

WORLD NEWS

Iranian Force Likely Will Defend Regime

IRGC is designed to thwart government upheaval and to outlast its enemies

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U.S. and Israeli airstrikes killed many of Iran's top leaders in just hours, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. But the huge security apparatus they oversaw to ensure the regime's survival is still intact.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is best known as an armed force of nearly 200,000 paramilitary members. It also functions as a parallel government and economic force whose main mission is defending the Islamic regime formed after the 1979 Revolution, and influential throughout the Middle East.

Unless the IRGC is defeated or somehow turned, it will retain its ability to generate cash through illicit activities and help proxies like Houthis in Yemen harass the U.S. and its allies. The IRGC has its own military and intelligence divisions separate from the conventional armed forces, and is deeply entrenched in

the country's businesses.

Its secretive Quds Force handles Iran's relationships with militant groups in the region, while other IRGC components are responsible for its missile program and domestic security.

Israel struck severe blows to the IRGC on Saturday, killing its top commander, Mohammad Pakpour, and Ali Shamkhani, who headed the country's war committee, as well as other high-level officials—a sign that the U.S. aims to degrade the IRGC's power. Attacks on IRGC facilities could fracture its control over lower-level operatives and shrink its capacity to put down domestic opposition, analysts said.

"If you decapitate the head of the IRGC, the body will start to shake," said Saeid Golkar, associate professor at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Among the targets hit by Israel was the IRGC's Tharallah Headquarters. During unrest, Tharallah coordinates intelligence, policing and street-level enforcers in the Basij militia, and psychological operations.

The IRGC is a dominant force inside Iran, but in a matchup with the U.S. and Israel, it is hopelessly outgunned. Still, crippling the organization could take weeks or even months of airstrikes and other



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military steps, said analysts and Iranian opposition leaders. Without doing so, the Iranian regime is likely to remain in place and become more repressive as hard-liners who survived the initial U.S. and Israeli strikes further unleash the IRGC's armed loyalists in hopes of clinging to power.

Khamenei's death "strengthens the most hard-line and militarized elements inside the regime," said Mohammed Albasha, founder of Basha Report, a Washington-based risk-advisory firm. "There is no organized opposition ready to seize this moment. The likely outcome is not reform but consolidation, closer to a closed

military state."

President Trump called Saturday for the IRGC and police to "peacefully merge" and "work together" with ordinary Iranians who oppose the government. But a transition away from 47 years of hard-line Islamic rule and hostility to the U.S. is the least likely scenario in the short run, analysts said.

There are pragmatists within the IRGC, but they are no less committed to religious fundamentalism than Khamenei, and the clerics who ruled by his side. Many of the group's leadership came of age as soldiers fighting in the war against Iraq in the 1980s.

Iran's government could

evolve into some form of military dictatorship under IRGC control. It is hard to imagine the emergence of a figure like Delcy Rodríguez, the Venezuelan vice president who has toed Washington's line since the capture of President Nicolás Maduro in a U.S. raid, analysts said.

"The IRGC is a highly radicalized and indoctrinated force," said Kasra Aarabi, the director of IRGC research for United Against Nuclear Iran, a policy organization that opposes the Iranian regime. "So the idea of them switching sides, I think, is unlikely."

In Tehran, the IRGC oversees bases in each of the city's 22 municipal districts manned by the Basij, the voluntary paramilitary group that spearheaded the government crackdown on protesters in January, said a report written by Aarabi and Golkar. A similar infrastructure is in place nationwide.

Without occupying the country and putting troops on the ground, toppling the regime will be "extremely difficult," said Richard Fontaine, the chief executive of the Center for a New American Security, a Washington think tank, in a social-media post. "The IRGC and Basij will still have the guns, and the people still won't."

As the U.S. and Israel

struck in Iran early Saturday, the security forces took steps to prevent antiregime protesters from taking to the streets.

Iran's leaders have been preparing for an attack on the regime that could lead to a breakdown of the chain of command. The IRGC announced plans in February to revive its so-called mosaic defense strategy, which allows commanders to issue orders independently to their units. It is designed to make the country more resilient to foreign attacks. The Islamic Republic set up four layers of replacements for its entire leadership, including its army commanders, in case of a sustained military campaign, Iranian officials said.

Possible Khamenei replacements, including Hassan Khomeini, grandson of the regime's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, lack his stature and high-level connections, Iranian officials said.

Iranian intelligence has drawn up plans for a military commander to hold power, said the officials and other regime loyalists. Two former top IRGC commanders—Ali Larjani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the Parliament speaker—are top contenders to take power.