—seem without intrinsic benefit to Khamenei and, therefore, likely to be concessions.44

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with “Israel must be wiped out” written on them—in contravention of both American sensitivities and UN Resolution 1929.48 It has also arrested several Iranian dual nationals, and forced a group of American sailors arrested in Iranian waters to apologize in a humiliating film.49 All of these cases go beyond even standard Quds policy, and seem designed to make improvement in U.S.-Iran relations more difficult. Congressional Republicans have, predictably, obliged.50 And as the new U.S. President threatens to repeal the nuclear deal, citing Iranian indiscretion, the Guard’s hardline policies might, once again, seem Iran’s only rational stance.51

PROXY DEPENDENCE

The final way that the IRGC influences foreign policy is by making Iran dependent on the Guard’s personnel for regional influence, and by circumscribing other foreign-policy options. Let us first acknowledge that the Quds Force has been stunningly effective—particularly in Iraq.52 Baghdad is one of Iran’s few regional allies and an important trading partner.53 Moreover, the prospect of their neighbor being taken over by another Saddam, or used as a springboard for Saudi, Islamic State, or American operations, is unacceptable to most Iranians.54 Shiite militias have given Iran considerable leverage over the Iraqi and U.S. governments. In 2008, for example, then-Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, an Iranian ally, tried to eliminate recalcitrant Shiite militants in Basra—but failed. Suleimani brokered the ceasefire, in which Ba’r Organization militants were incorporated into Iraq’s security forces, entwining IRGC-linked forces with the Iraqi government.55 Furthermore, in 2010 Suleimani extracted, from senior Shiite and Kurdish leaders, promises to support Maliki for Prime Minister, accept Jalal Talabani as President, and make American troops leave Iraq.56 57

While effective, Iran’s use of proxies reaches is not without costs. Many of these groups terrorize the Middle East’s Sunnis indiscriminately, turning them into enemies of Iran. In Iraq, in particular, Iran needs the Iraqi government to reassert its authority in Mosul and to have that authority appear legitimate to the largely Sunni residents of the area.58 This is the problem that Rouhani’s insistence on international, rather than sectarian, cooperation addresses. But the sheer range and depth of Quds Force operations means that moderation, at least in the Middle East’s current conflicts, would cost Iran severely—for two reasons.

First, the anti-Iran sentiment that these proxies generate precludes Iran from developing diplomatic means of expanding its influence, in turn increasing its dependence on the proxies.39 IRGC backing of Assad, for example, has pitted Iran against most regional actors, excluding Russia. But Iran fears that Russia will abandon Assad if its place in the eastern Mediterranean is secured otherwise. It has therefore had to build a vast, decentralized network of militias, modeled on the Basij, so as to assert its interests should Russia defect.40 In Iraq, furthermore, Washington provides Baghdad assistance that Tehran cannot match: in the military sphere alone, U.S. airpower and on-the-ground support have helped Iraq
achieve major gains against ISIS. Given the toxic relationship with the United States, Iran has little reason to believe that the Americans will attend to its interests should Iran abandon these militias.

One response is for Iran to moderate the proxies, pressuring them to curtail mistreatment of Sunni populations or be more cooperative with the Iraqi central government. But to do this, the Iranians cannot leave the Quds Force in command, as it would have little incentive to try to moderate the proxies (given the interests explained above). But if the Quds Force is removed from command of these groups, Iran will almost surely lose its leverage in Iraq. In part, that is because the Quds Force is uniquely knowledgeable and experienced there. The IRGC exerts influence in Iraq by “paying officials, subsidizing newspapers and television stations, and, when necessary, intimidating.” Such operations require a deep understanding of Iraqi politics and society, which the IRGC has gained over years of operating in the country. Furthermore, much of the Quds Force’s success is based on personal relationships, built through decades fighting together—some fought alongside the IRGC during the Iran-Iraq War—and shared ideology.63 Now having their own leaders and facing pressure from Shiite rivals who decry Iran’s “colonization” of Iraq, it is unclear if the militias would still be obedient should more moderate, diplomatic Iranian officials take the helm.64

In other words, the Quds Force has made both proxies and its own personnel so integral to Iranian power that Tehran, in formulating foreign policy, must choose between pursuing short-term interests—by maintaining Quds proxies—or long-term interests—by shifting towards diplomacy. It cannot have both. Given the high stakes of the short term, a hardline, proxy-based policy will likely take priority.

CONCLUSION

The IRGC has an enormous, possibly decisive, influence on Iran’s foreign policy. Its security apparatus and patron-client network minimize the extent to which Khamenei must accommodate moderates in an Iranian system based around informal power. Its provocations maintain the toxicity of the U.S.-Iran relationship, and hence the necessity for hardline policy. Its proxies have given Iran leverage to secure its interests in the Middle East, while eroding its relationship with other powers and making Iran dependent on IRGC commanders. Hardline Iranian foreign policy cannot be explained by mere recourse to the Supreme Leader as God; it is driven by factional dynamics that, while long-standing and entrenched, might change given the right conditions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES


8. Alireza Nader, Shabnam Chubin, and David E. Thaler, Mullalls, Guards, and Bonsyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics (Santa Monica, CA, United States: Rand Corporation, 2010), 34.


flags.html; Ostovar, “From Tehran to Mosul”; Ostovar, Vanguard, 160-178, 205-229; Fikkins, “The Shadow Commander”.


22. Nader et al, Mullahas, 12, 77-78.


29. Ostovar, Vanguard, 201-207.

30. Ostovar, Vanguard, 223; Mamouri, “Shiite Alliance.”


42. Arjomand, After Khomeini, 60-62; Alifonse, “All the Guard’s Men.”
ARTICLE


44. Arjomand, After Khomeini, 133-141.


47. Ostovar, Vanguard, 171.


52. Hezbollah is another markedly effective proxy. It not only a powerful deterrent to Israeli action against Iran and a vigorous representative of Iranian interests in Lebanon, but its soldiers, being Arabic speakers, are also attractive units for Iranian deployment in Iraq and Syria. See Filkins, “The Shadow Commander.”

53. Ostovar, Vanguard, 224; Bajoghi, “The IRGC’s Plan.”


55. Ostovar, Vanguard, 212; Filkins, “Shadow Commanders.”


61. Hollywood is another markedly effective proxy. It not only a powerful deterrent to Israeli action against Iran and a vigorous representative of Iranian interests in Lebanon, but its soldiers, being Arabic speakers, are also attractive units for Iranian deployment in Iraq and Syria. See Filkins, “The Shadow Commander.”

62. Ostovar, Vanguard, 224; Bajoghi, “The IRGC’s Plan.”


64. Ostovar, Vanguard, 212; Filkins, “Shadow Commanders.”


60. Johnson, “Iranian Strategy.”
61. Ostovar, “From Tehran to Mosul.”
64. Ibid, 224; Saadoun, “Iraqis Divided”; Ranj Alaaldin, “Iran’s Weak Grip.”