

IRGC Navy Leadership Change May Not Signal Imminent Behavior Change

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Despite the appointment of a radical anti-American commander, Iran's naval forces are unlikely to resume frequent provocations without a strategic shift at the very top of the regime.

On August 23, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei promoted the acting commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN), Alireza Tangsiri, to full commander, replacing Ali Fadavi, who was appointed as the wider IRGC's deputy commander for coordination. In his appointment letter, Tangsiri was instructed to build an "agile and growing naval arm on par with [the demands of the] Islamic Republic" by carrying out three main objectives: making use of "religious manpower," improving the navy's "training, skills, intelligence dominance, and interoperability with other IRGC branches," and "expanding its arsenal even further." Yet his promotion does not necessarily signal a shift back to tense naval provocations in Persian Gulf waters, depending on how Khamenei decides to respond to forthcoming oil sanctions.

WHO IS TANGSIRI?

A naval brigade commander during the Iran-Iraq War, Tangsiri headed the IRGCN's 1st Naval District in Bandar Abbas before becoming Fadavi's deputy in 2010. He is known for his staunchly anti-American views and his vocal support for detaining Western naval personnel whose vessels stray into Iranian waters. This has reportedly happened on six different occasions since 2003, including the brief capture of three American and two Kuwaiti sailors in the Shatt al-Arab waterway that year, the twelve-day detention of fifteen British sailors in the northern Gulf in March 2007, and the one-day detention of ten American naval personnel in January 2016 near Farsi Island.

It is not known how directly Tangsiri was involved in those operations, but he has repeatedly used them as examples of Iran's determination to face the "inherent threat and absolute evil nature" of America's Gulf presence, as he declared in July 2016. Two months later, he told an interviewer that Iran could only force the enemy to step back by maintaining a visible presence in the Gulf. More recently, he trumpeted the IRGCN's deterrent power in a January 2018 speech, threatening Western navies with a major blow if they make the slightest mistake.

VIEWS ON CLOSING HORMUZ

On March 4, Tangsiri stated that warships from the United States, Britain, Canada, France, and Norway no longer had the right of innocent passage through shipping channels north of Greater Tunb, an island whose ownership Iran has disputed with the United Arab Emirates since 1971. The inbound section of this narrow traffic separation zone lies entirely within Iranian territorial waters. More than fifty tankers navigate it every day under the watchful eyes of Iranian surveillance assets, including on Greater Tunb. The island is about 12 nautical miles (22.5 kilometers) from Iran's coast, 19 miles (35 km) from the IRGCN's 5th Naval District base near Bandar Lengeh, and 42 miles (79 km) from the UAE.

Yet Tangsiri's strident remarks on this matter are hardly different from his predecessor's. In a January 2016 interview, Fadavi declared that the IRGC reserves the right to deny U.S. Navy vessels innocent passage at any time, arguing that America and other Western nations hold hostile intentions toward the Islamic Republic. Two months later, he claimed that Iran had already been denying innocent passage to naval vessels from the United States, Australia, Britain, Canada, France, and New Zealand. By contrast, Washington maintains that international law does not permit Iran to deny any nation such passage.

It should also be noted that Tangsiri's first media appearance following his appointment highlighted the defensive nature of IRGCN activities in the Gulf, reiterating the navy's dominant control over local shipping traffic. And despite his repeated statements railing against America and declaring that Iran does not want any foreign navies in the Gulf, he made clear in an October 2016 speech that the IRGCN is not looking for trouble, noting that regional security is its top priority and emphasizing Iran's rationality and restraint.

CHANGING COMMANDERS, SIMILAR POLICIES?

Command of the IRGCN has changed hands five times since the Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988. One feature common to all of these commanders is their lack of academic naval training, offset by their accumulation of extensive experience in all aspects of IRGC riverine, marshland, or naval operations.

In December 1990, Khamenei unconventionally promoted a favorite IRGC officer, Ali Shamkhani, to the rank of commodore and appointed him to command the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) and the IRGCN at the same time. In that role, he was tasked with building unity of command to improve coordination between the two services. Despite some resentment in the IRIN, he was credited with laying the foundation for better interoperability by establishing the Khatam al-Anbia General Naval Headquarters (though it split into two separate headquarters for each of the navies in 2013).

When Shamkhani was appointed defense minister in 1997, he passed his command to Ali Akbar Ahmadian. Khamenei instructed the new chief to bring the IRGCN up to par with its defined missions, such as controlling the flow of shipping in and out of the Gulf, creating an effective working relationship with the national navy, and preparing the IRGCN to defend the regime's interests. That same year, Iran began local production of Chinese C-802 antiship cruise missiles, which greatly improved its striking power in the Gulf.

A veteran of Iranian antiship operations during the "Tanker War" portion of the conflict with Iraq, Ahmadian later served as a key architect of the IRGC's asymmetric naval warfare doctrine. During this period (1997-2000), he prepared the IRGCN for war against the United States and masterminded several large-scale naval exercises in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. He returned to the theoretical field in July 2000, taking charge of the IRGC's Center for Strategic Studies in order to implement the navy's lessons throughout the IRGC.

Ahmadian was replaced by Morteza Safaari, whose full ten-year term included separating the IRGCN and IRIN's operational areas and holding the first five installments of the major Great Prophet naval drills. These drills were meant to strengthen deterrence in the Gulf and improve the navy's coordination with other branches of the IRGC.

In May 2010, Safaari gave way to Ali Fadavi, who oversaw significant growth within the navy. In 2012, the IRGCN added a new naval district (the 5th Naziat) tasked specifically with controlling the strategic islands and shipping channels west of the Strait of Hormuz. Four more full-scale Great Prophet exercises were held between 2010 and 2015. After the July 2015 nuclear deal, however, the exercises were downgraded to smaller-scale land-based drills. And while Tehran's rhetoric about closing the strait has heated up at times this year, the IRGC's actual behavior in the Gulf has cooled down noticeably since August 2017, a few months after President Trump warned Iran that its naval maneuvers were akin to "playing with fire."

Fadavi has also acted as a favorite media pundit whenever state-controlled television outlets wanted to do their part in strengthening deterrence against external enemies. In addition, the regime credited him with major accumulation of arms and capabilities in coastal areas, and with handpicking the "best and the brightest" among the young religious Iranians who have volunteered to serve with the IRGC.

CONCLUSION

The latest change of command was seemingly a routine rotation of personnel, albeit two years ahead of the normal ten-year tenure. One reason for the relatively early move could be the desire to name Fadavi as the IRGC's deputy commander for coordination, perhaps anticipating a need to dramatically improve interoperability not only among IRGC branches, but also between the IRGC and the national military (Artesh). During the past year, Fadavi has been more active than other IRGC commanders in making cooperative overtures to his Artesh counterparts.

Absent a game-changing directive from Khamenei, Tangsiri's appointment is not expected to spur many noticeable changes in the IRGCN's currently quiet behavior in the Gulf. If U.S. oil sanctions kick in this November as expected, however, Tehran might put his aggressive stance toward the United States back to use. Furthermore, the IRGCN encourages tactical freelancing—aggressive young commanders can earn fame and promotion by taking risky steps around U.S. vessels, and they are traditionally "not required to seek permission where the Islamic Republic's strategy is determined to be clear," as one high-ranking officer noted in a 2013 interview. Thus, there will continue to be a significant risk of misinterpretation and escalation in Gulf waters.

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