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The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in the Iran–Iraq war: an unconventional military’s survival

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ABSTRACT

As Iraqi forces invaded the Iranian border shortly after the Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) participated in the battle along with the debilitated Iranian Army. The IRGC was a young religious-revolutionary institution that lacked the resources that revolutionary armies and militias conventionally rely on. Nevertheless, it survived the battle pressure and even achieved relative military successes in the second year of the war. By examining personal narratives written by Iranian veterans, this article argues that in the void of conventional resources in the first year of the war, the Guards retrieved elements of their Shia background to recognize a religiously inspired charisma in every combatant who would devotedly step up for martyrdom. This shared understanding of the omnipotent charisma was then acknowledged in action—by commanders’ deployment of it to impose order and through frequently held Shia rituals on the battlefield. It thereby created an alternative source of cohesion and motivation that led to the IRGC’s survival and prepared them for further successful steps by the end of the war’s first year.

Introduction

On 22 September 1980, Iran was invaded by Iraqi ground and air forces all along the western border. Alongside the official Iranian Armed Forces, a second body of combatants, i.e. the ‘Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps’ (IRGC), found themselves fighting Iraq despite their lack of training, experience and equipment. At the time, the IRGC was not an actual military, but a young, all-volunteer militia formed shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution to defend it against civil unrest and insurgencies. However, even before it gained full political support as a legitimate armed force, it survived the pressure of a conventional war without being merged with the regular army. How this non-professional, grass-roots militia functioned with relative success in the early years of this conventional battle is not explicable relying on existing findings in social scientific studies of militaries and militias. Ideologically committed militias that almost unexceptionally come with revolutionary states have commonly

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relied on experienced middle-rank officers of the pre-revolutionary armies and on coercion to impose order and discipline¹—sources that were not systematically deployed within the IRGC, especially in its early years of establishment. In addition, even though a revolutionary militia's involvement in an inter-state war is not unprecedented, the quality of the Guards' presence in the Iran–Iraq war makes the case a rather unique one. Their role was much more than a reserve force to fill the structural vacancies caused by purges in the regular army, or a body of commissars scrutinizing army ranks for loyalty, as was the case in major social revolutions.² They also went beyond acting as a vessel to mobilize citizens into revolutionary mass armies, as such ideological revolutionary formations often do.³ Rather, the IRGC fought the battle and survived it as a military entity in and of itself, independently of the Iranian regular army.

The IRGC's survival and prominence have frequently been attributed to the support it procured from the Islamic government as an ideologically reliable military wing.⁴ However, before the power struggle had settled between the Islamist politicians closer to Khomeini on the one hand and the moderate nationalists on the other, such support was hardly enough for the IRGC to function in battle. From the IRGC's formation in April 1979 until a year into the war, the incumbent nationalists treated the IRGC as an unprofessional force unworthy of military investment.

With the lack of professional knowledge and political support that plagued the IRGC up to July 1981, when they gradually acquired resources to transform the organization into a more professional one, the most readily available answer to the puzzle of their survival and relative success is the prevalence of the Shia concept of martyrdom in their belief system. It is generally understood that the promise of heaven motivated large numbers of volunteers, already invigorated by the culmination of the revolutionary movement, to sacrifice themselves for the cause of war.⁵ It is not clear in such studies, however, how the belief in the otherworldly rewards of self-sacrifice would compensate for the lack of military training, experience and equipment. Whereas it could potentially explain the personal motivation of volunteers, it does not address the puzzle of the organizational consolidation and success of the IRGC as a military entity at war. Studies that have addressed the organizational aspect of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the role of religious ideology therein have heavily focused on their post-establishment phase, when they had already transformed into a major

¹This trend is well illustrated in classical studies of revolutionary armies, such as John Ellis, *Armies in Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); and Jonathan R. Adelman, *Revolution, Armies, and War: A Political History* (Boulder, CO: Rienner, 1985).

²For a thorough discussion of such trends in the French Revolutionary Army, the Russian Red Army and the Chinese People's Liberation Army see John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791–94* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Diane Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald G. Suny, *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); and Lloyd E. Eastman, *Seeds of Destruction: Nationalist China in War and Revolution, 1937–1949* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), respectively.

³For theories around the prevalence of this pattern, see Meyer Kestnbaum, 'Mars Revealed: The Entry of Ordinary People into War among States', in *Remaking Modernity: Politics, History and Sociology*, ed. Julia Adams, Elisabeth Clemens and Ann S. Orloff (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 249–332.

