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THE IDEOLOGY OF THE IRGC: ROLES, ORIENTATIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN ITS IDEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

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There are multiple questions raised about the identity and ideology of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the factors which have contributed to shaping and creating it, particularly those that have impacted its orientations, decision-making processes, and strategies in the military and social fields. We notice that the structure of the elements making up the IRGC is different from those in regular armies. In addition, its intellectual and ideological underpinnings also differ from regular armies as well as its military spirit which informs the mission of the organization.

Knowing the ideology of the IRGC and the way in which it was formed is of significant importance, especially after the developments which led the United States to place the IRGC on the terror blacklist on April 8, 2019. This decision was followed by US sanctions which targeted the core pillars of the Iranian economy. This triggered a violent response from the IRGC. Some of its leaders threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz. This is in addition to some consequent developments such as downing the US spy drone in the Arabian Gulf, bombing oil tankers in the Arabian Gulf off the coasts of Fujairah and the Gulf of Oman and British forces seizing an Iranian oil tanker which was on its way to Syria off the Spanish coast. In response, Iran seized a British oil tanker and more recently it was accused of orchestrating drone attacks on Aramco's oil facilities in Abqaiq city in mid-September 2019.

The study sheds light on the ideological underpinnings which have contributed to shaping the IRGC and analyses its ideological components and missions, particularly those that have impacted its strategies and reactions. This is important given that most studies available focus on the IRGC from different perspectives such as its role, effectiveness, relationship with the political system and its control of sovereign and economic institutions within the Iranian state. Meanwhile, we claim that these manifestations and relationships involve hidden motives and unknown objectives, which are the main driving force controlling the behavior of the IRGC. These motives and objectives shape its vision for both its internal and external objectives. *The domestic objectives* are related to Iran's governance system and its national identity. *The external objectives* are related to Iran's relations with the world order and alliances it has formed with major world and regional powers. The IRGC has been classified as a terrorist organization, and put on the same footing with violent groups which practice regional and international terrorism and threaten countries and the lives of civilians. This classification of the IRGC, which impacts its tenets and practices, is mainly due to ideological reasons, not political and economic ones.

I- The Foundational Dimension of the IRGC's Ideology and the Doctrine of Its Elements

The establishment of the IRGC was in the context of the radical transformations which Iran witnessed in 1979 by Ayatollah Khomeini and the pursuit of the new Iranian government to strengthen its rule. The ideology of the IRGC, the doctrine of its affiliates and the ideological structure governing its role are in accordance with the principles adopted by Khomeini which formed the ideological basis for the new state in light of Velayat-e Faqih. The dimensions of such principles can be summarized as follows:

1- The Historical Model and Consolidating the Power of Velayat-e Faqih Depending on the IRGC's Strength

If we move to the era of the Safavids, we find that the cleric al-Karki, although he was close to the Shah and was apparently responsible for managing religious affairs in the Persian regions and was granted massive powers as the representative of the Infallible Imam, his position was something closer to political employment. He was dismissed and his relations with the Shah deteriorated. Hence, his role was limited to only what the Shah wanted. He did not succeed in laying the foundations for an absolute or restricted guardianship according to his own vision. The guardianship was restricted based on the Shah's vision. In the end, al-Karki showed no disagreement towards the ruler-jurist model of governance. He aligned himself with the ruling government after he was granted personal clout and influence. But it is noticeable that al-Karki did not possess the power or the ability to execute his religious and political agendas on the ground. The army was exclusively controlled by the Shah. In addition, the Shah resorted to the Qizilbash Brigades which managed to enable the Safavids to take control of the Persian regions.⁽¹⁾ These two examples: al-Karki's loss of power and the ability of the Qizilbash Brigades to dominate

and achieve victories, shaped Khomeini's vision for establishing the Revolutionary Guards.

Centuries after the collapse of the Safavid Empire, Khomeini realized that the jurist should hold absolute power and be the sole person capable of exercising it. He believed that Velayat-e Faqih would be a useless theory if the jurist did not possess the strength necessary for implementing his vision and project. He ended the joint rule between the ruler and jurist, replacing it with a jurist-centered governance system: the jurist ruler, i.e., the jurist leader. Therefore, the most important revolutionary decision taken by Khomeini was to establish the IRGC, with its doctrinal tenets and profound political and ideological principles, which contributed to Velayat-e Faqih spreading at home and recruiting revolutionary supporters overseas. The year 1979 was the year in which political Islam movements awakened, not only in Iran, but also in the region. In the same year, Juhayman al-Otaybi stormed the Grand Mosque of Makkah and political Islam movements rose to prominence in Egypt and Syria.⁽²⁾ Also, the region was thrown into a wave of sectarian and ideological conflicts. The consequences of these conflicts are still dominating the political and religious scene in the region to this day. These movements were on the verge of establishing armed brigades, bypassing national states, like the Revolutionary Guards. Khomeini worked to make the Revolutionary Guards exclusively loyal to him. Only the supreme leader has the power to appoint or dismiss the commanders of the Revolutionary Guards, contributing to solidifying his grip on the apparatuses of the state and impeding any attempt to stage a coup against the government of Velayat-e Faqih by the Iranian Army in case of any internal or external disturbances.

