

THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY ELITE IN THE GOVERNANCE OF IRAN (A Case Study of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)

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Abstract. *This article examines the role of the military elite in the system of state governance of the Islamic Republic of Iran, using the case of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It analyzes the mechanisms through which military-political institutions influence state power, their participation in the decision-making process, and their impact on both domestic and foreign policy. Furthermore, the study explores the stages of institutional development of the IRGC, its activities in the economic and security sectors, and its interactions with the political elite.*

Keywords: *Islamic Republic of Iran, military elite, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), public administration, political system, elite theory, neo-institutionalism, security policy, foreign policy, political stability, geopolitics.*

Introduction. The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran play a crucial role in shaping the country's domestic and foreign policy. They not only ensure the protection of Iran's sovereignty and territorial integrity but also exert significant influence on the decision-making process in security, defense, and foreign policy. Additionally, the Iranian military plays an important role in stabilizing the socio-political situation within the country, participating in the resolution of internal issues and various conflicts.

The Iranian Armed Forces consist of the regular army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is considered the country's military elite. The Corps was established in 1979 by order of Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini. It is one of the structural divisions of Iran's state governance system and carries out various tasks aimed at protecting and promoting Iran's national interests both domestically and abroad. Experts often describe its role and functions within the country as a "state within a state"¹⁴. In other words, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps holds extensive powers due to its responsibility for carrying out these tasks and its overlap with certain functions of other state institutions.

Discussion. The activities of the Corps and its subordinate forces became a mechanism for engaging a significant portion of the population in religious activities under the leadership of Iran's Supreme Leader. Nearly 10,000 young volunteers loyal to Ruhollah Khomeini and the ideals of the Islamic Revolution were recruited into the Corps' units.

¹⁴ Сажин В.И. Корпус Стражей Исламской Революции Ирана – государство в государстве. // Контуры глобальных трансформаций: политика, экономика, право. 2017;10(3). – С. 83-109.

Initially, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps operated as a paramilitary structure with an independent command system separate from the army. However, after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, the country's religious-political elite recognized the Corps' significant political, military, and repressive capabilities and developed strategies to transform it into the main force of Iran's armed structures. As a result, between 1979 and 1989, the IRGC evolved into a powerful regular military organization, becoming an integral part of the country's armed forces alongside the national army. Due to reforms, the Corps' personnel increased fiftyfold, reaching half a million by the early 1990s. Between 1982 and 1988, its combat units tripled in size. Additionally, the IRGC established its own Ground Forces, Air Force, and Navy. Over time, armed groups and special operations and intelligence services were also transferred under its control¹⁵.

In 1982, while the country was in a state of war, Iran's Supreme Leadership focused on modernizing the armed forces. This included implementing military reforms within the army and emphasizing the ideological and spiritual training of military personnel based on Shiite doctrine, including the principles of "Khomeinism." As a result of these efforts, the army's combat capabilities were significantly enhanced, particularly through an increase in the number of Ground Forces personnel. By 1987, the army's total manpower had reached 400,000¹⁶. During the Iran-Iraq War, the organizational structure of the army was improved, the number of divisions and separate brigades was increased, and these measures enhanced the effectiveness of troop management. A joint operational command staff composed of representatives from the national army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps achieved strong results in battles. Administrative units, responsible for the moral and spiritual training of military personnel, were introduced at all levels of the armed forces, with commissars overseeing this aspect of military life.

The development trends of Iran's armed forces in the 1980s and 1990s were carried out based on the concept of "New Shiite Pan-Islamism" defined by Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini:

- Modernizing the army and strengthening the moral foundation of military personnel based on Islamic values;
- Establishing and organizing the activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps;
- Forming the "Basij" resistance forces.

According to the Iranian Constitution, the Supreme Leader is the Commander-in-Chief of the country's Armed Forces. The Supreme Leader holds unrestricted authority over

¹⁵ Бондарь Ю.М. Войска специального назначения вооруженных сил Ирана / *Институт Ближнего Востока*, 2012 // [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=17191> (Дата обращения: 15.01.2025).

¹⁶ Сажин В.И., Бондарь Ю.М. Военная мощь Исламской Республики Иран. М.: Издательство Московского университета, 2014. — С. 179.

military and military-political matters, including declaring war, negotiating peace, and announcing general military mobilization¹⁷. Additionally, the Supreme Leader appoints, dismisses, and accepts the resignation of the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, the commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the army, the commanders of various branches of the armed forces, and the commander of special operations forces.

Over more than 40 years of its existence, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has developed as an irregular armed force with an independent command structure separate from the army. During the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC demonstrated its political, military, and repressive capabilities, securing a leading position within the armed forces. Today, the IRGC has become one of Iran's most powerful military structures, surpassing the regular army in certain aspects. In the post-war years, the two main branches of the armed forces were gradually integrated, leading to the establishment of a unified Ministry of Defense and a General Staff for the Armed Forces. However, both branches have retained a degree of relative autonomy.

Iran's armed forces, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, play a leading role and represent one of the most powerful military structures in the Near and Middle East. They gained significant combat experience during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. The development of the armed forces is driven by Iran's military-political objectives, economic capabilities, as well as national and religious characteristics.