⁴For instance, see Frederic Wehrey, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2009); and Ali Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards Is Turning Theocracy into Military Dictatorship* (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 2013).

⁵For most directly related examples see Farhang Rajaee, *The Iran–Iraq War: The Politics of Aggression* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993); Nikola Schahgaldian, *The Iranian Military under the Islamic Republic* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1987); Sepehr Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War* (London: Routledge, 1988); and Saskia Maria Gieling, *Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999).

politico-economic institution in the country, therefore leaving the puzzle of their survival in the early phase of the war unexplained.⁶

The unconventional character of the IRGC's organization has indeed been noticed, however, even if not with a focus on the early chaotic years. Ansari insightfully observes, for instance, that even at the peak of its maturity in the past decade, the IRGC was not 'a disciplined military organization in the Western sense of the term', but 'a network, a brotherhood, in which personalities and connections mattered far more than structures'.⁷ Ostovar addresses this structure more meticulously by referring to the IRGC's official view of the matter as of 1980: they strived for camaraderie among all ranks, political awareness and commitment to fighting 'in the cause of God', opposing themselves to secular militaries of the time.⁸ The analysis of the IRGC's self-proclaimed military doctrine, however, does not explain how a military relying on such unconventional principles could potentially work on the ground.⁹

The question that remains to be addressed, therefore, is as follows: How does the belief in martyrdom, combined with revolutionary passion, translate into organizational structure and functionality under battle pressure? This article explores the lived experience of Iranian veterans in search of an answer.

In the absence of a visible military structure, the lived experience of the members is a guide to the informally accepted principles and mutually recognized bonds that made the IRGC's organizational survival and success possible. By closely examining 60 wartime memoirs and diaries addressing the first year of the battle, I argue that the organization survived and thrived by relying on a diffused charisma as its source of cohesion and motivation. It was not the ideology of martyrdom per se, but the way a particular reading of it created a charismatic aura around almost every soldier, that became the source of collective identity, motivation and cohesion. I demonstrate how charisma became a commonly available commodity as the Guards conjoined the unique moment of war with a particular understanding of their traditional Shiite roots. It is a well-acknowledged fact that they sacralized their everyday readiness to die on the battlefield by making it traceable to their saints' 'holy' will to martyrdom. I illustrate how the sacredness was collectively recognized and then affirmed in practices that commanders pursued in the conduct of war, thereby consolidating it as the leading organizational principle.

⁶Among such valuable studies are Hesam Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The Evolution and Roles of the Revolutionary Guards* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016); M. Mahtab Alam Rizvi, 'Evaluating the Political and Economic Role of the IRGC', *Strategic Analysis*, 36(4) (2012), pp. 584–596; Kevan Harris, 'The Rise of the Subcontractor State: Politics of Pseudo-Privatization in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 45(1) (2013), pp. 45–70; and Hazem Kandil, *The Power Triangle: Military, Security, and Politics in Regime Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 118–126. Although Kandil and Forozan do address the formation process of the IRGC briefly, the broader aim in both works is to explain its stance in the power play in the long run. Earlier studies such as Kenneth Katzman's *The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993) have not distinguished between the multiple phases of the IRGC's presence in the war in the first place.

⁷Ali Ansari, 'The Revolution Will Be Mercantitized', *The National Interest* (January/February 2010), pp. 50–61, here p. 50. In *Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics: Elites and Shifting Relations* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), Bayram Sinkaya also recognizes the early years' disarray as a lack of 'corporateness', but does not address how it was in fact organized nevertheless.

⁸Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 123.

⁹Ostovar does in fact illustrate how the image of Karbala was heavily relied on to sacralize the war and the image of the Guard (ibid., pp. 133–40) by studying the official propaganda and the authorities' viewpoints. To complement this analysis, I rely on the everyday practices of foot soldiers and the commanders in battle.

Studying the IRGC's formation from the viewpoint of its members serves as a crucial step in understanding the diverse underlying mechanisms that run religious militias, as an alternative to research performed on their ideological apparatus.¹⁰ Theorizing the Guards' experience of the organization through a twist on the concept of 'institutional charisma', this article explores one of the various ways of tapping into alternative resources for fostering solidarity, integrity and efficiency—for establishing and maintaining an unconventional military organization.

