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THE IMPACT OF ISRAEL'S OCTOPUS DOCTRINE ON THE IMAGE OF THE IRGC

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Introduction

Iran's discourse to promote the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is based on what it believes to be its security successes in the Middle East; its proxies penetrating Arab countries. However, Israel started to distort the IRGC's image of strength and cohesion in line with its strategy to confront Iran. Former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett code-named this strategy "the Octopus Doctrine."

This paper explores Israel's revised strategy to directly confront Iran's regional movements and nuclear activities that may lead to its development of a nuclear weapon. Israel rejects a nuclear Iran and has openly declared hostility toward Tehran. It also examines the potential impacts of Israel's strategy that identifies the IRGC as the most prominent organization representing the power of the Iranian political system. The strategy defines the standing of the IRGC in Iran's security approach and strategy. In addition, this paper looks at Mossad's countermeasures against IRGC operations, and possible impacts on the image of the IRGC.

IRGC Domestic and Regional Standing in Iran's Security Strategy

On May 5, 1979, Khomeini established the IRGC under his decree after the overthrow of the Pahlavi government.⁽¹⁾ The IRGC consists of various elements, expresses revolutionary enthusiasm and loyalty to Wilayat al-Faqih. The IRGC has approximately 125,000 soldiers who are assigned across the organization's land, air, and naval forces.⁽²⁾ The IRGC is a critical pillar of the Iranian political system and plays an important role in Iran's security and deterrence strategy.

The Standing of the IRGC in Iran's Internal Security Strategy

The IRGC has an important role to play in Iran's security strategy through:

■ **Preserving the revolution and its gains:** According to Article 150 of the Iranian Constitution, "The Islamic Revolution 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."⁽³⁾ The ideas and structure of the IRGC developed over time and it turned into the ideological guardian of the revolutionary Iranian political system.⁽⁴⁾ The IRGC began to pursue political and economic goals along with its security duties. The IRGC has a special standing in the political system as it is a close ally of the supreme leader; it enjoys his permanent support.⁽⁵⁾

The traditional Iranian army does not enjoy the same standing as the IRGC in terms of tasks and budget. In 2017, for example, the government allocated about \$7.5 billion of the national budget to the IRGC, while the army got only \$2.7 billion and nearly \$1 billion has been allocated to the IRGC Resistance Mobilization Force (more commonly known as the Basij Force) since 2007.⁽⁶⁾

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has involved the IRGC in the political arena, violating Khomeini's commandment and writings. Khomeini said, "I want the IRGC to withdraw from the political arena, because this interference will prevent its harmony, and lead eventually to its collapse."⁽⁷⁾ The greatest evidence of the IRGC's political interference was under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was an IRGC member, and he appointed five IRGC members as ministers in his government, in addition to the fact that dozens of parliamentarians were former IRGC members.⁽⁸⁾

Beyond the political arena, the IRGC oversees media outlets, and runs training and educational programs designed to foster loyalty to the government, prepare citizens to defend the homeland, and bolster its credibility in the eyes of other actors. On the economic front, strategic industries and commercial services fall under the control of the IRGC, and it engages in several illegal activities such as smuggling, arms sales, and money laundering.⁽⁹⁾

The IRGC is like a private actor in Iran, with its affiliated banks and financial institutions among the largest listed on the Tehran Stock Exchange.⁽¹⁰⁾ The IRGC also runs charitable organizations that provide social services inside

and outside Iran known as *bonyads*. The latter have played a major role in expanding its support base.⁽¹¹⁾ In addition, they have supported the IRGC in tackling natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods.

From the aforementioned, the role and importance of the IRGC in maintaining Iranian security, covering all its political, economic and social dimensions, becomes clear.

■ **Facing internal opposition and popular protests in times of crisis:** The IRGC plays a major role in suppressing protests and demonstrations in Iran. The protests and crises that Iran has faced in recent years include the protests of 2017 and 2018, as well as the fuel crisis in 2019 and the water crisis in 2021.

