



MYTH OF THE IRGC'S INVINCIBILITY

by
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In less than 36 hours of starting Operation Rising Lion, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) announced “air superiority” over Tehran, which is roughly 2,300 km away from Israel. The announcement, alongside the successful targeting of key Iranian military infrastructure, military commanders, and over a dozen key nuclear scientists, reflects the remarkable achievement and strategic brilliance of the Israeli military, something analysts and strategic thinkers will be studying for years to come.

Yet, there has been a missing discussion on the other side of the equation: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or IRGC. The ideological military organisation fell incredibly short of its often-praised strategic genius and asymmetric warfare capabilities.

The Glory Years

Since 1980, no discussion on Iranian regional activities and influence has been complete without praise or admiration for the IRGC. In fact, one can argue that Iran's military successes have been synonymous with IRGC's successes, be it during the Eight-Year War (1980-88) or the Iranian proxy network in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and, lately, Yemen.

Iran's much-touted missile, drone, and cyber programs are all credited to the IRGC, and even domestically, the regime has praised the IRGC (and the Basij volunteer paramilitary militia) profusely for suppressing the successive protests over the years. Yet, when faced with a direct offensive by Israel, the IRGC was not merely unsuccessful in defending the “Revolution and its achievements,” which is its constitutional mandate, but it failed miserably to save itself and its senior leadership, which fell like a house of cards. Over two weeks, not merely key officer holders but their deputies and, in some cases, their successors were eliminated, leaving the largest leadership vacancy in the IRGC since 1989.

For decades, the IRGC's successes – some of which are notable – can be traced to its strategy of avoiding direct confrontation and developing proxy networks. With its massive domestic expansion under Khamenei's tenure as Supreme Leader, the IRGC's biggest achievement may not have been avoiding direct wars but accountability. Its proxies have borne the cost of escalation and direct confrontation, while the Iranian exchequer has borne the cost of funding them, but the IRGC managed to stay away from any scrutiny.

However, it must not be misunderstood that the IRGC did not have challenges. The IRGC leadership before June 13 had been veterans of the Iran-Iraq War and had survived various purges over the decades. To be relevant and secure the leadership positions, IRGC officials had to pass through the ‘ring of fire’ – loyalty to the Supreme Leader.

After the tumultuous political succession in 1980-81, Ali Khamenei became President for two terms before assuming office as the supreme leader after Khomeini's death in June 1980. His term as President during wartime yielded limited influence in policymaking or war itself. Yet, Khamenei was able to earn the trust of many young military officials of the IRGC with his frequent visits to the frontline. In 1989, when he became Supreme Leader, the IRGC helped Khamenei to consolidate and defend his rule. In return, he rewarded them with power and influence, a point astutely made by Alex Vatanka in a Foreign Policy article a few years back.

Lack of Accountability

Now, military failure is neither a new nor an unexpected phenomenon. But more resilient militaries have one thing in common – their ability to learn and adapt, which, among other things, is ensured through their accountability, be it through the military itself or civilian leadership. More serious militaries can learn even from the failures of other militaries. The experience of the war has shown that the IRGC has learned little itself and even less from the experience of Hezbollah and Yemen.

The IRGC lacked accountability, which it compensated



for by adhering to a culture of ideological and leadership-oriented fidelity. This, in turn, meant that over time, competence rarely rose to the top. With Khamenei now struggling to fill in the ranks after the decapitation of the senior IRGC leadership, it's quite evident how the IRGC has hollowed out over the years.

Israeli Precision

Even before the October 7 massacre, the IRGC had been misunderstood as 'thriving'. A good example is how hard-pressed the IRGC and its proxies were in the November-December 2019 protests in Iraq as well as Lebanon, two months before the killing of Major General Qasem Soleimani. Add to this, the frequent inability to prevent sabotage attacks over the last decade on Iran's key infrastructures and even the killing of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran.

The manner and expanse of Israeli ingenuity with the Pager attack, striking Lebanese politician and former secretary-general of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, in his own bunker, or preventing and carrying out precision strikes in Yemen, some 2,000 km away, the IRGC learned nothing.

In fact, all that the IDF tried over the years in terms of innovation and capabilities was at full display during Operation Rising Lion, be it air power, intercepting missiles, leadership elimination, or inside sabotage. The IRGC was obviously completely unprepared.

Khamenei may have good reason to promote the patronage system for regime survival. Yet, ironically, in strengthening his regime and expanding its influence,

Khamenei weakened the IRGC. With its top brass nearly eliminated, the next generation of the IRGC may lead the way for reform or innovation. However, the leadership (be it Khamenei or his successor) will have to choose between loyalty and competence, which, under precarious situations, would likely prioritise the former.

The myth around the IRGC was built on decades of proxy successes and patronage politics. However, the myth crumbled when faced with direct war with a capable and professional military, revealing how Khamenei and the IRGC leadership preferred sycophancy over strategy. Moving ahead, this invariably carries long-term implications for the region, as various proxy groups and militias under the tutelage of the IRGC are likely to reassess their loyalty and support. Not to mention, the IRGC itself would attempt to recalibrate its constructed image as an invincible force. This also means more violence in the region, but that does not necessarily imply a shift in favour of the IRGC.

In the past, the IRGC may have had notable achievements, but failure to adapt to what happened with Hezbollah or Houthis does not indicate strategic genius but wilful blindness, compensated only by sloganeering and AI-generated revenge videos. In the 12-Day War, the biggest casualty on the Iranian side has been the myth of the IRGC's invincibility.

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