

# The Zarif Tape: Revelations on Russia, the Qods Force, and Iran's Election

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Apr 29, 2021

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**The foreign minister had much to say about the IRGC branch's political interference at home and close relations with Moscow, and the regime has done nothing to dispute his account so far.**

**M**uch speculation has emerged about a [recently leaked audio interview \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-J8QuYE5vI\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-J8QuYE5vI) with Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, including the fact that it materialized so soon before the country's June 18 presidential election despite reportedly being conducted months ago. One likely explanation is that the tape was leaked not by Zarif's opponents, but by his fellow officials in President Hassan Rouhani's circle, who have been [looking for an opportunity to negotiate \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/diplomacy-work-iran-must-understand-it-cannot-overplay-its-hand\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/diplomacy-work-iran-must-understand-it-cannot-overplay-its-hand) with the United States even though making final decisions on such matters is beyond their authority. If so, the interview was presumably intended as a warning to the Iranian public.

The subject of this apparent warning was twofold. First, Zarif made clear that the hidden militarism behind the government's civil appearance will become [much stronger after the next election \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-2021-presidential-vote-and-tightening-regime-control\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-2021-presidential-vote-and-tightening-regime-control), perhaps spearheaded by the victory of a candidate affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Second, he revealed the extent of Moscow's role in Iran's regional policy and its close relationship with IRGC commanders and conservative politicians, explicitly accusing the Qods Force—the IRGC's most powerful branch—of being “heavily influenced by Russia and cooperating with it.”

## Claims About the Qods Force

**M**any Iran observers and Western policymakers have long assumed that the country's political system is based on dual sovereignty between two power centers: one consisting of democratic institutions and supported by the private sector and the Westernized urban middle class, the other comprising undemocratic institutions and decisionmakers directed by the Supreme Leader and serving as the regime's narrow-minded, anti-Western ideological pillar. By keeping a close eye on the power struggles and political fissures between these power centers, Western officials often sought to open channels with the former camp in order to find an exit from various regional crises. Thus, in dealing with Iran, one of their considerations was whether a given policy would empower the "moderates" or hurt them.

Yet Zarif is now the highest-ranking official to refute this premise and admit that "there is basically no dual sovereignty in Iran." Rather, the system is based on sole sovereignty under Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is not only the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic but also commander-in-chief of the armed forces, including the IRGC.

Zarif elaborates on this structure as the leaked interview progresses, describing how Qasem Soleimani—the late military commander who brought the Qods Force to unprecedented heights of notoriety and influence before his death last year—often "sacrificed diplomacy for the battlefield rather than vice versa," referring to the force's military activities throughout the region. For instance, Zarif tells the story of how he repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) asked Soleimani to stop using the flagship civilian carrier Iran Air for sending materiel to Syria's Assad regime and other military purposes: "After Iran started to purchase planes from Boeing and Airbus, and Iran Air was delisted from the U.S. terrorism list, Qasem Soleimani increased the airline's trips to Syria. [Former Secretary of State John] Kerry told me that since Iran Air was delisted, its flights to Syria multiplied by six times." Zarif claims that this spike in flights came as a surprise to him. Moreover, when he asked Soleimani why the Qods Force was using Iran Air instead of other methods, Soleimani allegedly replied, "Iran Air is safer."

Given how often the interview mentions Soleimani forcing his will on Rouhani's foreign policy team, Zarif's complaints seem like a warning about the future as much as a tale of the past. According to him, the Qods Force is more than just the IRGC's chief regional wing—it also has the strongest word on foreign policy in general and nuclear policy in particular, and has even flexed its muscles in the political arena at times. In 1999, for example, Soleimani helped compile a letter in which twenty-five of the most powerful IRGC commanders threatened reformist president Muhammad Khatami in the wake of large-scale student protests.