Also, by dividing the top military brass between the Iranian Army and the IRGC, and even dividing power within the IRGC itself, where some commanders were granted excessive powers by the supreme leader, such as Qassem Soleimani (the late Quds Force Commander). This allowed the supreme leader to tighten his grip on the sources of hard power in the country, making it difficult for any of those two military powers: the IRGC and the Iranian Army, to attempt to seize power. They engaged in head-to-head contests, which amounted to, according to some commentators, aversion. Some military commanders attempted to downplay the differences between the IRGC and the Iranian Army.⁽³⁾

Yet, Khomeini realized, based on the experience of military leaders in the Middle East in the mid of the 20th century, the Iranian military must avoid any kind of cooperation with its Western counterparts. Therefore, the relationship between the Iranian army and Western militaries had never been elevated to the level of strategic cooperation with regard to national security in the region. This enabled the Iranian military to remain independent of Western interests when it comes to strategic and military decision-making. Hence, this contributed to keeping it under the auspices of the ideological and sectarian lines of Velayat-e Faqih. The posture of this relationship allowed Khomeini to maintain a grip on Iranian military officers. The supreme leader was keen to control military officers, clinging to all his powers in appointing and dismissing military officers, although they were in total harmony with the state's ideology and identity.

All military formations of the Iranian Army engaged in wars of ideological and sectarian expansion as well as sponsoring sectarian militias, as was the case with the Qizilbash forces in the past. This contributed to fueling the ideological and sectarian nature of militias affiliated with the IRGC. This ensured expansion and outside wars by the IRGC inciting anger, victimization and sectarianism which shape its ideology.

All the foregoing enabled the supreme leader to have the final say over the Revolutionary Guards as Louis XIV of France said, "I am the state." The Shah said, "I am the army."⁽⁴⁾ The supreme leader became the army and the state according to the new reality.

2- The Ideological Selection to Assume the Missions of Velayat-e Faqih

The Iranian government has set harsh requirements for joining the Revolutionary Guards to ensure loyalty to the Islamic government. These criteria ensure that IRGC members come from within the ruling religious elite, not from among its political and religious foes and rivals. This ensures full commitment to the principle of 'heeding and obedience' between the Sheikh and disciple, according to Sufi principles, between senior cleric and junior cleric according to Shiite ideology and between commander and soldier according to military principles. This trinity, adopted by the religious elite in forming the IRGC and setting the criteria for joining it, elevated the status of the IRGC as a military façade for this religious elite. It is not different from the religious elite in any aspect.

To join the IRGC one must meet certain criteria such as: full belief in the principles of the Islamic revolution, belief in Velayat-e Faqih in letter and spirit, and stay away from any political party or organization; "Under Article 48, members of Revolutionary Guards are not allowed to belong to any political organization," and practise good conduct.⁽⁵⁾ These criteria were set after the establishment of revolutionary brigades- originally ideological groups-involved in military activities against the Shah's government. They always branded secularists and those who opposed Velayat-e Faqih as hypocrites. This term has been used against all those who speak up against Velayat-e Faqih or mismanage state affairs. The Iranian political system had attempted to maintain the distinguished aspects of those revolutionary brigades i.e., their ideological and revolutionary nature. These are the two requirements that the internal statute of the Revolutionary Guards has sought to ensure.

There is a certain philosophy behind Khomeini choosing indoctrinated Revolutionary Guard elements. This philosophy is intertwined with the political and religious vision of Khomeini. A national and ideologically neutral army cannot maintain the pillars of the state's identity. Therefore, selecting IRGC members is of no less importance than establishing the IRGC.

According to the ideological vision of the government no destructive elements can join the IRGC. On the contrary, there should be reliable elements who are totally loyal to the jurist supreme leader. It was imperative to shape the awareness and mindset of those affiliated with the Guards. This led the government to establish several colleges for graduating affiliates of the Guards in order to ensure the criteria mentioned above remain embedded in Guard members.

The Revolutionary Guards established several research centers which convey the principles of Islam to the affiliates of the Guards. These centers included the Guards' Islamic Studies Institute. Its missions include: conducting studies in the field of humanities and Islamic sciences, writing down educational texts in the field of morality and ideology, studying history and political sciences and preparing programs.⁽⁶⁾ In all the branches of the Guards, administrations to oversee ideological adherence and political and religious awareness were set up. This is in addition to the supreme leader's representatives in all offshoots of the IRGC and the army as well. These administrations act as the think tanks which outline the strategic plans for forming the religious, sectarian and military doctrine of the Guards' affiliates and the military establishment in line with the supreme leader's vision, the identity of the state and changes in political and religious arenas.

In a meeting between Hojatoleslam Qandahari, the official in charge of the political and ideological department in the Ministry of Defense, and Hojatoleslam Saidi, head of the political doctrine office in the General Command of the Armed Forces, the two sides discussed the political doctrine programs in the Ministry of Defense for 2019. In the meeting, Qandahari submitted a report on the cultural activities conducted by the

political doctrine department in the Ministry of Defense and its efforts in: protecting and strengthening the intellectual and moral aspects of those affiliated with the Iranian Army. Meanwhile, Hojatoleslam Saidi believed that they should work on aspects which promote an Islamic lifestyle.⁽⁷⁾

Despite the existence of these colleges and research centers focusing on the doctrine of the IRGC in order to strengthen the ideology of the IRGC and its affiliates, the religious elite and the jurists supportive of Velayat-e Faqih continually supervise the ideology of the IRGC and partake in determining its parameters with IRGC commanders.

3- The Guards and the Priority of Jihad to Establish a Globalist Government

A man's loyalty shall never be perfect until he joins the IRGC even if for a short time in his life. IRGC members carry the banner of jihad and are fully prepared for martyrdom in the cause of God. According to their beliefs, those who are killed for the sake of God will be rewarded with Firdwas Al-Ala, the highest layer of heaven.

