

# Inside Iran's Regime (Part 1): Growing Fissures and Poor Morale in the IRGC?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**A recently leaked document—if genuine—may indicate substantial internal skepticism toward the regime's handling of the current domestic crisis, and perhaps even pressure for limited reforms.**

Last week, media outlets [Iran International \(https://www.iranintl.com/en/202303200645\)](https://www.iranintl.com/en/202303200645) and [IranWire \(https://iranwire.com/en/politics/114906-exclusive-irgc-commanders-warn-khamenei-about-implosion/\)](https://iranwire.com/en/politics/114906-exclusive-irgc-commanders-warn-khamenei-about-implosion/) claimed they had been given an eye-opening forty-four-page document detailing frustrations and criticisms among senior tiers of the Islamic Republic's military leadership. According to their reports, the document consists of notes from a January 3 meeting between commanders in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Person-by-person remarks are detailed from forty-five officials: six clerics, three major-generals, twenty-three brigadier-generals, five *sardars* (a generic term for generals of all types), and eight colonels. At the end, a report is given on Khamenei's forty minutes' worth of remarks.

If the document is authentic, it offers a much more negative picture of the regime's stability and the state of the IRGC than is customarily found in commentary inside or outside Iran. This PolicyWatch—the first in a multipart series—focuses on the document's provenance and general policy implications. [Part 2 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-irans-regime-part-2-clerical-crisis\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-irans-regime-part-2-clerical-crisis) focuses on clerical issues brought up in the document. [Part 3 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-irans-regime-part-3-irgc-economic-frustrations\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-irans-regime-part-3-irgc-economic-frustrations) focuses on the IRGC's economic frustrations.

## Fake or Real?

Caution is in order when evaluating the document, since there are compelling arguments both for and against its authenticity. Such a product can be easily fabricated these days, and the background of the two organizations

that published it may raise authenticity questions as well. This is presumably why the document has not been covered much by other media organizations—indeed, no major Western newspaper appears to have picked up the story.

The first short report about the January 3 meeting, posted on Twitter the day after it took place by the Britain-based lawyer and human rights activist Kaveh Moussavi, was widely dismissed on social media and drew little attention from analysts. Then came the Iran International and IranWire stories, along with the full document. Both of these outlets are relentless critics of the Iranian regime—so much so that Tehran reportedly made toning down the first outlet’s coverage **a central demand (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-beijings-iran-saudi-deal-means-and-what-it-doesnt>)** in its recent normalization negotiations with Saudi Arabia (Iran International is based in London but funded by Saudi individuals). Partly because of this reputation, Iran International evidently receives a great many items claiming to be leaks of sensitive information.

IranWire was launched in 2013 by award-winning Iranian-Canadian journalist Maziar Bahari after his release from Evin Prison. It works with many prominent Iranian journalists and has much more material in Persian than English. The outlet describes itself as having “a strong focus on documenting human rights abuses in Iran” while largely avoiding “macro issues such as the nuclear program, which are abundantly covered by bigger media organizations.” It also has an ongoing partnership with the American news site Daily Beast.

Despite the question marks about the document’s provenance, however, the regime appears to have offered no official repudiation of the purported leak—a striking contrast to its normal practice of loudly denouncing unfavorable reports, even ones that are almost certainly accurate. There is also strong reason to believe that the January 3 meeting occurred, since considerable reporting emerged about IRGC commanders gathering with Khamenei during that week’s commemorations of the death of IRGC-Qods Force general Qasem Soleimani.

## **Fissures and Poor Morale in the IRGC?**

**L**ike any organization composed of 600,000 people (including affiliates such as the Basij militia), the IRGC no doubt has complex internal politics in which senior officials hold differences of opinion (even bitterly so) and dissatisfied elements express disrespect for their superiors. These traits seem especially likely in an outfit with as many different components as the IRGC, which has separate, large, and powerful branches dedicated to missions as diverse as developing drones and missiles, supporting foreign terrorists and insurgencies, engaging in air and naval operations, running lucrative businesses, hunting foreign agents inside Iran, and orchestrating mass repression of the citizenry. In that sense, the serious differences voiced in the forty-four-page document should come as no surprise.

