

Iran's Military Establishment Doubles Down on "Revolution"

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Brief Analysis

By dismissing the Zarif tape and calling for further securitization of government decisionmaking, the officials truly in charge of Iranian foreign policy are previewing what negotiators and neighbors can expect from Tehran for the foreseeable future.

Amid heightened nuclear diplomacy and [controversial new revelations](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/zarif-tape-revelations-russia-qods-force-and-irans-election>) by Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, the leadership of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has called for a review of the country's regional policies. Yet far from scaling back its current posture, the military establishment—often referred to as “the field”—seems intent on [further securitizing](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rise-bonapartism-iran>) Iranian foreign policy, increasing the budget of the IRGC-Qods Force, and otherwise cementing the Islamic Republic's ingrained military adventurism.

During the April 28 inauguration ceremony for [the new Qods Force deputy commander](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/who-mohammad-reza-fallahzadeh-new-deputy-commander-irans-qods-force>), IRGC chief Gen. Hossein Salami praised the “heroic and beautiful regional role” that the force has played over the past decade, describing how it created an array of potent proxy actors and military fronts around the Middle East in order to prevent enemies from concentrating their power. According to him, this effort was made possible by integrating Iran's ideological and national interests with those of sympathetic actors in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and other arenas. He also rebutted Zarif's assertion that the IRGC had interfered with Iranian diplomacy, instead arguing that the deceased Qods Force commanders Qasem Soleimani and Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi are the ones who empowered the government's diplomatic efforts through their

military achievements abroad.

These messages were soon echoed by other IRGC commanders, including Brig. Gen. Gholamreza Jalali Farahani, the hardline chairman of the National Passive Defense Organization. In a statement released May 1, he accused Zarif of sacrificing revolutionary values and strategies for short-term tactical gains that make the country more vulnerable. Criticizing both Zarif and President Hassan Rouhani for their “false idealism,” he referenced Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s November 2015 speech mandating that all Foreign Ministry initiatives should serve the regime’s strategic principles, not work against them.

With that mandate in mind, Jalali called for a more securitized foreign policy, using “active resistance” on the “battlefield” and deterring the enemy’s use of hard power in order to gain the upper hand in negotiations. This includes boosting and demonstrating the IRGC’s strength, holding more military exercises, and unveiling new weapons and capabilities. In his view, such efforts will make Iran less vulnerable, more unpredictable, and better positioned at the negotiating table, while also complicating enemy calculations.

Interventionism Is the Core of the Regime’s Identity

For more than three decades, the IRGC has been running its own foreign policy apparatus via the Qods Force and the Khamenei-controlled Supreme National Security Council, but the Guards are also heavily embedded in Iran’s traditional diplomatic institutions and activities. Zarif referred to this fact in his leaked interview when he mentioned the regime’s growing “securitization” of the diplomatic corps, but he did not elaborate on why he has failed to resist this intrusion or resign in protest.

According to Articles 3, 152, and 154 of the Iranian constitution, the country’s foreign policy is built on an open-ended commitment to support the struggles of oppressed Muslims worldwide by any means possible—the same principal objective as the IRGC. The military-security establishment has therefore consistently sought to advance the regime’s revolutionary values through foreign interventions, regardless of what the president’s team may negotiate in multinational agreements like the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Unlike Zarif’s complaints that the “field” has either interfered with the work of Iranian diplomats or failed to adequately coordinate with them, the two sectors are more often described as intertwining arms, both focused on safeguarding the revolution and the Islamic system (Nizam) as the main source of Iran’s “national identity.” For example, an April 27 tweet by Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, insisted that the Nizam’s diplomatic and “field” policies take shape only after extensive internal deliberations based on the “definitive principles of the Islamic Revolution.”

The practical significance of this mindset becomes clearer when one understands that many of the figures who lead regime institutions tend to prioritize the revolution and Nizam over traditional national interests, despite theoretical attempts to combine them in a unified identity. Zarif is not exempt from this tendency, despite his occasional advocacy for diplomatic realism during the JCPOA process and other instances. Even when the Islamic Republic was arguably at its weakest—in 1988, when it accepted a UN resolution to end the long, devastating war with Iraq—founding leader Ruhollah Khomeini still told the public that “safeguarding Islam” and exporting the revolution were the country’s top priorities. His successor, Khamenei, has repeatedly emphasized the same goal.

This unflinching commitment to revolutionary interventionism helps explain why Zarif and Rouhani’s approach to U.S. relations still runs into obstacles at home. Zarif’s leaked interview offered a model for “managing conflict” with the United States by setting aside “unsolvable” issues (e.g., Iran’s militant nature and rejection of Israel’s existence) and focusing on areas of potential cooperation, much like Washington has approached relations with China and Taiwan. Yet the non-zero-sum approach that Zarif often advocates in foreign interviews totally ignores the zero-sum game that the regime has openly been playing against the United States and Israel since the 1979 revolution.

The most recent example of this contrast is the JCPOA. Zarif has criticized “the field” for failing to coordinate with his team and thereby undermining the JCPOA. Yet Khamenei used his May 2 speech to fully endorse the Qods Force and declare that the direction and management of foreign policy should be left to the highest level (meaning himself), with Zarif’s team merely giving minor input and implementing the leader’s decisions—including on the nuclear front.

Despite these differing attitudes about how to manage U.S. relations, Zarif and other cabinet members are far more involved in facilitating the field’s interventionism than they let on. For example, in one part of the leaked tape, Zarif expressed surprise that civilian carrier Iran Air had increased its flights to Syria six-fold during the war in order to deliver military personnel and arms, but such a massive increase could not happen without explicit cabinet authorization via the Ministry of Transportation and Civil Aviation Organization. Similarly, his account of the IRGC’s shutdown of a Ukrainian jetliner raises suspicion that he, Rouhani, and other cabinet members knew the cause of the crash early on and concealed the information to cover for the field.

Policy Implications

Regardless of who is foreign minister, Iran’s diplomatic machine will continue taking a back seat to the IRGC’s constitutionally mandated military interventionism as directed by the Supreme Leader, and IRGC commanders will continue advancing their missile projects and foreign policy objectives according to their “**non-conservative** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-reduced-naval-harassment-gulf-temporary-and-tactical>)” military vision. As highlighted by the latest surge in aggressive IRGC harassment of U.S. Navy vessels in the Persian Gulf, any decrease in Iran’s “active deterrence” and “resistance” measures is only temporary and tactical.

Thus, even if the parties make progress in JCPOA negotiations, one can expect increasing IRGC assertiveness on various fronts, especially the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, but also via proxies elsewhere in the region. More missile parades and test launches are likely as well, with the usual objective of gauging the international community’s tolerance. And if Washington and other parties attempt to curb Iran’s missile capabilities and regional adventures via new JCPOA mechanisms, separate deals, or back-channel measures, the IRGC will do whatever it can to stymie these efforts.

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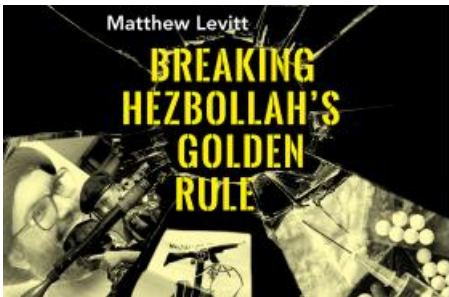
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