In fact, the political system has expanded the role of the IRGC and Basij rather than narrowing it. Moreover, the Basij gained greater control over law enforcement after the creation of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, in which its members were authorized to arrest people for religious offenses.⁽¹²⁾ Recently, the ramifications of the Basij having so much power were evident after its members were involved in mistreating women who protested against the mandatory hijab in Iran.

In short, the IRGC has been operating as a broad social, political, and economic organization with its influence extending to every corner of Iranian political life and society.⁽¹³⁾

The IRGC's Significance in Iran's Regional Security Strategy

Iran exercises its foreign policy strategy through embracing two mindsets: the "state mindset" and the "revolution mindset." While it practices the first in its dealings with other states and governments, it uses the second in its relations with militias and armed groups. Iran therefore represents a case of extreme complexity and contradiction in discourse and action, and duplicity at other times.⁽¹⁴⁾ The government applies the state mentality, while the IRGC embraces the revolution mentality. This duplicity is more apparent under a "reformist" presidency as during the tenure of former President Hassan Rouhani.

The IRGC has significant importance in Iran's regional neighborhood, especially in the Middle East, it has created strategic depth through using the sectarian dimension of Wilayat al-Faqih to influence Shiite communities, in addition to financing, arming, and training agents and proxies. However, it is fair to say that the operations of the IRGC extend beyond Iran's immediate neighborhood.

The following points explain the IRGC's role in implementing Iran's foreign policy strategy:

■ **Exporting the revolution abroad and creating agents in the targeted countries:** Through the ideology ingrained in its leaders and members, the IRGC is considered to be a major supportive organization for "exporting the revolution."

This task is assigned to the IRGC's arm abroad, the Quds Force, which was established in 1990 after the Iran-Iraq War. The Quds Force is responsible for exporting the revolution, establishing partner militias, providing them with material and financial support, as well as training and advising them.⁽¹⁵⁾ These militias include the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi groups like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr Organization and Hezbollah in addition to the Houthi militia in Yemen and the Defenders of Shiite Shrines in Syria. The late General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, had a major role in this external strategy because of his significant influence inside Iran and abroad, and given his close ties with militia leaders, as well as his effective role in persuading Russia to intervene militarily in Syria in 2015. Soleimani stated at that time, "Indications of exporting the revolution have become evident in all regions, from Bahrain and Iraq to Syria, Yemen, and even North Africa."⁽¹⁶⁾

However, Soleimani's assassination on January 3, 2020 in a US strike in Iraq led to confusion in the resistance axis that he led, especially since his successor, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, does not have the same charisma.

■ **Executing military operations and assassinations in other countries:** The IRGC often conducts military maneuvers to demonstrate its power. In September 2008, the IRGC officially assumed responsibility for defending Iranian interests in the Arabian Gulf. While its naval forces have minimal control capabilities, they have a variety of assets at their disposal to threaten shipping lanes in the Gulf and Caspian Sea, and the ability to block the Strait of Hormuz.⁽¹⁷⁾ In recent years, Iranian attacks on ships increased in the Gulf region, in addition to the confiscation of oil tankers and the downing of drones. These events prompted former US President Donald Trump to form a US-led military coalition to protect navigation in the Arabian Gulf and strategic corridors in the region.

Moreover, the IRGC carries out assassinations abroad. On August 10, 2022, Washington announced that it had thwarted a plot by the IRGC to kill former US National Security Adviser John Bolton, while Turkish intelligence foiled another plot to assassinate eight Israelis in Turkey.⁽¹⁸⁾

Recent Mossad Methods to Counter IRGC Operations

Iran wants to be a major regional power in the Middle East with the possibility of joining the nuclear club. Other regional powers, especially Israel, reject this Iranian ambition. Therefore, Israel has engaged in secret battles, known as "shadow wars," since 2004 with Iran, but Israeli attacks have increased recently against Iran's proxies. Israel has also started to infiltrate Iran to carry out assassinations of Iranian figures linked to the country's nuclear program and IRGC commanders; some of them are interrogated by Israeli agents inside Iran as part of Israel's Octopus Doctrine.