In Zarif's view, such incidents prove that the Qods Force perceives its mandates and missions as extending beyond regional and military affairs. Commanders believe they have legitimacy to intervene in domestic affairs and shape the country's policy orientation as they wish, especially in times of crisis, and this mindset did not change upon Soleimani's demise. Zarif therefore seems to be implying that the Qods Force will play a paramount role in shaping the outcome of the next presidential election, even more so than voters or competing military factions.

## Claims About Russia

**Z**arif also makes multiple blunt references to Russia during the interview. In doing so, he implies that the IRGC is not monolithic, and that its strongest faction is the one capable of establishing the closest relationships with powerful foreign players like Moscow. After all, Iran's regional policies and ambitions set the stage for elite power struggles at home, providing the means and ends for domestic policymaking. Having unparalleled relations with Russia gives the Qods Force the self-confidence it needs to justify its interference in many fields irrelevant to its mission as an expeditionary military branch.

In unequivocally stating that the Qods Force and Moscow have close ties, Zarif also notes that this relationship is unequal. According to him, Vladimir Putin forced Iran to send ground forces to Syria: "Soleimani's 2015 trip to Russia was based on Moscow's will, not ours. The will of Russia was aimed at destroying the Foreign Ministry's

achievement. This is why they invited Soleimani.” This characterization is a sharp contrast to the frequent arguments that Soleimani dragged Putin into the Syria conflict. In Zarif’s words, Putin “entered the war by air force, but dragged Iran’s ground force to war too. We didn’t have ground forces in Syria by then.”

Zarif also insists that Russia opposed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and worked closely with the Qods Force to erode the nuclear deal, despite helping to negotiate its creation. In his view, Russia’s policy focus is to make sure that Iran remains Washington’s number-one challenge in the region, thereby diverting America’s attention from Moscow.

Zarif’s frequent mentions of Russia might also serve as a warning about its potential role in the election and Iranian domestic politics in general. If Moscow has penetrated the heart of decisionmaking in the IRGC’s strongest faction, and if the Qods Force has a substantial stake in transitions of national power, then what is to prevent the Russians from helping the Supreme Leader’s circle bring a military man to power in the upcoming election? More important, what is to prevent them from influencing the process of choosing Khamenei’s eventual successor and establishing an even more deeply militarized regime after him?

## Regime Reaction to the Leak

In an editorial this week, Hossein Shariatmadari, the Supreme Leader’s representative at *Kayhan* newspaper, attempted to downplay Zarif’s interview as a political stunt: “Don’t be fooled, unlike the claim of some government officials, Mr. Zarif’s tape was not confidential, it was deliberately produced for public release. Zarif was not the main party responsible for the tape, he speaks on behalf of [Rouhani’s] government, and he addresses the American administration rather than the Iranian people. All the problems expressed by Rouhani’s government stem from the fact that...Soleimani did not let them run the country’s foreign policy based on norms imposed by the United States.” Interestingly, however, Shariatmadari does not deny any of Zarif’s claims about the Qods Force, the IRGC, or their relations with Russia—instead, he criticizes the foreign minister for opposing the decisions made by these entities and dismisses any discontent about how Iran’s foreign policy operates, calling Zarif’s complaints “illegitimate.”

In reaction to the controversy over his interview, Zarif noted, “I regret how a theoretical, confidential debate about synergizing the military realm and diplomacy has become a subject for internal struggle. In expressing my expert views, I considered any comfort seeking, condescension, and self-censorship as a betrayal.” Ultimately, the incident may prove to be the beginning of the end for Iran’s power struggle between civilian politicians and military forces.

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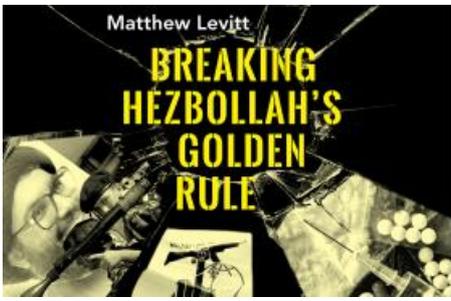
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