

Inside Iran's Revolutionary Guard: A Defector Speaks

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Jul 13, 2010

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Brief Analysis

On July 9, 2010, Reza Kahlili addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Mr. Kahlili is the author of *A Time To Betray: The Astonishing Double Life of a CIA Agent inside the Revolutionary Guards of Iran*, a memoir that describes his career as a spy for the CIA. He was introduced by David B. Crist, a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute on leave from the Defense Department, where he serves as a senior historian for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

David B. Crist

Although Iran was a country of great strategic importance at the time of the Islamic Revolution, the United States had few sources of information about what was occurring there, especially after the U.S. embassy was seized and official relations ended. Accordingly, Iran became an early priority for former CIA director William Casey in the 1980s. Information provided by Iranian insiders such as Reza Kahlili became critically important in this regard.

One anecdote aptly illustrates Kahlili's key role. Former defense secretary Caspar Weinberger's personal papers include an account of a National Security Council debate concerning Iran's plan to seize Basra, Iraq. In his book, Kahlili described how he told his CIA handler to inform the U.S. government about the planned offensive.

Weinberger's papers make clear that Kahlili's report was a key factor in U.S. discussions about whether to tilt toward Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War. Whether that was a smart policy or not is another issue; the point here is that thanks to Kahlili, Washington was well informed in advance about Iran's plans.

Reza Kahlili

After attending college and graduate school in the United States, Kahlili returned to Iran in 1979, hoping that the Islamic Revolution would bring real democracy and freedom to his nation. What he found, however, fell far short of his expectations. Compared to his successors, the shah had provided a high standard of living to the Iranian people and created a peaceful regional environment -- albeit at the price of severe restraints on freedom of speech and political participation.

Kahlili had a childhood friend in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) who recruited him to join the force, where his expertise was in high demand. The process was not complicated and did not involve much vetting other than his friend vouching for him. He did not receive much training; in its early years, the IRGC was not a very systematic organization.

To his surprise, once Kahlili was established in the Guard, he found that the revolution had been taken over by extreme elements. As a result of his position, he became aware of the regime's horrific, systemic human rights violations, such as the rape and execution of teenagers. The Islamic Republic soon evolved into a fascist state, with a radical minority ruling a moderate majority.

Seeing this new direction firsthand and lacking a political option to work for change, Kahlili decided to help his country by spying for the CIA. He returned to the United States under the pretext of caring for a sick aunt and contacted the FBI, which handed him over to the CIA. The CIA personnel he dealt with were very professional and well informed. They asked him to return to Iran as a spy, though they said he was free to remain in the United States if he wished. Kahlili volunteered to help the agency, hoping that the information he provided would help the United States bring about change in his country.

When Kahlili returned to Iran, his IRGC friend asked him if he had joined the CIA, and Kahlili joked about dining at the White House. Had anyone from the IRGC followed up by investigating whether he actually had a sick aunt in America, he might easily have been exposed.

During his CIA recruitment and training, Kahlili became acutely aware that U.S. authorities tended to lack understanding of Iran. From then on, he became committed to helping Washington assemble a more accurate picture of Iran's internal politics. He provided many reports, waking early to prepare them before going to his IRGC job. He was surprised -- and a bit concerned for his safety -- to learn from news accounts of U.S. government statements that his reports were taken very seriously.

According to Kahlili, the IRGC was -- and, he assumes, still is -- composed of three types of people: average individuals, many with little education and moderate religious beliefs; self-serving opportunists; and hardcore radicals who subscribe to an extreme messianic Islamist ideology. Despite these diverse motivations and beliefs, however, most IRGC members shared certain attitudes, including a deep belief in fundamentalist Islam and a conviction that Israel is the enemy of their religion. And the IRGC intelligence unit recruited from the ideological hardcore of loyal regime insiders, whose families were considered among the regime's staunchest supporters.

In assessing the religious views of IRGC members, Kahlili noted that the majority of the guards he had contact with believed that Islam would eventually rule the world. Only a minority were motivated by or felt a deep loyalty to IRGC leaders. And despite their enmity toward Israel, many expressed interest in living in the United States -- that is, they viewed Israel and America in entirely different lights.

As for the benefits of IRGC service, Kahlili noted that in his day, members received low salaries and lived modestly, though he believes that has changed as the Guard has moved into economic activities. During his tenure, he saw the IRGC make use of all institutions under the regime's control -- for instance, Guardsmen were posted abroad as officials of the Foreign Ministry, the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, and many other government- or government-affiliated institutions.

Despite leaving Iran more than twenty years ago, Kahlili still has strong opinions about the country and its relations with the United States. He would like to see the regime overthrown, and argues that the key to doing so is incapacitating the IRGC. Toward that end, he would support an external military attack against the Guard if necessary. He also is convinced that the IRGC continues to pursue nefarious activities around the world, working in one way or another with al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.

Although Kahlili is skeptical about whether his years as a spy helped advance his goal of a free Iran, he continues to give the CIA potentially valuable information from his contacts in the IRGC. He also speaks out for freedom and democracy in Iran, being acutely aware that many who live there are unable to speak out.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Hale Arifagaoglu. ❖

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