

ROUND TABLE

## Iran Protests and Patterns of State Repression

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Over the past four months, the brutal, extralegal, and violent repression of protestors during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran has taken observers and participants by devastating and sometimes fatal surprise. Although not a drastic departure from past practices, the large scale and seemingly random acts of violence, such as the beating of protestors to death on the streets, the shooting of passersby and nonviolent demonstrators point blank, and the fatal torturing of detained protestors and activists, have marked new levels and scales of violence. In what follows I analyze this brutal repression campaign in relation to the institutional history of the Islamic Republic's armed units, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as the most controversial entity among all. I contend that the IRGC's historic endorsement of firing at will as an accepted practice among its ranks has enabled the decentralized radical instances of violence. I will discuss how, despite the continued reliance on decentralized forces, their firing at will is not unanimously endorsed this time around, due to the different nature of the current movement and the deepening uncertainties and schisms in both the forces on the ground and the ruling elite.

The Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran has entered its sixth month as a leaderless movement. There are no exclusively influential leaders to call for large demonstrations, and no recognizable social movement organizations to structure the course of the protests. Although a few large demonstrations have happened, as on the fortieth day after the death of Mahsa (Zhinā) Amini, for instance, or following Friday prayers in the Sunni-majority province of Sistan and Baluchestan, they have been outliers. Most instances of protest have been smaller in scale, scattered around residential neighborhoods, schools, and other public spaces of large and small cities, without a call far in advance. The spontaneity and geographical breadth of the movement has made it difficult for the Islamic Republic's security forces to be in the right place at the right time. Whenever they have been present, they have arrested, injured, or killed protestors on the spot, rather unsystematically, causing more problems for the state by sparking more outrage.

The more vehement repression course, however, has been to double down on groups that constitute the usual suspects in the eyes of government hard-liners: university students, experienced NGO activists and journalists, and, most extensively, ethnic minorities with established opposition organizations or strong ethnoreligious ties. Although containing protests systematically has proved impossible, the repression apparatus has targeted such groups in the hope of establishing deterrence. The Sharif University raid, during which the top-ranking technical university was put under siege and consequently raided by security forces, happened when students across many more campuses had refused to attend classes, staging a sit-in in the courtyard instead.<sup>1</sup> The September 30 “Bloody Friday” in Zahedan (province capital of Sistan and Baluchestan), where sixty-six people, including children, were

<sup>1</sup> Maziar Motamedi, “Riot Police Raid Iran's Sharif University after Student Protest,” Aljazeera, October 3, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/3/students-injured-after-security-forces-raid-iran-university>.

killed with live ammunition, occurred when citizens had only started to gather in peaceful protest after a Friday prayer. In Kurdish cities in the southwest of Iran, security forces randomly shot live rounds at small groups of people on the streets and at citizens' homes, when there was no organized oppositional force to confront.<sup>2</sup> The harshness and arbitrariness of the prosecutions, including long prison sentences, torture, and the speedy sham trial and execution of a number of protestors, also can be attributed to the government's policy of "deterrence, wherever possible," as the only imaginable way to repress the uprising.

Although unfathomable from a humanitarian and legal point of view, the invoking of such harsh and at least partially random measures by government forces is not inexplicable from the perspective of an authoritarian government struggling for survival. The repressive apparatus, including the IRGC, the Islamic Republic's Law Enforcement Command, and informal plainclothes militias, has been stretched thin. A possible hypothesis is that whenever it gets a chance, it applies extreme brute force and demonstrates extreme rashness in persecution. In addition to pondering the reasons for this pattern of repression, however, we also must ask how it has become possible. Are instances of brutal beating of protestors on the streets, in many cases to death, or random fatal shootings with pellets, shotguns, or live rounds, or sexual assault of protestors on the streets or in jail against detained citizens centrally planned and ordered?<sup>3</sup> Are its perpetrators trained for it, or mentally prepared or justified, to act in this way? And most importantly, what kind of an institution allows for and facilitates this pattern—whether centrally planned and controlled, or resulting from lack of control? The answer lies in the shared institutional history of the IRGC, the Basij (a paramilitary acting under the IRGC), and many other military and nonmilitary state institutions in postrevolutionary Iran. Below I briefly describe the formative history of the IRGC as the main security pillar of the government and a significant actor in the campaign to crush the Woman, Life, Freedom protests.