Looking at the principles of the IRGC, we notice the radical transformation in traditional Shiite jurisprudence at the hands of Khomeini and the IRGC. It is well known in Shiite jurisprudence that jihad is suspended until the reappearance of the Infallible Imam. The jihad here is offensive, not defensive. The Infallible Imam only has the right to declare jihad. Even those clerics who deemed offensive jihad lawful, such as Abu al-Qasim Khoei, legalized jihad under the auspices of *Hisbah* (Accountability), not Velayat (Guardianship).⁽⁸⁾

This means they rendered jihad lawful within the system of the civilian state, not under the rule of Velayat-e Faqih. Even with the presence of the Infallible Imam, Shiite understanding inclines to secularism, which maintains a distance between Dawa and the state, or 'Holy Secularism'⁽⁹⁾ as Karen Armstrong describes it.

None of the infallible imams who followed Imam Hussein announced defensive jihad, or even the offensive kind. In the era of the Safavids, who established a sect-dominated state, jurists in the seminary never declared jihad against the foes of the Safavids at the time. Even if this announcement was made by state-appointed jurists, this does not represent the main current and traditions of the Shiite sect.

But the major transformation in Shiite jurisprudence was at the hands of the traditionalist movement represented in Khomeini and the conservatives supportive of Velayat-e Faqih. This movement bypassed established traditions and the religious seminary's legacy. It dealt with political and military realities based on jurisprudence inspired by realities and interests.

The movement did not pay much heed to adapting to Jafari jurisprudence. Most of the legal conclusions and justifications were based on personal judgement rather than jurisprudence and were interest-driven.⁽¹⁰⁾

The Iranian government issued a decision at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war allowing children above 12 to join the war without taking permission from their parents since they were under the auspices of the Guardian Jurist. After issuing this decree, tens of thousands of children were taken to the battlefields wearing red headbands, which referred to martyrdom.⁽¹¹⁾ Imam Khomeini likened them to Imam Hussein as they died to express their love and affection for the Unseen Imam. But they served the interests of the nation as well.⁽¹²⁾ This is close to what the Islamic State did when it recruited children and catapulted them into battles.

This was not a temporary position embraced by Khomeini, or a marginal tenet. He made many statements about jihad and sacrificing blood, which he deemed essential to protect the revolution and establish his state.

The current supreme leader Ali Khamenei, during the honoring of the Qods Force

Commander, Major General Qassem Soleimani, said, "Jihad in the cause of God is a matter which cannot be recompensed via worldly rewards. God has deemed Soleimani successful as he endangered his life on several occasions in the face of the enemy and fought in the cause of God. I wish him a happy life that ends with martyrdom, not now, as Iran needs Soleimani for several years."⁽¹³⁾

Khamenei considered the activities of Soleimani in Iraq and other regions, where civilian blood had been spilled, to be jihad in the cause of God and hoped that Soleimani attained martyrdom at the end of his life after he 'does more' for the cause of Iran. It has become a conviction for the ruling elite in Iran as it is the only means to protect the state and sect. According to one of the commanders of the Qods Force, martyrs maintain the path of Imam Hussein and due to the blessing of their blood, the power of the Iranian government in the region and the world has increased.⁽¹⁴⁾

Here, there is a paradox in understanding and employing jihad. This philosophy encourages spilling the blood of foes and opponents at home and abroad, deeming it as jihad in the cause of God and destroying the hypocrite camp, and considers shedding blood of commanders and members of the IRGC by enemies and foes as martyrdom in the cause of God. There is no means to protect the state and revolution and to establish a globalist government which paves the way for the reappearance of Imam Mahdi except by shedding the blood of enemies and martyrdom.

This philosophy places Iranians in a ceaseless dynamic and a state of revolution, creating wars, foes and clashes at home and beyond borders. Perhaps it is a policy deliberately pursued by the government in order to export its problems overseas. For the mujahideen, these conflicts rid them of their sins and transgressions and gain the pleasure of the Infallible Imam. At the same time, they have found an outlet from their boring and bleak lives.⁽¹⁵⁾

4- The IRGC and the Iranian Jihad Model

There are two points related to what we can call the Iranian jihadi model: the common ideologies between the IRGC and violent organizations such as al-Qaeda and other groups, and the second is the level of actions on the ground.

A- The Ideological Intersection Between the IRGC and Violent Groups

Violent groups and the IRGC share some ideological points springing from their understanding of the jurisprudence of jihad within Islam. Both of these groups seek to establish an Islamic government, and obliterate the borders of the nation-state. They want to begin with obliterating the closer enemy instead of the distant enemy and make themselves guardians and custodians over all Muslims.

Engaging in clashes with the near enemy is one of the tenets prompting the actions of the IRGC. Therefore, IRGC personnel were sent to Iraq, Syria and Yemen. This presence was at the expense of engaging in clashes with the distant enemy, whether this enemy is the United States or Israel which the IRGC has always threatened to clash with, without any actions on the ground. We have also found the road to Jerusalem, in the tenets of the religious elite and IRGC commanders, begins from Aleppo, Sana, Karbala and Baghdad, but it never begins from Jerusalem.

In order to prevent the near enemy of the Iranian people from gaining control of the political system, as was the case with the revolt against the Shah led by Khomeini and his supporters, the Iranian government worked to make the close enemy at home the Iranian opposition, who are branded in the media as hypocrites. Overseas, they are those who reject Iranian domination at home and abroad.

