

Who Is Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi, the New Deputy Commander of Iran's Qods Force?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

The general's background includes often-buried links to the pre-revolutionary MEK, along with a sobering record of transforming the Basij into a fine-tuned engine of domestic repression and organized vigilantism.

On January 20, Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami, chief commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), appointed Brig. Gen. Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi as deputy chief of the Qods Force following [Brig. Gen. Esmail Qaani's elevation to the top post](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/who-is-esmail-qaani-the-new-chief-commander-of-irans-qods-force>). Who is Hejazi, and what was his background prior to his relatively recent involvement with the Qods Force?

MEK LINKS SCRUBBED?

Hejazi was born in Isfahan in 1956 or 1957 as part of a seemingly well-to-do family. He and his slightly older brother Ahmad, who was killed during the war with Iraq in 1982, appear to have engaged in political activism prior to the 1979 revolution. Both were imprisoned for a time, and Mohammad was allegedly expelled from his university. Remarkably, however, public information about the two brothers' political affiliations during this period is scarce.

Known accounts about Ahmad, who appears to have been the more active of the two, may shed some light on Mohammad's early political thinking and networks. According to Hadi Ghaffari, a radical affiliated with Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) prior to the revolution, Ahmad used money he borrowed from his father Hossein to undergo guerrilla warfare training at Palestine Liberation Organization camps in south Lebanon during the late 1970s. Ghaffari further disclosed that a year or two before the revolution, Ahmad shared a room in Damascus with six other Iranian

revolutionaries, including cell leader and MEK member Mohammad Gharazi, a fellow Isfahani. There, a third MEK member from Isfahan, Mohammad Montazeri, took Ahmad under his wing and funded his travels to Paris (where he visited Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini) and Mecca (where he engaged in propaganda against the shah).

In light of this information, both Hejazi brothers were likely MEK members, or at least sympathizers. This is not so unusual for first-generation members of the IRGC. Yet once the MEK fell out with the Islamic Republic post-revolution and was declared a terrorist organization, Persian-language source material fell silent about such affiliations.

SUPPRESSING KURDS, FIGHTING IRAQ, DODGING PURGES

After the victory of the revolution in February 1979, Hejazi joined the IRGC in Isfahan and may have distanced himself from the increasingly Marxist MEK. He was subsequently deployed to the provinces of Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan to suppress Kurdish separatists, then later put in charge of mobilizing volunteers for front duty in the war against Iraq. In this capacity, he may have grown close to Mohammad Ali Rahmani, who served as chief of the Basij militia organization from 1984 to 1990. Apart from mobilizing volunteers, the Basij's so-called "Sarallah" patrols were used to suppress domestic opposition at the time.

By the mid-1980s, Hejazi was deployed to the front as a deputy commander at Salman Operational Base and, later, Qods Operational Base. This deployment bolstered Hejazi's career and may have saved his life. Had he remained in Isfahan, his friendship with Mohammad Montazeri would likely have embroiled him in the bitter power struggle between the latter's father, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, and the triumvirate of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ahmad Khomeini, and Ali Khamenei. The elder Montazeri was Khomeini's successor-designate at first, but his faction eventually lost the succession battle, and his prominent supporters in the IRGC were executed.

TRANSFORMING THE BASIJ

After the Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988, Hejazi returned to the Basij as chief of staff under Brig. Gen. Ali Reza Afshar. Not much is known about his activities at the time, but in March 1998, Supreme Leader Khamenei appointed him to head the Basij. Under his leadership, which lasted until September 2007, the Basij not only transformed into one of the most important pillars of the regime's internal security, but also played a dominant political role through its affiliate vigilante organizations.

For starters, Hejazi's remodeling of the Basij helped the Supreme Leader counter the 1997 electoral victory of reformist president Mohammad Khatami, which both reflected and augmented the increasing public demand for political liberalization. The regime was neither able nor willing to deliver such change. Instead, Hejazi endorsed and nurtured vigilante groups such as the plainclothes Ansar-e Hezbollah to terrorize regime critics and reformist politicians alike.