Still, it is striking to read how extensive and strongly held these differences appear to be. For instance, some of the speakers purportedly summarized in the document strongly defend Khamenei’s son Mojtaba for his recent interventions in IRGC affairs, while others bluntly criticize him. The criticism comes mostly from officers responsible for the provinces; the support mostly from those based in Tehran.

The document also characterizes military morale as poor. Abdollah Haji Sadeqi, Khamenei’s representative in the IRGC, is quoted as stating, “Based on our reports, it appears that the IRGC forces are not in the same situation as last year, particularly with respect to their morale, as there has been a decline.” Mahmoud Mohammadi Shahroudi, commander of the Basij seminary students, purportedly stated that “around 5,000 members have left” in recent months, noting, “I believe that the recent issues of abandoning religious clothing, as well as conflicting beliefs among students and clerics in the last two months, may have been a surprise.” Mohsen Karimi, commander of the IRGC’s Ruhollah Brigade stationed near Tehran, mentioned that some soldiers had been arrested after holding protests; he also described the situation on the ground around the city of Arak southwest of the capital, noting that

belief in the Islamic Republic's system had declined by half. Hassan Hassanzadeh, head of the IRGC's Mohammad Rasulullah Corps of Greater Tehran, noted that some soldiers had been found to be sympathizing with people on the street during protests rather than carrying out orders. And Ehsan Khorshidi, a deputy IRGC commander in Alborz province, stated, "Recently we have witnessed instances of disruption and aid by armed forces toward civilians." He also described soldiers stealing from a storage depot to distribute goods to civilians.

## No Clear Voice Commanding Universal Respect

One of the most remarkable aspects of the comments reported in the leaked document is how little respect and support they show for the regime and IRGC leadership. Numerous speakers lash out at President Ebrahim Raisi and his team for incompetence and mismanagement, but criticizing elected governments is hardly unusual among regime and military officials. What is surprising is how few of them made explicit statements supporting the revolution's general direction or Khamenei's leadership.

To be sure, some of the quoted officials do stand up for the Supreme Leader. For example, Awaz Shahabifar, military advisor to the Qods Force in Iraq, purportedly complains, "These conversations show that you object to the leadership. We were supposed to stand by the leader's side in difficult times." Yet few others pick up this theme, and there is no sense in the document that the speakers couched their candid criticism in the context of general support for the leadership or the revolution's ideology.

Of course, this could be a product of how the remarks were reported. Perhaps the rapporteur found such statements so unexceptional as to not include them. Yet it could also be the case that no figure in the regime still commands the same level of respect and unquestioning loyalty seen in the past.

## Policy Implications

Even if the leaked document proves to be genuine, it is still just a description of a meeting rather than a complete, verbatim transcript, and may therefore reflect what the rapporteur or leaker wanted to portray as much as what was actually expressed. Again, however, it is quite noteworthy that the regime has not rushed to insist that all IRGC commanders hold the same positive views, or that reports of internal fissures are fake or exaggerated. This suggests that at least some regime figures are willing to live with—or even wanted to publicize—reports that powerful voices inside the system are calling for substantial change.

The main takeaway from the document is that foreign policymakers and analysts should be cautious about any assessments that the Islamic Republic's control over Iranian society is rock-solid, or that IRGC commanders are ready, able, and willing to do whatever it takes to keep the regime in power while it **continues to eschew major concessions to public opinion (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khamenei-attempts-restore-optimism-and-normality-nowruz-speeches>)**. Perhaps the internal voices for reform that gives people more freedom (even if not more voice over government decisions) are stronger than believed. The general rule with authoritarian regimes is that they look like they cannot be challenged—right up until the situation suddenly changes and they look like they cannot persist. The purportedly leaked document suggests that one cannot be completely sure where the Islamic Republic ranks on that scale.

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