B- Military Cooperation Between Iran and al-Qaeda

Based on the aforesaid philosophy and the shared vision of violent groups and the IRGC towards the nation-state, ideological cooperation and intersection emerged. It seems to be between two divergent poles: the Shiite far right and Sunni far right. But, at the same time, it is a close one. It is divergent at the level of principles, but close at the level of objectives and means.

The truth which cannot be ignored is being disclosed day after day due to documents, papers and credible testimonies that reveal strong cooperation between the IRGC and both Sunni and Shiite violent groups alike. At the time when the IRGC incubated sectarian militias and transboundary movements from Afghan Shiites and others, its training camps also hosted al-Qaeda operatives and several of the organization's top leaders who fled Afghanistan following the US invasion.

The IRGC has strategic aims lurking behind such cooperation. The ideology of the IRGC does not believe in the borders of the nation-state or the modern world order. Moreover, based on the understanding of realities, it is forced to protect the boundaries of the Iranian state in its current status, regardless of the future ambition or the romantic ideological tenets it embraces in expanding an empire mimicking the Sasanian Empire. Therefore, it expanded its vision, presence and control to protect the center in Tehran against any external threats. The IRGC also sought to create a strategic depth for the Iranian state beyond its borders. This depth was not only created via military intervention or through supporting Shiite militias, but also through sectarianizing this strategic depth through indoctrination and creating ideological, not only political, loyalty to Tehran, in order to ensure sustainable loyalty and permanent control over this strategic depth.

The religious elite shrouded the interferences of the IRGC in revolutionary and jihadist narratives. The mission of the IRGC in Syria, Yemen and other parts is a holy and jihadist one which cannot be criticized or have its objectives and hidden motives called into question.

Saeed Qasimi, one of the senior retired IRGC commanders, said that the IRGC supported the jihadist forces in Bosnia and that they aligned themselves with al-Qaeda. According to him, the IRGC headed to Bosnia under the cover of the Red Crescent Society and trained the jihadists there. "We were with al-Qaeda⁽¹⁶⁾ and formed jihadist units with all the jihadists across the world."⁽¹⁷⁾

The comments of Saeed Qasimi were endorsed by Hossein Allah Karam, an IRGC commander who leads Ansar-e Hezbollah.⁽¹⁸⁾ This angered the conservatives who began to step up measures against those who made these remarks⁽¹⁹⁾ as they confirm what the US administration did by placing the IRGC on its terror blacklist, the relationship which the ruling elite in Iran has always denied.

The spokesman for the IRGC denied these remarks and said, "The comments made by Saeed Qasimi, the retired IRGC officer, about using the Red Crescent as a cover for operations overseas lack credibility."⁽²⁰⁾ Also, the Red Crescent Society denied such remarks, saying in a statement that it has lodged a complaint against Qasimi, asserting that the measure of which Qasimi spoke was carried out without any permission or coordination with the society.⁽²¹⁾

In any case, realities suggest that Iran did not stop at cooperating with al-Qaeda as Qasimi stated in his remarks. It also hosted the first-ranking leaders of the group after the US invasion of Afghanistan. Many of them are still living in Iran to this day. Moreover, some of them continued to exercise their jihadist missions and oversee the work of the organization from inside Iran such as Jafar al-Uzbeki,⁽²²⁾ who contributed to supporting the al-Nusra Front organization in Syria, which is affiliated with al-Qaeda although he is inside Iran,⁽²³⁾ along with dozens of others among the organization's leaders.⁽²⁴⁾

II- Ideological Missions and Roles

The IRGC played a prominent role through its watertight ideological structure inside Iran. This can be broken down in the following items:

1- Consolidating the Pillars of Velayat-e Faqih

If the Qizilbash revolutionary forces contributed to establishing the Safavid state and helped it wrest control over the Persian regions⁽²⁵⁾ and if foreign regiments – as the orientalist Stanley Paul terms it, partook in consolidating the pillars of the Shiite Fatimid dynasty in Egypt and helped wipe out the hotspots of rebellion,⁽²⁶⁾ the IRGC is the hallmark of the contemporary Iranian state and made the biggest contribution to solidifying the pillars of the state immediately after the revolution and during the uprisings such as in 1999, 2009, 2017 and 2018.

Following the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979, in which all Iranians participated, despite their political differences, the outbreak of assassinations and wide-ranging clashes among warring parties affected the leaders of all political and religious currents. In the midst of this, we find that Khomeini seriously thought of a strategy to maintain the revolution and control it exclusively via loyalist forces, which were indoctrinated, believed in his ideology, position and leadership, especially after many army commanders showed loyalty to the Shah and others adopted neutral positions.

In the beginning, these forces were comprised of revolutionary groups from Iran's seminaries as well as religious villagers – who protected and secured neighborhoods. These forces became responsible for the security of Khomeini⁽²⁷⁾ and for meeting his needs as he settled in the Alavi school. These forces were formed on the orders of Khomeini himself in April 1979.⁽²⁸⁾ According to an IRGC commander, a serious threat they faced after the 1979 revolution and before the official establishment of the IRGC was the assassination of revolutionary figures; therefore, groups were formed to guard revolutionary figures.⁽²⁹⁾

These revolutionary groups and brigades managed to consolidate the pillars of government and achieve victory in what seemed to be a civil war between the supporters of the pro-Velayat-e Faqih current who supported Khomeini, the rest of the revolutionaries, the IRGC and secular groups⁽³⁰⁾ against the stalwarts of the Shah's regime.⁽³¹⁾ The IRGC launched a campaign against all weapons depots, arrested all those who hid weapons, and authorized state-appointed security forces affiliated with the pro-Velayat-e Faqih current the exclusive right to bear weapons,⁽³²⁾ rendering the pro-Khomeini current victorious.