A few days after the February 11, 1979 revolution, the interim government of Mehdi Bazargan announced the IRGC as a transitional entity to oversee civil order before the police and the regular army could be reestablished. Grassroots militia leaders who had been summoned to participate in this effort, however, were not too keen to submit to the technocratic interim government's control. Clerics of the Revolutionary Council, a governing body acting in parallel with the interim cabinet, were keener to embrace direct "revolutionary" action and offered a more flexible setup to the Guards-to-be.<sup>4</sup> Within the contingencies of postrevolutionary state building, the Guards found the opportunity to consolidate rather unconventional traits and practices and establish them as politically legitimate. These traits have continued underneath the IRGC's bureaucratized structure and persist in affecting its operation, as I will illustrate.

First-generation Revolutionary Guards preferred to rely on informal, interpersonal ties to manage tasks at hand. Without a well-developed hierarchy, a trustworthy bureaucracy, and sufficient professional training, this was perhaps the most efficient and reasonable course of action. It was not just the potential efficacy, however, that attracted the Guards. Rather, managing organizational affairs informally was closer to the idea of spontaneous and grassroots revolutionary behavior. The same reasoning was behind the early IRGC members' penchant for direct action. Taking initiative at personal or small-group levels was rendered necessary in a revolutionary context—there was a lot to be done and a lack of institutional

<sup>2</sup> Campbell MacDiarmid, "'Military Invasion' as Iran Sends Tanks to Crush Kurdish Region Protests," *Telegraph*, October 11, 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/10/11/iran-sends-tanks-kurdish-region-amid-reports-military-operation>.

<sup>3</sup> "Iran: Leaked Documents Reveal Highest Military Body Ordered Troops to Crush Protests at Any Cost," Amnesty International, UK Press Releases, September 30, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/iran-leaked-documents-reveal-highest-military-body-ordered-troops-crush-protests-0>.

<sup>4</sup> Maryam Alemzadeh, "The Informal Roots of the IRGC and the Implications for Iranian Politics Today," *Middle East Brief* 130 (2019).

support to bear the procedural load rapidly. Yet aside from the necessity, direct action had a certain attraction for the young revolutionaries. Waiting for respective authorities to issue an order for the Guards to, for instance, arrest a suspect counterrevolutionary or sabotage an oppositional demonstration did not culminate in the exultation that passionate young volunteers expected; they frequently took matters into their own hands instead.<sup>5</sup>

In the first year after the February 1979 revolution, the IRGC played a significant role in repressing civil unrest around the country. The low-intensity armed conflicts created the opportunity for the Guards to practice their penchant for informality and direct action on the battlefield. These battles did not require the IRGC to rapidly centralize to be effective. The locally organized, minimally trained units already on the ground did the job, minimally but satisfactorily. The flexibility and readiness for direct action proved advantageous, as in the most intensive battles the Guards were confronting irregular units in mountainous terrains of Kurdish provinces. Not only did this unconventional *modus operandi* become ingrained in the Guards' practices, it also gained some political legitimacy, since the relatively successful repression campaign had benefited the central government.<sup>6</sup>

With Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1989, the IRGC's *modus operandi*, and that of the Basij, now formally a branch of the IRGC, was further honed and consolidated. Insisting on preserving the flexible, flat, and minimally professional structure, Guards became experts in high-risk infantry attacks and asymmetrical warfare in the first two years of the war. Although in the following years the IRGC grew much closer to a conventional military, the routines and practices that early revolutionary years had ingrained in the institution continued strong. During the war and beyond, IRGC operations relied on the element of surprise, flexibility of structure, and the members' readiness and authority for direct action. This is how security forces have operated in postwar years as well. Although professional antiriot special units have been created under the Law Enforcement Command, the latter has been increasingly infiltrated by the IRGC, and the IRGC has in fact been in command of repressing protest movements whenever they have become a potential threat.<sup>7</sup>