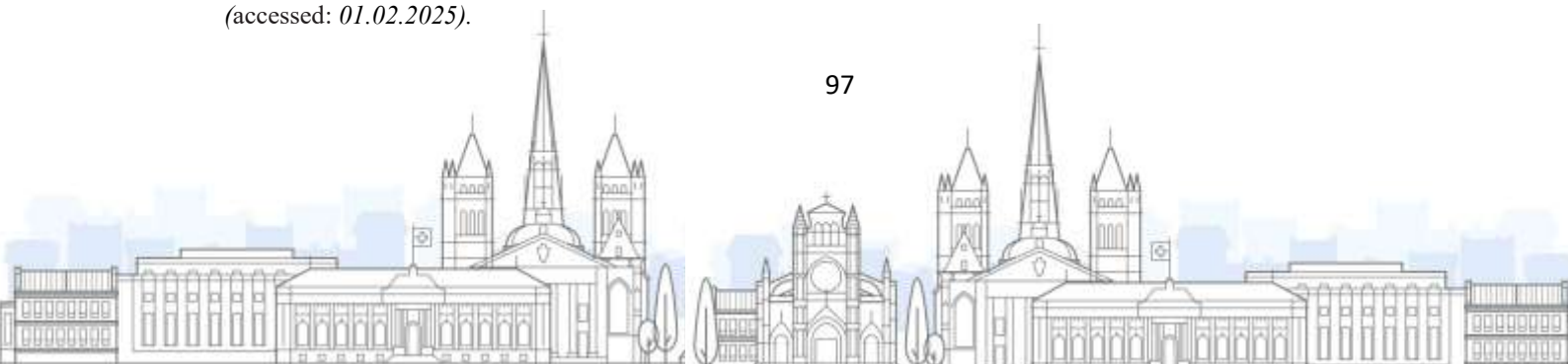
The IRGC operates not only as a military-police force but also as a powerful political and economic entity. Since the 1980s, the Corps has increasingly evolved into a financial-economic cartel. After the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC, as a leading structure within the state system, became actively involved in military-political affairs and emerged as the government's primary repressive force.

The IRGC has a military personnel strength of 125,000. Its structure also includes the Basij armed group, which comprises 10 million members. Basij members are engaged in enforcing compliance with legal and religious norms and suppressing opposition.

The "Al-Quds" special forces, established in 1980, are an important unit of the IRGC. They are responsible for military intelligence, international special operations, and maintaining relations with Shiite organizations abroad.

¹⁷ قانون اساسی جمهوری اسلامی ایران.

(Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 110). — URL : http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/content/iran_constitution (accessed: 01.02.2025).



The 1989 presidential strategy developed by Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani aimed to redirect the influence of the IRGC. He sought to shift the Corps' activities from the military-political sphere to the economic sector. The IRGC was tasked with rebuilding the infrastructure destroyed during the Iran-Iraq War, carrying out major construction projects, particularly in roads, bridges, power plants, and industrial facilities. This decision pursued two main goals: first, to limit the IRGC's political ambitions, and second, to utilize its resources and capabilities for national reconstruction. However, this strategy led to an unexpected outcome – the IRGC grew even stronger through its economic activities, transforming into a financial-industrial conglomerate and gaining significant influence and a dominant position in the state economy.

As a result of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's reforms, the IRGC gained control over the "Foundation of the Oppressed of the Islamic Revolution" (بنیاد مستضعفان انقلاب اسلامی). This foundation managed properties that were transferred to state ownership after the revolution. Through this entity, the IRGC secured a leading position in industries such as textiles, cement, food production, and construction materials. Although the president's strategy aimed to redirect the IRGC from politics to the economy, in practice, the Corps strengthened both its economic and political influence. During periods of sanctions, its economic role expanded even further, as the withdrawal of international companies from Iran resulted in many strategic sectors coming under IRGC control¹⁸.

During the sanctions period of 2011-2016, the IRGC became the "shadow sector" of the Iranian economy. It developed mechanisms to conduct international financial operations, bypass sanctions, and ensure the import of strategic goods. As a result, the Corps' financial influence grew even stronger. IRGC-affiliated construction companies implemented major infrastructure projects in countries such as Venezuela, Iraq, and Syria. Their activities had not only economic but also political significance, allowing Iran to expand its sphere of influence. Thus, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's strategy of redirecting the IRGC towards the economy ultimately strengthened it even further. The IRGC transformed not only into a military-political force but also into a global economic-financial institution.

Conclusions. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has transformed from an armed militia-type military structure into a multifunctional state institution that occupies a central role in Iran's military-political and economic life. Its uniqueness lies in the integration of functions typically associated with regular armed forces, intelligence services, an economic conglomerate, and an ideological influence mechanism. Today, the Islamic Revolutionary

¹⁸ Графов Д. Сажин В.И. КСИР, администрация верховного лидера и исламские благотворительные фонды в экономике Ирана // «Вестник Института востоковедения РАН» №2. 2018. [Электронный ресурс]: [URL:https://zavtra.ru/books/ksir_administraciya_verhovnogo_lidera_i_islamskie_blagotvoritel_nie_fondi_v_ekonomike_irana](https://zavtra.ru/books/ksir_administraciya_verhovnogo_lidera_i_islamskie_blagotvoritel_nie_fondi_v_ekonomike_irana) (Дата обращения: 01.02.2025).

Guard Corps has become a mega-holding that unites military, intelligence, police-repressive, political-ideological, and financial-economic structures under the direct control of the Supreme Leader.

The special status of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps within the state system is defined by its direct subordination to the Supreme Leader and its independence from other institutions. This allows it to operate as a "state within a state" and carry out various functions with minimal external oversight. The influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps extends beyond national borders, advancing Iran's national interests by participating in regional conflicts and supporting Shia groups across the Middle East.

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