This explains how the pillars of the new government militarily and politically were consolidated and the role of the IRGC in crushing the new government's foes. No less important than the aforesaid, these revolutionary brigades were involved in solidifying the ideology, culture, principles and tenets of the new government within society. Hundreds of people were executed on charges of committing un-Islamic behavior⁽³³⁾ at the beginning of the revolution. Some of these groups took to the streets to enjoin virtue and forbid vice, which disturbed many women and young men.⁽³⁴⁾

Things evolved after the institutionalization of the IRGC, further boosting its mission in maintaining the Islamic nature and identity of the state before its mission to protect Iran's boundaries. The concept of national security according to the doctrine of the IRGC is not restricted to the country's soil and borders, but is expanded to include the Islamic political system, the revolution and Velayat-e Faqih.

2- Supporting the Philosophical Vision and the Jurisprudential Options of the Government at Home

The IRGC played a significant role in solidifying the philosophical views of the government

in addition to its jurisprudential opinions, which are supposed to be *ijtihad*-based and below the level of certainty at the expense of rival currents or even the reformist current which seeks gradual reform from within the government. IRGC forces have intervened at crucial times when the ruling religious elite was threatened such as during the 1999 protests, the Green Movement protests in 2009, and the 2017 protests. Also, IRGC forces intervened whenever the ideological pillars of the ruling religious elite were under threat.

Some enlightened figures criticized the guardianship of the government over cultural affairs and called on the government not to interfere in shaping knowledge or influencing the collective mind of the Iranian nation. According to Shabasteri, this theory, the guardianship of the government over cultural affairs ends up legitimizing violence and repression. Therefore, the government should not take over shaping culture because assigning the government with shaping culture means undermining democracy and eroding culture.⁽³⁵⁾

This custodianship over cultural affairs ends up supporting violence by the state. Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi believes that using force is necessary to maintain the Islamic government if it is rejected by more than half of the people. According to him, the level of public support is not a criterion for maintaining the government. But the criterion is that some followers of the Infallible Imam or the legitimate *Velayat-e Faqih* offer their support in order to protect the government. Sometimes the level of loyalty is 90 percent, 50 percent or 40 percent. He, the supreme leader, is the one entitled to maintain the Islamic government. As long as there are elements who can protect the Islamic government, he is ordered to maintain it. Therefore, the level of support is of no consideration.⁽³⁶⁾ The government should remain in office by any means, even if it enjoys public support below 10 percent.⁽³⁷⁾

According to advocates of the pro-*Velayat-e Faqih* current, if there is no way to achieve Islamic goals but through violence, hence, violence becomes a necessity.⁽³⁸⁾ Therefore, extrajudicial killings become a must, i.e., killing people without judicial or legal legitimacy,⁽³⁹⁾ in order to protect the Islamic values of the state.⁽⁴⁰⁾ This renders clear how far the IRGC is important for the religious elite in Iran.

This position is no longer confined to the philosophers supportive of the political system, some military commanders have joined the club. According to a statement from the General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, it will not allow any harm to the government resulting from the people voting. The armed forces are ready to sacrifice their souls in defense of the geographical, ideological and political boundaries of Islamic Republic of Iran.⁽⁴¹⁾

In an utterly unambiguous statement, the deputy for political affairs of the IRGC, Yadollah Jawani, said that the role of the IRGC cannot be confined to military missions in light of clear and compounded threats. Those people who want the IRGC to play a military role only prove that they are not fully aware of the mission and message of the IRGC. The revolution in Iran has always faced threats over different periods and some parties inside and outside the country seek to let the government deviate from its core ideology. It is essential that the IRGC identifies such schemes and maintains the government in the face of these threats.⁽⁴²⁾

According to Major General Jafari, a former IRGC commander, the IRGC, according to the Constitution, is the guardian of the Islamic revolution and its accomplishments. General Jafari points to Article 150 of the Iranian Constitution, which expressly states that the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, organized in the early days of the triumph of the Revolution, is to be maintained so that it may continue in its role of guarding the revolution and its achievements.⁽⁴³⁾

The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei points to this mission in his speech before the personnel of the IRGC, saying, "Maintain your preparedness in the face of tremendous events. This was one of the characteristics of the IRGC. The IRGC, since its establishment,

stood up in the frontline and during major incidents. During that phase, and in its early days, the IRGC stood up to different developments in the country, ethnic strife and the flare-ups which had always happened. The IRGC marched forth and proved its readiness and preparedness. Along the blessed life of Imam Khomeini, the imposed war broke out and the IRGC marched forward, repelled aggressors and has proved its preparedness since then. In the events that followed the demise of Imam Khomeini, the social and political events and all the different flare-ups, wherever there is a disturbance, the IRGC proved it is prepared for working to end it."⁽⁴⁴⁾

In another speech by Khamenei, he outlines the top priorities and advises people to remain cautious against the cultural influence of the enemy, which is more dangerous than security and economic threats, because it leads to gradually changing the beliefs of the people.⁽⁴⁵⁾

The IRGC seeks to transfer its model to its outside proxies which it establishes and supervises such as the Popular Mobilization Units in Iraq⁽⁴⁶⁾ and Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁽⁴⁷⁾

3- Reshaping Iranian Identity and Culture

According to Velayat-e Faqih, the guardianship of the Guardian Jurist extends to include the cultural affairs of the country, which annoys a lot of Iranian dissidents and thinkers for what they call 'Guardianship over the cultural affairs' as we mentioned above.