Institutional charisma

Revolutionary fervour usually buttresses an egalitarian cohesion in the rank and file, frequently clashing with tactical, logistic and disciplinary goals pursued by commanders and, therefore, creating a need for top-down imposition of order in the long run. Quite to the contrary, charisma of individual leaders and war heroes creates and maintains a centralized order by legitimizing the authority of the command, as classically laid out by Max Weber.¹¹ These potentially conflicting sources of order are brought closer together in theories of institutional charisma, where the very passion and commitment of non-charismatic members are interpreted in terms of charisma itself—the attachment to the charismatic leader is seen as openness to more tangible manifestations of charisma. By being involved in the daily functions of an institution headed by a charismatic leader, actors each enjoy a mediated connection to the 'vital' source that initiates the leader's charisma in the first place.¹² In this sense, charisma is not merely a revolutionary force disrupting the existing order, but a source for a new one. It has the potential to create a new institution by providing its central value as well as the ethical thrust needed to make people inclined to pursue that value.¹³

However, the combination that these theories offer does not seem to be a durable one. It is not quite clear how the extraordinariness of charisma is preserved, if at all, when it turns into the central value to which an institution is oriented.¹⁴ And if there is nothing extraordinary about a central value, the question remains how it can be seen as a powerful continuation of charisma as opposed to its obliteration, which Weber had suggested by the concept of 'routinization'.¹⁵

I push this theoretical trend forward by discussing the case of the IRGC I argue that a particular conjunction of tradition and circumstances of everyday life allowed the appearance of institutional charisma without it losing its extraordinariness. Imbued with Shia beliefs and myths about the sacrality of their saints' martyrdom, the Guards sacralized their own actions in the war, which they had interpreted as yet another religious war of truth against evil. Given the particularity of the war situation, as I will illustrate, a selective activation of this ingrained tradition helped tune combatants to perceiving extraordinary characteristics

¹⁰The recentness of Islamist militias' activities has left them out of reach for fundamental empirical examination. As a result, studies have mostly focused on the militants' religious reference texts, the organization's cultural products or on rather limited quantitative databases, e.g. see John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

¹¹Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 249.

¹²Edward Shils, 'Charisma, Order, and Status', *American Sociological Review*, 30(2) (1965), pp. 199–213, here p. 200.

¹³Max Weber and S.N. Eisenstadt, *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Papers* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. xx.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

¹⁵Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 246.

in their co-combatants of different ranks on a daily basis. That is to say, through the help of their Shia-oriented perception, they were able to experience and recognize charisma frequently and routinely.

Methodology and analytical strategy

I have closely examined 50 wartime wills, diaries and memoirs written by IRGC veterans, in addition to 10 of those written by regular army veterans, all of which have been published as books in Iran as early as 1982. Selecting from among hundreds of relatively reliable publications—i.e. those issued by well-established publishers and supervised by acclaimed editors—I have strived for diversity, covering narratives from individuals with various backgrounds and different roles in the war. I have looked for evidence of the Guards' culturally specific understanding of both the organization and the war situation in its early years, with the goal of theorizing how this self-understanding was spread throughout the institution as a source of organizational functionality and cohesion. I have pursued evidence of their general orientation stemming from two interconnected sources. One is the deeply embedded Shiite tradition, newly invigorated and authorized by the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and individually experienced by each combatant. The other source is the historically particular war situation, with the emotional intensity of the Guards' mainly infantry-based, high-risk warfare in its first year. I trace how their mentality, relating to each of these platforms, takes shape in a feedback loop: how the collocation of the cultural tradition and the historical moment of war forms a shared understanding, and how 'validations' of this understanding in the form of others' words and deeds affirm and reinforce it time and again.¹⁶

In what follows I will first provide a politico-cultural background of the Guards' birth and development. Then I will delve deeper into the selected personal narratives to illustrate the informal mechanisms at work in the first two years of the war, highlighting how religiously infused charisma flowed throughout the institution and filled the void of a rigid military organization.

The Guards Corps, the Islamic Revolution and the 'Holy War'

The grievances of the masses that gathered around Ayatollah Khomeini as well as the smaller groups that joined the Islamist armed resistance were of a strongly cultural nature.¹⁷ What the revolution was promising them to address such grievances was not a newly articulated revolutionary ideology, but a revival of respect for a Twelver-Shiite lifestyle they already knew very well.¹⁸

The important aspect of this deeply rooted cultural asset for the purposes of this article is the strong presence of saints in this stratum's beliefs and practices. Hussein, the third Imam, has a particular place among these saints in the Iranian culture due to the story of his

¹⁶Andreas Glaeser, *Political Epistemics: The Secret Police, the Opposition, and the End of East German Socialism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 24.