The following points address Israel's responses to threats posed by the IRGC.

Unconventional Israeli Methods in the Secret War Against Iran

Israel views a nuclear Iran as an existential threat which has prompted it to launch preventive attacks and a secret war that has become almost public against Iran. Israel also rejects any international agreement on the Iranian nuclear program and considers itself not bound by it, and always reserves the right to act according to its interests and security, especially against the backdrop of Iranian and IRGC hostile discourse against Tel Aviv. Israel prefers the selective military option by targeting areas where Iran's nuclear sites are located. Therefore, in 2018, Israel worked to persuade former US President Donald Trump to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear agreement that the Obama administration signed in 2015.

While the current US administration, led by President Joe Biden, is trying to conclude a new agreement with Iran, Israel rejects this path and works to achieve its own outcomes even if it is concluded, especially putting an end to Iranian missile development, arms transfers, and the financing of terrorist groups by all means possible such as the following:⁽¹⁹⁾

■ **Tracking proxies through third countries:** After the Arab revolutions, Israel found itself surrounded by Iran's allies in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, which are arenas for Tehran's proxies. To counter this, the Israeli General Staff launched a low-intensity military campaign known as "the campaign between wars," with heavy air domination since 2013, to target the pro-Iranian axis in Syria and Iraq. These air raids have intensified since 2018 on the Tehran-Beirut corridor, and Israel has avoided attacking Iran directly. They target convoys carrying weapons for Hezbollah. Israeli Chief of Staff General Gadi Eisenkot stated that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF/TSAHAL) carried out 2,000 raids in 2018 against Iran-affiliated targets. Israel regularly launches air strikes targeting Damascus International Airport to prevent Iranian planes carrying military equipment from landing there, as well as on the air base of Iranian forces in Tartus.

■ **Targeting nuclear sites and threatening Iranian cyber security:** The Iranian-Israeli cyberwar is evident, as Israel has targeted Iran's nuclear sites with repeated cyberattacks. In 2021, former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said at a press conference held with former US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in Jerusalem, "Iran has not and will not give up its ambition of possessing nuclear weapons, and Israel pledges to prevent it from obtaining it."⁽²⁰⁾

Netanyahu made this statement without commenting on the official Iranian accusation against Israel of committing sabotage acts at Iran's Natanz nuclear site on April 11, 2021.

In October 2015, Herzi Halevi, the head of the Israeli Military Intelligence Directorate, responded to a question about whether Israel would go to war in the next decade, "We are already at war with Iran. It is a technological war, our engineers are fighting theirs, and this fighting is expected to grow in the future."⁽²¹⁾ Israeli cyberattacks also targeted several Iranian military and civilian sites, yet again, Israel did not acknowledge the attacks.

Israel possesses advanced cyberwarfare capabilities far superior to Iran's, as Israel is one of the major countries in the cyber space globally. On May 18, 2020, Israel carried out a cyberattack on the Port of Shahid Rajaei, which caused severe damage in retaliation for an Iranian cyberattack attempt.⁽²²⁾

■ **Targeting Iran through the Octopus Doctrine:** This strategy includes practices that Mossad has always carried out against Israel's enemies, especially assassinations. Former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin targeted weapons of mass destruction sites, and authorized the assassination of engineers, scientists and diplomats to prevent the development of a weapons of mass destruction program in the region.⁽²³⁾ But this new strategy is different from previous Mossad operations, because the targeted country is Iran (a country which always boasts about its strength), the intensity of operations against Iranian territory is high, and Israel claims responsibility for the operations. Therefore, the Iranian political system, most prominently the IRGC, have been caught off guard as Israel's policy of engaging in a secret war against Iran's proxies has shifted to their sponsor; the Iranian political system at home.