The role of the IRGC has not been confined to maintaining Velayat-e Faqih or the culture shaped since Khomeini and his comrades took power. This role expanded to include a primary role in shaping Iranian culture and decisively interfering in the pre-university educational curricula, hence controlling the collective mind and cumulative memory of the Iranian nation. What is happening today in Iran bears resemblance to what the Safavids did. If the Safavids launched a massive crackdown to force people to convert to Shiism, the IRGC conducts massive crackdowns, both soft and harsh, to force the people to embrace a specific understanding of a certain religious school of thought and a certain theory within that school of thought. It holds that none of the other schools are right or can ensure salvation. To avoid problems rising while generating indoctrinated elements for the army and the IRGC, the latter participates in cultural operations to avert secularization, safeguard Islamic principles, and ensure these principles penetrate all segments of society. Also, IRGC involvement in cultural operations prevents the whitewashing of Islamic concepts related to revolution and jihad. As a result, the IRGC interfered in shaping culture across the different stages of education and shaping the collective mind of the Iranian nation to provide ideology-filled elements which are molded according to the direction of the IRGC leadership. This is in addition to cutting short the time required for shaping the elements who join the ranks of the IRGC. The early indoctrination of the young entrenches the IRGC ideology in their minds even before they join the IRGC.

There are other reasons which prompted the leaders of the IRGC to tighten the circle around those not believing in Velayat-e Faqih and the religious rule in the country. Expanding the circle of those who do not believe in Velayat-e Faqih leads to increasing the cultural gap between the ruling elite and the ruled. No rule shall survive in such circumstances unless there is utter brutality, which exhausts both society and the state. Therefore, the supreme leader advises the IRGC leaders to get closer to society and understand its problems. He tells the IRGC leaders, "Be loving towards the people, embrace them and let your behavior be kind towards them. Avoid boasting, seeking worldly gains and aristocracy because the IRGC, since its establishment, emerged from within the people."⁽⁴⁸⁾

In September 2011, the Iranian supreme leader determined the objectives of the Islamic revolution. Some of the objectives have been achieved such as the Islamic revolution itself

and establishing an Islamic government. There are remaining matters, such as 'establishing a globalist government' with 'mastership of the world' and a global Islamic civilization, both of which depend on guardianship beyond borders. Despite what Iran has achieved in this respect, including expansion on sectarian lines in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and other countries in the region, a remarkable statement was made by the then IRGC chief, Major General Jafari. He admitted in May 2015 that they were unable to achieve progress in these two areas: 'establishing a globalist government' with 'mastership of the world' and a global Islamic civilization. According to him, this delay threatens the foundations of the Islamic revolution itself. In most cases, the IRGC leaders blame moral and cultural spheres in the country, which disturb them the most, which prompted them to call for making radical and substantial changes in the university education curriculum.⁽⁴⁹⁾

4- Achieving the Objectives of Velayat-e Faqih Beyond Borders

The missions of the IRGC are not limited to the Iranian home front. The IRGC members have a religious and sectarian belief that the guardianship of the supreme leader, and – subsequently – their missions, extend to all the Muslim countries, not just Shiites only. Hence, the IRGC had points of convergence with extremist groups in the region, which led to activities inside Islamic countries, not outside them, and attacking the close enemy, not the distant one. The geography of the IRGC missions goes beyond borders, according to the supreme leader.

The supreme leader said in a speech to the IRGC leaders, "We should not lose sight of the comprehensive vision of the resistance's geographical scope, which goes beyond borders. We should not stop at the borders of our region and bound ourselves within four walls and pay no heed to the threats existing beyond borders."⁽⁵⁰⁾ The comprehensive vision which goes beyond borders and rests with the IRGC constitutes the strategic depth of the country. On some occasions, it may become more necessary than the most urgent duties, but some are not heeding to this issue. In this context, some IRGC leaders spoke of the Shiite Crescent and that Aleppo, Syria and Iraq are satellites of the bigger Iranian entity. This is in addition to IRGC leaders' meddling in the affairs of regional countries. This Iranian dream was not a spur of the moment plan. It has been planned for since the early days of the revolution. Hassanein Haykal noticed the formation of this Shiite Crescent extending from the borders of Pakistan to the Mediterranean under the sponsorship of Iran.⁽⁵¹⁾

This is attributed to the Iranian religious belief that Velayat-e Faqih extends beyond the borders of Iran to include all Muslims, not just Iranians, or even Shiites in the East and West. In this respect, Khamenei argues that, "All Muslims should obey the orders and decrees issued by the ruler of Muslims when it comes to the general affairs of Muslims, including the issues of peace and war, and this is applied to the ijtehad-stricken scholars and senior figures."⁽⁵²⁾ We notice that he used the terms "all Muslims," "ruler of Muslims" and "general affairs of Muslims."

