

The Conflict and Relationship between the Artesh (Islamic Republic of Iran Armed Forces) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and Their Weaknesses

(Translated)

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was established in 1979 by decree of Ayatollah Khomeini, shortly after the Islamists came to power following the revolution, to serve as an instrument for protecting the new political system from its domestic and foreign adversaries. The Iranian Constitution stipulated that “the IRGC shall remain firmly established to fulfill its role in safeguarding the revolution and its gains.” The Constitution also made “Iman and creed the foundation and basis” for equipping the armed forces, emphasizing that the latter are bound not only “by the responsibility of protecting and guarding the borders, but also bear the burdens of their Iman-based mission, which is Jihad.”

The IRGC has evolved from an ideological militia into one of the state’s most powerful institutions; it possesses immense military capabilities, and its networks of influence extend into the economy, intelligence, and regional politics. In this context, David Khalfa, a researcher at the Jean Jaurès Foundation in France, describes the IRGC as an “empire within an empire,” according to Agence France-Presse.

Khalifa adds that the IRGC “practically controls the Iranian economy,” estimating its annual budget at between 6 and 9 billion dollars, representing about 40% of Iran’s official military budget. Journalistic analyses go further, asserting that the IRGC is not merely an armed force but an economy in its own right, led by its most prominent engineering and investment arm, Khatam al-Anbiya Headquarters, alongside networks of semi-governmental companies estimated to be worth half of the Gross Domestic Product. These entities capture more than half of the oil export revenues allocated to security forces in the budget of the year 1404 (Iranian Solar Hijri), corresponding to March 2025 to March 2026, in addition to its connection to conglomerates affiliated with the Supreme Leader’s office, valued at approximately 200 billion dollars.

The primary reason for the establishment of the IRGC was Khomeini’s distrust of Artesh (Islamic Republic of Iran Armed Forces), which had been significantly weakened and purged after the revolution. According to historical reports, the Shah left the country on January 16, 1979, and appointed Shapour Bakhtiar as Prime Minister. Despite Khomeini’s return from exile on February 1, 1979, senior army officers remained loyal to the Shah and maintained their absolute hostility toward the revolution in its early days.

Declassified documents reveal that Khomeini at the height of the revolutionary movement and amid his public rhetoric against Washington secretly communicated with the United States in January 1979, sending a message that the people listened to him while the army obeyed America. Khomeini promised Washington that if it persuaded the army to remain neutral and allow him to assume power, he would preserve regional stability and guarantee American interests.

Kurdish Iranian political activist Aso Qadri, based in Europe, points out that the tension between the IRGC and the army is not a dispute over reform or a desire to change the political structure, but instead a, “fierce competition for power and influence.” Qadri added in a statement to Al-Hurra TV, “Theoretically, Mojtaba Khamenei is considered a prominent figure in the decision-making of the Islamic Republic, but practically, he does not play the same decisive individual role as his father. This has led to the transfer of actual centers of

power to a security and military network in which multiple spheres of influence compete and collaborate simultaneously, as the IRGC seeks to tighten its grip on all state apparatuses.”

The Iranian daily newspaper, Jomhuri-e Eslami, had previously raised a question that was considered taboo for decades, “Is the state still able to bear the cost of two armies – the Artesh and the IRGC?”

The newspaper pointed out that the IRGC's expansion into the economy, politics, diplomacy, and media has turned it into a factional institution that sparks internal controversy and a persistent pretext for international pressure externally. The existence of two armies was never a matter of military sufficiency. Instead, it was an explicit strategy for the regime's survival: a conventional army to defend borders, and a parallel ideological force to monitor that army, control society, and balance power among political factions. Although Khomeini historically acknowledged the idea of eventually merging the two forces, and despite former President Hashemi Rafsanjani's attempt to merge their ministries into a single Ministry of Defense, the actual merger on the ground was aborted and remains stalled.

The IRGC is described as a state within a state, yet deeper analytical readings break it down into three conflicting factions wearing a single uniform:

1. The Ideological-Doctrinal Body: directly subordinate to the Wilayat ul-Faqeeh (Guardianship of the Jurist), which has relatively weakened with domestic political changes.
2. The Professional Military Apparatus: ideologically built on the philosophy of martyrdom and armed confrontation.
3. The Financial Oligarchy: based on networks of interests and a culture of survival and political maneuvering.

This composition creates a structural contradiction; while the military doctrine pushes toward confrontation and fighting to the end, the financial oligarchy leans toward a survival culture that accepts negotiation, adaptation, and concession to protect its network of economic interests.

This duality is clearly reflected in the current scene, where media reports such as Iran International indicate sharp disagreements between the executive governmental wing led by Masoud Pezeshkian, and the influential military and security leaders of the IRGC and their allies, such as Ahmad Vahidi and senior military commanders. The dispute centers on the economic and social repercussions of the ongoing regional escalation with the Jewish entity and the United States.

While the civilian wing under Pezeshkian calls for returning administrative and executive powers to the government to alleviate the severity of the livelihood crises, the security leadership of the IRGC insists on retaining management of strategic and financial files linked to the axis of escalation.

This multiplicity of decision-making and command centers represents a fundamental vulnerability in the structure of the Iranian regime, particularly with the success of Western and Jewish intelligence in carrying out extensive security penetrations, exemplified by the series of successive assassinations of first-rank leaders of the IRGC. This reveals a clear security exposure that reinforces the domestic division between a rigid ideological current, and a pragmatic, realist current seeking compromises that ensure the regime's survival and continuity.

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