His utility became apparent to the regime leadership during the student protests of July 1999, which erupted following the closure of the reformist newspaper *Salam*. Officers from the government's Law Enforcement Force were mainly spectators to this unrest—it was the Basij's Sarallah Headquarters (under Hejazi's personal command) and Ansar-e Hezbollah that descended onto campus to violently suppress the protests, reportedly killing seventy students.

Beyond their anti-riot functions, the Basij and Ansar-e Hezbollah became overtly involved in politics under Hejazi. Complaining about their systematic efforts to undermine his reformist government, Khatami famously declared, "Every nine days a new crisis is manufactured for my cabinet!" When the June 2005 election rolled around, both organizations actively campaigned for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and letters to Khamenei protesting such interference were ignored.

At first, the IRGC did not mind Hejazi's attempts to strengthen the Basij. Maj. Gen. Rahim Safavi, the corps chief commander at the time, was a fellow Isfahani, and his brother Salman was a veteran of Mohammad Montazeri and Ahmad Hejazi's revolutionary cell. In addition to these personal connections, Safavi welcomed the chance to outsource management of regime thugs to the Basij and keep the vigilantes at arm's length.

This all changed in September 2007, when Khamenei appointed Mohammad Ali Jafari to head the IRGC. Previously, the general had founded the IRGC Center for Strategic Research, where he developed theories on how to counter the "velvet revolutions" and "soft regime change" policies allegedly pursued by the United States. Even prior to his appointment, his ideas served as the theoretical foundation for establishing the IRGC's Al-Zahra and Ashura Brigades as anti-riot forces.

Jafari sought to implement his theories further once he became IRGC chief, including a secret plan to merge the Basij into the IRGC. At first, Jafari assured Hejazi and Basij members that their organization would not be absorbed. Khamenei seemed to provide further reassurance when he appointed Hejazi as chief of the IRGC's Joint Staff shortly after elevating Jafari. Yet the Supreme Leader showed his true intentions in May 2008, when he named Hejazi as deputy commander of the IRGC—a model that was replicated at the provincial level, where local Basij commanders were appointed as deputy commanders under local IRGC chiefs. Clearly, the appointments were meant to minimize protests from Basij members, and once the risk of rebellion within their ranks was over, Khamenei and Jafari fully incorporated the Basij within the IRGC's organizational structure.

This restructuring came just in time for the regime, which soon faced the challenge of dealing with millions of protestors angered by Ahmadinejad's fraudulent June 2009 reelection. Hejazi and Jafari claimed that the protests were a manifestation of the American-guided velvet revolution they had warned against all along. In response, Hejazi unleashed the Basij, the Sarallah Headquarters, and all of their plainclothes vigilante allies to fight a prolonged battle against the opposition Green Movement and Iranian society at large.

As the IRGC, Basij, and allied forces gradually contained the protests, Khamenei appointed Hejazi as deputy commander of Armed Forces General Staff in October 2009, responsible for preparedness, logistics, and industrial R&D. At the time, the position appeared to be a dead end in Hejazi's military career—he had tried to make the Basij independent from the IRGC, lost the struggle for power to Jafari, and been promoted into oblivion. Yet his fortunes changed once again in April 2019, when Khamenei named Salami, a native of Isfahan, as IRGC chief, paving Hejazi's path to the top of the Qods Force. Now that memories of his attempt to break the Basij free from the IRGC have apparently faded, the corps leadership is putting his ambitions and expertise to good use in the Qods Force.

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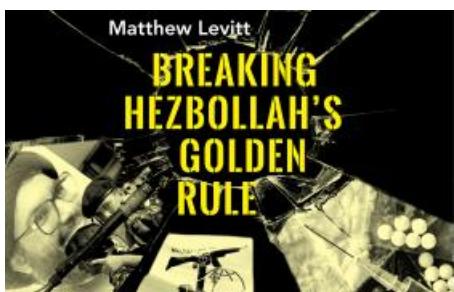
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