Overall, the IRGC is the military and ideological façade of the religious elite ruling Iran, which trusts none but itself. In his speech before the leaders of the IRGC, Khamenei lauded them and assigned them with the power to determine all strategic affairs in foreign and domestic policy and all that is related to religious, political and economic affairs.⁽⁵³⁾

III- The Future of the IRGC and the Chances of Bypassing Ideology

The IRGC is facing genuine challenges, which include the future of the government and its domestic interactions after four decades in power. The challenges also include shifts in outside and domestic arenas, which pressure the government and the state in its entirety. The future of the IRGC can be clarified in the following points:

1- The IRGC's Position on Velayat-e Faqih

Many researchers raise the issue of the pivotal role of the IRGC in naming the next supreme leader.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Some of them go further to state the increased likelihood of the IRGC's takeover of power in the country⁽⁵⁵⁾ or the expansion of its political role to control the apparatuses of the state, excluding the political and religious elite.

Some analysts argue that the IRGC attempts to 'apparently obey' Khamenei during his lifetime. But after his death, the IRGC will not find itself compelled to remain committed to the absolute Guardianship of the Jurist. This opinion holds that the IRGC will emerge as a savior if it can overcome the clerics whose position is likely to weaken in the aftermath of Khamenei's death and bypass the absolute version of Velayat-e Faqih. It seems that those embracing this opinion are well aware of the international and regional hindrances, so they assume that the IRGC will open channels of correspondence and negotiations with the Americans, the West and even Israel to get support from them.

This opinion is totally heedless of the realities of the Iranian domestic front and the psychological status of the IRGC itself. Speaking of the IRGC as a solid entity which pursues the same line of thought and approach is not useful in this context. Also, ignoring the ideology of the IRGC and its jurisprudential and ideological founding principles leads to such assumptions which remain nothing but scenarios which are not backed up by any political or religious indications or military movements resembling alliances or models opposed to Velayat-e Faqih.

The IRGC is not different from the ruling religious elite in Iran. It is the military façade of it. It is a doctrine-saturated façade which believes in Velayat-e Faqih. The IRGC elements are sincere students of senior religious leaders in Iran and *muqalids* [those who follow the Imams] of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Most politicians and officials in Iran have served in the IRGC for a certain period in their life.

Neither Velayat-e Faqih nor the ideology of the ruling government and its religious elite were imposed on the IRGC since it is part of this elite and this ideology. This ideology, and some of the IRGC's offshoots, to a big extent, are shaped within its incubators and under its supervision and patronage. Many leaders of the IRGC and its different branches have sought to acquire religious knowledge from the religious seminary and display unmitigated loyalty to the supreme leader and the project of Velayat-e Faqih. Hence, drawing a separating line between the ideology of the IRGC and that of the state is meaningless. The IRGC is an integral part of the political, religious and economic system in the post-1979 state.

2- Adapting to Social and Political Transformations

The IRGC has earned infamy among the Iranian opposition and the reformists from within the government itself due to its security and political interference in favor of the conservatives and the supreme leader's wing. Also, the IRGC is infamous among the youth and women due to its guardianship over culture and the public religious atmosphere in the country. Furthermore, the IRGC is not a single entity which receives orders from the supreme leader or the minister of defense. It is made up of several brigades controlled by the supreme leader, who appoints the commanders of these brigades. This makes the principle of heeding and obedience displayed by those commanders to the supreme leader of utmost importance. This is in addition to deliberately creating rivalries among commanders, who he is keen to keep balanced against each other.⁽⁵⁶⁾

The current hierarchy of the IRGC was not prepared by accident, but it was deliberate in order not to repeat the army's actions against Mosaddegh, or the failure of the Constitutional Revolution and serious concerns about the military coups which took place in some Arab countries in the mid-20th century, of which the religious and revolutionary elite have been well aware.

Yet, there are well-established centralities and principles within the Iranian political system, which cannot be bypassed, on top of which comes the Constitution, which cannot be bypassed unless there are exceptional circumstances such as revolutions and massive turmoil.

However, it could be said that the Iranian state has adapted to such disturbances. The religious elite is a revolutionary one which emerged from the inferno of a revolution, civil war, and armed operations with its revolutionary partners against the Shah's government. Iran is still presenting itself as a revolutionary country as a way to monopolize the revolution and to contain and prevent any revolution against it. Any revolutionary wave which moves against the revolution will be branded as a counter-revolution and an attempt to circumvent it and turn against its principles.

3- The Ideological Constitutional Commitment in the Post-Khamenei Era

It is likely that there will be a commitment to the Constitution regarding the transition of power after the demise of Khamenei. Even if there are unexpected popular uprisings during Khamenei's era or after his death, the IRGC's hijacking of any such uprisings is not on the cards as it is an organization known to all Iranians, assuming that the IRGC will remain united in the face of these large-scale sudden uprisings at a moment when the government and its elite show fragility. Even if we agree that the IRGC and the military establishment would take over power in the country, it will not be better prepared to reduce tensions than the government of clerics.⁽⁵⁷⁾

But the question remains: How far can the IRGC interfere in the naming of the supreme leader himself? In fact, the intervention of the IRGC would be very limited. It is confined to preventing the country from sliding into civil war and preventing any attempts to hijack the identity of the Iranian state and its ideology. In other words, the IRGC protects the Islamic government. It protects the ideology of the government itself if the political situation deteriorates. However, this protection will continue to be from the outside. The IRGC will not have a say in the choosing of the next supreme leader and will not be able to tip the scale of a favored candidate against the other. It is not imagined that the IRGC chief would be inside the meeting room when the next supreme leader is chosen or that he would have the right to vote on, agree to or oppose any choice of the clerics as this is a fundamental right of the clerics and the essential and central part of Velayat-e Faqih theory – unless there are social disturbances across the country following the absence of the supreme leader or there are cracks in the ranks of the ruling religious elite.