¹⁷Said Amir Arjomand, 'Iran's Islamic Revolution in Comparative Perspective', *World Politics*, 38(3) (1986), pp. 383–414, here pp. 397, 400–401; Kambiz Afrachteh, 'The Predominance and Dilemmas of Theocratic Populism in Contemporary Iran', *Iranian Studies*, 14(3–4) (1981), pp. 189–213, here p. 192; Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 472.

¹⁸Said Amir Arjomand, 'History, Structure, and Revolution in the Shi'ite Tradition in Contemporary Iran', *International Political Science Review*, 10(2) (1989), pp. 111–119.

martyrdom in Karbala.¹⁹ In *ta'ziya* and *rowza* ceremonies, stories of Hussein and his heavily outnumbered comrades in Karbala are retold in sorrowful songs. The audience has learned to be touched by the story of 'victory of blood over blade'. It is commonly believed that reliving the tragic injustices the Infallibles went through, which situates one in a state of deep sorrow, has a purifying effect on the soul. Mourning their death as martyrs is, therefore, understood as a sign of a genuine spiritual connection to the holy; a sign of one's purity of soul.

These cultural traits entered the Iranian revolutionary discourse from the early stages.²⁰ Due to his widely acknowledged charisma, Khomeini was seen as a true descendant of Imam Hussein and the rest of the Shia Imams, and the true representative of the hidden twelfth Imam. Those opposing the Pahlavi regime in demonstrations and riots were frequently called 'soldiers of Islam' and their death was dubbed martyrdom. It was with a strong dedication to this cultural discourse that the young Islamic Revolutionary Guards came into existence.

Post-revolutionary politics and the formation of the IRGC

In an attempt to unify multiple grassroots militias that had formed throughout the revolution, the IRGC was officially established by Ayatollah Khomeini's decree on 22 April 1979 as a militia to maintain civil security. The establishment of the IRGC was one of the most controversial affairs of the post-revolutionary power struggle. Aside from leftist groups and militias that were gradually marginalized, two main groups of activists were engaged in rivalry in the state-building process. The nationalists were experienced politicians who, although not secular, prioritized pragmatic political concerns over religious correctness.²¹ Khomeini supported the nationalists as an indispensable source of political experience, as he initially believed that the clerics should not be directly involved in politics.²² The provisional government appointed by Khomeini a week before the fall of the Shah was headed and staffed by the nationalists.

The Islamists had exalted radical methods of resistance in the course of the revolution, aiming for nothing but uprooting the Shah. Their activity was less organized compared to leftist and nationalist organizations—their presence mainly emerged within community-based formations around locally trusted figures such as mosque clerics, who had direct or mediated contact with Khomeini.²³ The majority of the clerics who had made themselves known as influential revolutionary leaders sympathized with the Islamists' style of revolutionary direct action.

¹⁹Mary Hegland, 'Two Images of Husain: Accommodation and Revolution in an Iranian Village', in *Religion and Politics in Iran: Shi'ism from Quietism to Revolution*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 218–236.

²⁰For example, see Nikki R. Keddie, 'Religion, Society, and Revolution in Modern Iran', in *Modern Iran: The Dialectics of Continuity and Change*, ed. Michael E. Bonine and Nikki R. Keddie (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 21–36.

²¹This distinctive preference is observable in the prominent nationalist figures' press appearances, as well as their diaries and memoirs. For a rich example see Mahdi Bazargan, *Masa'il va mushkilat-i nukhustin sal-i inqilab az zaban-i ra'is-i dawlat muvaqqat* [Problems and Difficulties of the First Year of the Revolution in the Provisional Prime Minister's Words] (Tehran: Daftar-i Nahzat-i Azadi-i Iran, 1361[1982]).

²²Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifah-i Imam: majmuu'ah-i asar* [Collected Works of Khomeini] (Tehran: Mu'assisah-i Tanzim va Nashr, 1378[1999]), vol. 5, p. 472.