The formative history of the Islamic Republic's main military and security force has enabled the present-day behavior. Tolerance for firing at will—in both the literal and figurative senses—has been historically ingrained in the Islamic Republic's repression apparatus. It is not an impromptu last resort to allow minimally trained agents to act freely on the ground, but a deeply institutionalized feature. This is not to claim that all recruited forces, whether motivated by ideological loyalty or the promise of financial rewards, are meticulously trained and commissioned to operate in a decentralized fashion. It is rather to point out that the IRGC's operational precedence enables both decision-makers and on-the-ground forces to respectively allow and expect freedom of action. That said, the current repression campaign demonstrates discontinuities from the past as well, just as the present uprising is different from previous ones in Iran. Having considered the institutional past, recognizing differences helps us think about the future of the security forces' behavior.

There are two aspects of security force behavior that make the current events different from previous instances of repression. First is an element of strategic confusion, caused by the spontaneous nature of the movement. As I briefly discussed at the beginning of this piece, what security forces have been facing in the past months is an amorphous, ambiguous, shape-shifting, and spontaneous resistance movement. In the past, different armed branches have had an understanding of the type of entity they were facing, whether it was the Iraqi

<sup>5</sup> Maryam Alemzadeh, "The Attraction of Direct Action: The Making of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in the Iranian Kurdish Conflict," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, October 2021, doi: 10.1080/13530194.2021.1990013.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Saeid Golkar, "The Evolution of Iran's Police Forces and Social Control in the Islamic Republic," *Middle East Brief* 120 (2018); Ehsan Mehrabi, "Taghsim-e kar-e gharargah-ha va nahad-ha-ye sarkub dar Iran," *BBC News Farsi*, September 25, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/cv2devyp699o>.

armed forces, Kurdish guerrillas or civilian protestors, leftist and Islamist-Marxist activists and guerrillas, reformist religious intellectuals and their constituency, or economically instigated mass demonstrations and riots. The scattered, impromptu yet expansive and prolonged nature of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement has made it difficult to have a clear, albeit flexible, strategy. Continued use of the Basij and plainclothes militias attests to the state's dependence on such forces and their flexibility. On the other hand, the state's attempts to cover up many cases of the murder of citizens can be interpreted as decision-makers' dissatisfaction with the unfolding of the events in practice. Cases of extreme violence against unarmed citizens seem to be the unintended consequence of the institutional firing-at-will policy, at least for a few among the ruling elite.

The second point of departure of the repression apparatus from its institutional past has to do with a crisis of belief, both among the rank and file and the military and political elite. In all previous instances of either war or armed repression, especially in the early postrevolutionary years, the IRGC and the Basij enjoyed unconditional support from the political faction sponsoring them, that is, the Islamist clerics close to Ayatollah Khomeini. Even though the interim government and the following elected government of President Banisadr had many qualms about the IRGC, the Guards benefited from the Revolutionary Council's unwavering support.<sup>8</sup> Internally, signs of discord about the IRGC's war management did appear in the 1980s. They were easily quieted in favor of preserving the status quo, however.<sup>9</sup> Compared to this history of relative consensus, there are significant signs of intraorganizational discord as well as disapproval of the armed units' conduct in the political circle. Within the armed forces, voices of dissent have emerged from various ranks. In a leaked bulletin intended for the IRGC commander in chief, General Salami, it was noted that "revolutionary forces" on the ground are experiencing "uncertainties and reservations," and that the Basij "does not have the power to mobilize" anymore.<sup>10</sup> Disagreements in higher echelons of the military and security forces also have surfaced. In a recently circulated video of a public address in October, an aide to the IRGC commander in chief expresses disappointment in IRGC generals, "from among [his] own commanders," who "fell short . . . who stood against values; stood against their leader; stood against their regime."<sup>11</sup> It is not difficult to imagine that whereas the arrest of reformist opposition leaders or point-blank killing of armed leftist revolutionaries was nothing to show remorse about, beating unarmed protestors to death or fatally shooting passengers in a passerby's car is.