It is unexpected that such cracks in the ranks of the religious elite would appear as they have no genuine competition. There has been a quasi-complete absence of reformist clerics who are influential and charismatic since the death of Ayatollah Montazeri and Ayatollah Sanei's failure to emerge on the scene with the same strength of Montazeri. This is in addition to the absence of Montazeri's senior students who can compete head to head with senior conservative clerics. Competition, to a large extent, will be confined to the conservatives themselves rather than between the conservatives and the reformists. Therefore, the role of the IRGC if this scenario occurs smoothly will be limited – provided no unexpected developments happen from outside these camps.

4- The Future of the Ideological Options

We could say that the IRGC is not a regular force like other armies. Its effectiveness and genuine dynamics lie in the ideology it embraces. This ideology is the main driving force of its policies and orientations at home and abroad. This ideology determines its identity and the level of its sectarianism and that of its personnel.

To sum up, the IRGC is an ideological army. It believes in Imam Mahdi and the global

government which will pave the way for the Mahdi. However, we must pay heed to non-ideological parameters such as individualization within the IRGC's leadership and personnel, which includes competition among its members to please the supreme leader, the bidding for influence by announcing loyalty to the supreme leader and repressing any opposition, financial corruption in the economic file, suspicious alliances in the political files, and supporting certain parties at the expense of others. But the foregoing is a result of – or a symptom of – a central and essential factor, which is ideology. The ideology of the IRGC and the Iranian state is represented in Velayat-e Faqih, the political theory of Khomeini, and the pro-Velayat-e Faqih current does not allow the existence of a state run by institutions which uproot corruption. On the contrary, the state paved the way for the rise of sacred and immune figures such as clerics and jurists who are representatives of the Infallible Imam who try people but cannot themselves be tried.

This ideology enhances the principle of giving precedence to those who are loyal over those who are efficient. It is sufficient for a cleric to announce loyalty to the supreme leader and the revolution while bidding against opponents in order to attain some executive positions or some privileges of the state. Meanwhile, efficient technocrats, reformists and opposition figures are not given any important executive positions in the government. This was the same shortcoming under the Shah against which Khomeini argued when he accused some jurists of being soft on the Shah and called on the people to take off their turbans. Then he himself enhanced the role of the clerics in the post-1979 state to perform the same role of the Muqalids, who had not engaged in political movements during the Shah's reign.

There are no indications that such an ideology will decline in the near future even after the demise or absence of the current supreme leader for several reasons, such as the networks of the ruling community have become complicated and ideology-saturated, with ideology becoming part of their interests and vice versa. They have overlapped in a way that makes it impossible for self-imposed reforms from within. This community is the one that possesses the military, economic, political and seminary power to a large extent. It fully controls the corridors of power as well as sovereign and non-sovereign institutions. This community is not confined to the conservatives, but it includes the reformists and the conservatives alike. The two sides have the same ideology amid differences over mechanisms, implementation and marginal issues. They do not disagree on the major issues, especially with the insistence of the reformists on making change from within the ruling system. The reformists themselves require revisions of thought and politics.

We can say that the Iranian state became saturated with ideology after the 1979 revolution as the difference between the state and its institutions and Velayat-e Faqih as a theory for governance had vanished. Hence, any breakdown of its ideology or a small concession of part of it means breaking down the post-1979 political system. Toby Matheson noticed this when he made the ideology of Shiism the centerpiece for understanding the functioning mechanism of the state and society in Iran.⁽⁵⁸⁾ In more accurate words, the Khomeinist version of the Iranian Shiite school of thought is the main basis for understanding the ruling religious elite.

Conclusion

This ideology, to which the IRGC is committed assuming it will survive and not be wiped out via an outside intervention or internal retreat due to economic pressures and political isolation, will erode and die away in the long run. It may erode and collapse from within. It runs counter to modernity and the modern state. Its failure depends on its success in maintaining and keeping society detached from modernity and political and social secularization.

Meanwhile, the modernity which the Iranian leaders avoid is a *fait accompli* and cannot be bypassed given historical necessity and the time in which we live, marked by leaps in technology and social media. Erosion here does not mean the total collapse of the political system which holds a tight grip on the military power of the IRGC and fails to provide rights and freedoms and run the state efficiently. It is rushing headlong into this abyss very quickly. Ideology has become a job within the corridors of power for making gains and profiteering illegally in light of a complete absence of institutions, enforcement of laws and regulatory bodies.

Perhaps the solution lies in genuine revisions which will be carried out by the religious elite at the level of thoughts and policies. Elevating *Velayat-e Faqih* to the degree of a sectarian necessity was a strategic mistake by this elite. It led to a collision between those not believing in the theory and all the powerful apparatuses of the state such as the IRGC. The emergence of hardcore forces, such as the security forces and the IRGC, as guardians of virtues and values springs from this theory, which is considered a defense of the sect's necessities and the state's ideology.

Only if the religious elite focused its efforts on outlining a carefully selected jurisprudential blueprint which strikes a balance between modernity and sectarian and national heritage, and seeks to establish balanced relations with global and regional countries away from the ideological and sectarian dimension, would it turn into a normal and development-oriented state with safe relations with rival movements at home and balanced relations with regional countries abroad. Clashing with modernity in principle and refusing to harmonize with all its related aspects has resulted in social grassroots movements inside Iran defending modernity and resisting the clout and influence of traditional movements, that have made Iran appear as a radical state on the global arena.

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