The term "Octopus Doctrine" was first used by the current Alternate Prime Minister of Israel Naftali Bennett who said in his interview with *The Economist*, "We are applying the Octopus Doctrine. We are no longer targeting the tentacles with Iran's proxies. We have created a new equation by targeting the head."⁽²⁴⁾

The Octopus Doctrine, is based on the following elements:

■ **Targeting military and scientific figures associated with the Iranian nuclear program inside Iran:** In this context, Mossad captured and interrogated IRGC official Yadullah Khedmati inside Iran after interrogating Mansour Rasouli, an officer in the Quds Force. Based on the information obtained, Israel stated that it thwarted Iranian attempts to "assassinate a US general in Germany, a journalist in France, and an Israeli diplomat in Turkey." A statement by the Israeli government's presidency stated, "The supreme leadership in Iran ordered, financed and approved these plans, and it was scheduled to be implemented by the IRGC."⁽²⁵⁾

Israel also carried out a series of assassinations against Iranian scientists inside Iran. Five figures were major targets over 10 years from 2010 to 2020. The most prominent figure was Mohsen Fakhrizadeh who was assassinated by

Mossad in 2020. Fakhrizadeh was a key figure in the military sector of Iranian nuclear activities. According to Richard Goldberg, the director of the National Security Council at the White House, to combat Iranian weapons of mass destruction under former US President Donald Trump, "Mohsen Fakhrizadeh would not have been killed without a massive security breach inside Iran."⁽²⁶⁾

Israel has also carried out more recent assassinations, including the targeting of an engineer at the Parchin military site that develops missiles and drones. A small drone attack targeted an engineer in late May 2022. In addition, Israel assassinated another aviation engineer named Ayoub Entezari by poisoning him in the city of Yazd city on May 31, 2022.⁽²⁷⁾ IRGC officers also did not survive a series of Israeli attacks inside Iran, including Colonel Hassan Sayyad Khodaei, who was found dead in his car in Tehran this year.

In response to these acts, the IRGC carried out retaliatory operations, but they were not comparable to the Israeli operations in Iranian territories despite the success of some of them.

■ **The theft of documents related to Iran's nuclear program:** On January 31, 2018, Mossad stole Iran's nuclear archive from a warehouse in Turqzabad.⁽²⁸⁾ Additionally, Mossad stole confidential documents from the Aerospace Organization near Tehran. Yossi Cohen, former director of Mossad, admitted to the previous operation, and the documents were digitally smuggled to Israel, even before the Mossad agents left the headquarters of the Iranian archive.⁽²⁹⁾ In reference to the Israeli intelligence penetration into Iran's security apparatus and upper-level systems, former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said, "The highest official who took charge of Israeli counterintelligence in the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence was a spy for Israel himself."⁽³⁰⁾

■ **Attacks on Iranian drone facilities:** The targeting of Iran's drone facilities is included in Israel's new strategy in order to confront Iran's growing drone development program. These attacks are part of Israel's preventive defensive strategy, because Iranian drones have targeted Israel several times.⁽³¹⁾

The Potential Ramifications of the IRGC's Deteriorating Image of Strength

Generally speaking, stereotypical images can be both positive and negative. This is applicable to the case of describing the strength of the IRGC; it might be positive or negative depending on the receiver of the stereotypical images. While the IRGC's strength, about which the Iranian political system boasts, represents a positive factor for the revolutionary system, its foreign militias and "hardliner" governments, it represents a negative factor for the Iranian people, who desire change and reject Iran's foreign policies. The Iranian people also condemn the government's violence at home, especially against trade unions, and its rejection of "reformist" parties. Moreover, the army does not favor the growing influence of the IRGC and its interventions in the

Iranian political and economic spheres. In addition, the peoples in the region have been affected by Iranian interference in their countries' internal affairs through the Quds Force and its proxy militias.