I should add that among IRGC elite the deepening schism is not just a matter of ethical or ideological disagreement over violence against unarmed protestors. Many IRGC commanders also are concerned that continued violent repression will negatively affect their economic interests. Since the early postrevolutionary years, the Guards' motivational map has undergone major transformations. Whereas in the early postrevolutionary years it was all about serving the supreme leader and preserving the state, Revolutionary Guards commanders have now become invested in economic pursuits.<sup>12</sup> As part of the demobilization campaign after the Iran–Iraq War, the IRGC's material and human resources were put to use for a national reconstruction effort. The IRGC established large corporations, called "bases" to

<sup>8</sup> Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, "Factional Politics in the Iran–Iraq War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, nos. 3–4 (2019): 480–506.

<sup>9</sup> Hossein Bastani, "Kudeta-ye khazandeh dar sepah; navar-e sowti-ye jalaseh-ye mahramaneh dar zaman-e jang," BBC News Farsi, September 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-53961947>.

<sup>10</sup> "Bultan-e vizheh-ye sardar sarlashkar pasdar Hossein Salami," in "Bultan-e Mahramaneye khabargozari-ye Fars baray-e farmandeh-ye kol-e sepah-e pasdaran," p. 62, Iran International, November 30, 2022, [https://issuu.com/iranintl/docs/b29\\_2\\_1\\_](https://issuu.com/iranintl/docs/b29_2_1_).

<sup>11</sup> "Enteshar-e sokhanan-e moshaver-e farmandeh-ye sepah darbareh-ye mokhalefat-e 'mas'ulan-e darajeh yek' ba Khamenei," Radio Farda, December 30, 2022, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/32200166.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Hesam Forozan and Afshin Shahi, "The Military and the State in Iran: The Economic Rise of the Revolutionary Guards," *Middle East Journal* 71, no. 1 (2017): 67–86; Ali Ansari, "The Revolution Will Be Mercantitized," *National Interest* 105 (2010): 50–60.

fit with its military identity, that bid to take over state-sponsored projects and won the bids with a generous amount of extralegal help. The IRGC's dominance over Iran's economic sector has only increased over time. Today, the IRGC controls a major part of Iran's economy, in fields as varied as energy, tourism, media, and telecommunication.<sup>13</sup> Although many high-ranking members of the IRGC are ideologically committed, others will not see it as advantageous to preserve the chaotic status quo. The sociopolitical tumult, especially if it triggers further targeted sanctions, limits financial transactions in the civilian businesses they conduct. In addition, it will push away the middle and upper classes to a point of no return, depriving the IRGC of consumers of its domestic businesses, such as luxurious shopping malls and imported consumer goods.

To conclude, the IRGC's institutional history, and the formation history of other government organizations with a similar structure, reveal the capacity of the Islamic Republic's repressive machine to operate in a decentralized way. In its formative years, the IRGC enabled and relied on the direct action of forces on the ground. In the first few years after the revolution, as the IRGC was put to work quenching opposition and assisting the regular army in the Iran–Iraq War, this method proved at least partially successful, and was embraced by the organization as the alleged revolutionary method. The IRGC's power and influence in postwar years enabled it to preserve this flexibility of action in the face of the major criticism it engendered. Before the ongoing stretch of social protests in Iran, these practices were put to use by the IRGC as well as informal plainclothes militias rather successfully to suppress any oppositional movement. The same pattern of operation appears to continue in the government's violent attempts at repressing the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. As a result of confusion caused by the nature of the movement and significant disagreements and doubts among decision-makers and agents on the ground, however, the response to this round of protests has been more random and more disproportionately violent. Numerous counts of extreme, fatal violence against civilians on the streets, in their homes, and in prisons have created a severe backlash, forcing authorities to attempt cover-ups and deepening the existing fissures among them. Changing motivations of top-ranking IRGC members have potentially worsened internal dissonance, making it possible for observers to think about initially marginal but eventually detrimental defections or desertions as one way the future may unfold.

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<sup>13</sup> Ahmad Majidiyar, "IRGC's Role in Iran's Economy Growing with Its Engineering Arm Set to Execute 40 Mega-Projects," Middle East Institute, May 7, 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irgcs-role-irans-economy-growing-its-engineering-arm-set-execute-40-mega-projects>.