The following points highlight the impact of Israel's Octopus Doctrine on the IRGC's stereotypical image:

Impact on the Image of the IRGC Inside Iran

The Octopus Doctrine represents a setback for the IRGC and its image of strength, deterrence and prestige that the Iranian system promotes inside Iran. The negative impact can be noted through the following points:

■ **The Iranian people's declining confidence in the IRGC's intelligence:** One of the organizations responsible for Iranian security is the IRGC Information Protection Organization, which was founded in 2009 and headed by cleric Hossein Taeb since its establishment until the government dismissed him due to Israeli operations inside Iran. Mohammad Kazemi, a military officer, now heads the organization.⁽³²⁾ The organization's image has been shaken because of the large number of Israeli assassinations in Iran. These assassinations caused embarrassment to the Iranian political system, although the IRGC tried to downplay assassinations or thefts that occurred in front of the Iranian people through threatening to retaliate, or by not acknowledging the incidents, or minimizing their seriousness, or even trying to mislead the public by arresting people unrelated to the incidents.

The Israeli operations also created a state of confusion and led to blame against IRGC officials. The head of the Strategic Center of the Iranian Parliament said that Iran had turned into a "sanctuary for spies," and lawmakers demanded the resignation of senior IRGC security and intelligence officials. The Israeli operations also impacted IRGC commanders, as the IRGC Commander Brigadier General Hossein Salami said, "This intelligence war has turned today into the most realistic war," and warned that "the enemy brought all its means into the field" and reminded his comrades that "Many regimes were overthrown by world powers through intelligence operations."⁽³³⁾

Thus, the series of Israeli assassinations shook the standing of the IRGC, and even drove a segment of officers to feel insecure. Currently, the Iranian economy is suffering under the Raisi government, who belongs to the "hardliner" current that agrees with the IRGC's orientations. Iran may witness a new wave of price rises and consequently the return of protests and more clashes with the IRGC-affiliated Basij Force. During the 2018 unrest, protesters rejected Iran's regional policies by chanting slogans such as: "Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, I sacrifice my life for Iran!" and "Leave Syria and take care of our problems!" As well as "Death to Hezbollah!" With regard to Hezbollah, Iranian public opinion considers it the greatest beneficiary of Iranian generosity and accuses the IRGC of promoting it in Lebanon.⁽³⁴⁾

The IRGC's embarrassing situation multiplied when affiliated members and companies were exposed for engaging in corruption and this coincided with Israeli operations in Iran. After the embezzlement case of about 8,000 billion tomans in the Quds Force-affiliated YAS company, the IRGC is currently facing a scandal of corruption in Mobarakeh Steel Company in Isfahan, as an embezzlement estimated at 92,000 billion tomans was disclosed.⁽³⁵⁾

The IRGC's modest performance against the Israeli strategy gave an opportunity for the "reformist" movement to criticize the organization. It can be noted that an Iranian "reformist" politician commented on Israel's capabilities to infiltrate Iran and carry out operations in the country, to the British Financial Times newspaper. He said that it is "as if Israel has set up a large-scale organization in Tehran," adding,

"Israel runs its operations freely in Tehran; it is clearly targeting the image of a secure Iran, to discredit its greatness among the people."⁽³⁶⁾

■ **The rise of the Iranian regular army's (Artesh) stature:** In 2020, the Assistant Coordinator of the Iranian Army Commander Admiral Habibollah Sayyari made statements to the Iranian news agency IRNA showing the differences between the regular army and the IRGC. Sayyari launched an unprecedented attack against the IRGC, without mentioning the name, which revealed a "state of tension within the army" regarding the IRGC's escalation of influence in various political and economic sectors. Sayyari said, "We (the army) do not interfere in politics ... Politicism is harmful for the armed forces ... It is not in the interest of the armed forces to interfere in the economy ... the armed forces should avoid parallel work."⁽³⁷⁾

However, Tehran decided to connect the Iranian army with the IRGC to develop the country's missile and unmanned aircraft programs because of Israel's new strategy. Iranian researcher Masoud Rezaei revealed in an article published by the US National Interest website that there has been an increase in the number of joint platforms between the Artesh and the IRGC. He explained that the Artesh's military parade in April 2022 was an official announcement of its repositioning in Iran's defense strategy.⁽³⁸⁾

Impact on the IRGC's Regional Power Image

The following points explain the impact of the Octopus Doctrine on the IRGC's regional image:

■ **The credibility of Iranian deterrence:** Iranian officials often make statements on the country's deterrence capabilities, but the Israeli Octopus Doctrine toward Iran has revealed major flaws. Masoud Rezaei indicated that this strategy "reduced the credibility of Iranian deterrence."⁽³⁹⁾ The successful Israeli assassinations, bombings, and sabotage operations inside Iran were followed by failed assassination operations by the IRGC. US officials said, "The failure of Iran's plan to assassinate two former US government officials confirms

the IRGC's incompetence."⁽⁴⁰⁾ Moreover, Turkish intelligence succeeded in thwarting the IRGC's plan to assassinate Israelis inside Turkey. On August 30, 2022, the Iranian opposition-affiliated channel, Iran International, reported that the US Navy had thwarted the IRGC's attempt to seize an unmanned ship operated by the US Fifth Fleet in the Gulf. Thus, there was a regional exposure of the IRGC's inefficiencies, while Iran's propaganda machine was keen to polish the image of the IRGC and present it as an "indomitable force."

■ **The "axis of resistance:"** Iran and its proxies are facing popular rejection in many countries in the region, including in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen despite the ongoing killings, assassinations, and repression of opponents and demonstrators. The peoples in the region have publicly declared their rejection of Iran's loyalists, their policies and corruption in addition to Iranian interventions through the Quds Force in the internal affairs of their countries. The resistance axis run by the Quds Force has been suffering since 2018, and the situation worsened after the assassination of Qassem Soleimani in 2020. The massive popular demonstrations in both Iraq and Lebanon in October 2019 forced the axis of resistance parties to disengage from their major projects supporting Iranian ambitions. In Lebanon, demonstrators criticized the rampant corruption and the dire state of the economy. The Lebanese people also directly attacked Hezbollah and held it responsible for the explosion at Beirut port in 2020,⁽⁴¹⁾ which led to the party's loss in the Lebanese parliamentary elections in May 2022. Currently, political differences in Iraq are also increasing with Muqtada al-Sadr's supporters rejecting Iran's interventions through its militias in their country.

Because of the regional circumstances, particularly the failure of Iran-affiliated militias in Arab countries, ongoing Israeli attacks and the stalemate in the nuclear talks, Iran has started to focus on strengthening its military capabilities. This may lead to reducing its funding for its proxies, especially in light of Israel's monitoring of them and efforts to prevent their financing by intensifying attacks, especially inside Syria.

Conclusion

Israel's strategy toward Iran, including sabotage operations, bombings and a series of assassinations inside Iranian territory, has greatly impacted the reputation of the IRGC at home and abroad. The IRGC no longer appears to be a prominent power with super regional activities and capabilities. It has lost much of the power aura that surrounded it, which was magnified by the Iranian political system through the sponsorship of proxies and militias throughout the Arab world. The Octopus Doctrine has impacted Iran's defense strategy and prompted it to make amendments by giving a greater role to the Artesh through increasing the quantity of its military equipment and raising its quality.

Under the Israeli Octopus Doctrine to escalate the shadow war inside Iran, the IRGC's effectiveness, efficiency and reputation is expected to decline further. Thus, the Iranian political system is likely to resort to rehabilitating the Artesh to maintain internal security and cover Iranian intelligence failures. This will have an impact on limiting Iranian military and material support provided abroad, thus undermining the effectiveness and capacity of Iran's arms affiliated to the so-called axis of resistance. Iran will focus on restoring the reputation of its revolutionary forces, which the Iranian political system depends on to guarantee its survival.

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