²³Hishmat Allah Salimi, *Mubarizat-i ruhaniyun va vu'az-i masjid bih rivayat-i asnad* [Mosque Clerics' Resistance and Struggle in Documents] (Tehran: Intisharat-i Markaz-i Asnad-i Inqilab-i Islami, 1386[2009]), pp. 117, 142.

Although both sides agreed upon the necessity of an ideological militia until the police and the army could be recalibrated and trusted again,²⁴ they entered a bitter struggle to win control over it. Islamists activated their closer personal ties to Khomeini as well as their pre-existing networks of trustees to detach the IRGC from the provisional government.²⁵ Thereby, the IRGC that was officially announced in April 1979 became the armed wing of the Islamist fraction of the state in practice. Nevertheless, the nationalist government, which was still responsible for financing the IRGC, did not grant it the legitimacy that the Islamists had hoped for, and challenged its practices in multiple ways.²⁶

With the lack of full political support, an experienced managerial team and a well-trained military staff, and in the context of the post-revolutionary tumult, the organizational development of the IRGC was hard to control centrally. Local branches were established either by local forces or by representatives from Tehran and started recruiting volunteers under unofficially organized units.²⁷ According to different estimates, the IRGC consisted of between 20,000 and 30,000 personnel by then, structured loosely under regional units.²⁸ Such was the organizational state of affairs as the war broke out on 22 September.

Disputed authority at the beginning of the war

The regular Army of the Islamic Republic was, according to optimistic estimates, down to one-third of its pre-revolutionary manpower when Iraq initiated the war.²⁹ Equipment was not in abundance as maintenance teams were understaffed and imports were stalled, and the leadership was debilitated due to revolutionary purges. Nevertheless, the army was still the most professionally prepared ground force of the country. Since claiming military success would give either of the political rivals the upper hand in the power play, the struggle between the nationalists and the Islamists assumed a new outlook with the outbreak of the war: the question was whether to spend time setting the regular army up for proper defence, or to deploy the abounding non-professional forces, despite their lack of training and organization.³⁰ The nationalist president and commander in chief, Banisadr, advocated a calculated approach, calling for meticulous and well-informed military plans.³¹ However, he was overly optimistic of the army's capability of bouncing back from the latency it had sunk into during

²⁴News reports of a press conference with the nationalist cabinet attest that the nationalists were of this mind, as well as the Islamists. For instance, see *Risalat*, 3 May 1979.

²⁵Muhsin Rafiqdust, *Baray-i tarikh miguyam: khatirat-i Muhsin Rafiqdust* [Memoirs of Muhsin Rafiqdust] (Tehran: Sureh Mihr, 1393[2014]), p. 57.

²⁶Evidence of such clashes abounds both in IRGC founders' memoirs and in news reports of the time covering the nationalists' comments on the matter. For instance, see Rafiqdust, *Memoirs*, p. 25.

²⁷From 30 April onward, news outlets reported the establishment of such units rather frequently. For instance, see *Keyhan*, 2 May 1979.

²⁸Ghulam'ali Rashid, 'Sharayit va zarurat'ha-yi tavallud, ruzhd, va tasbit-i sipah dar jang' [Conditions and Necessities of Birth, Development, and Consolidation of the Guards in the War], *Siyasat-i Difa'i*, 19 (1376[1997]), pp. 1–28.

²⁹Ali A'vani and Nasir Arastah, *Sukhan-i ashina: matn-i sukhanrani-i amir sartip Nasir Arastih* [Familiar Words: A Speech by Major Nasir Arastah] (Tehran: Nashr-i Aja, 1386[2007]); William F. Hickman, *Ravaged and Reborn: The Iranian Army* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1982).

³⁰Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, 'Factional Politics in the Iran-Iraq War', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2017), doi:10.1080/01402390.2017.1347873.

³¹Abu al-Hasan Bani Sadr, *Ruz'ha bar ra'is-i jumhur chigunah mi-guzarad* [How Is the President Spending the Days], vol. 3 (Tehran: Sazman-i Intisharat va Amuzish-i Inqilab-i Islami, 1359[1980]).

the revolution.³² Under political pressure to engage the army in an offensive as soon as possible, he urged military commanders to conduct large-scale operations. Despite some achievements, these operations failed to fulfil the designated goals—i.e. moving Iraqi forces back to the international borders.³³ Islamists' critique became sharper as a result, accusing Banisadr and the army of incapability. Nevertheless, Islamists were still dubious themselves whether the IRGC should be deployed in the war independently of the army.³⁴

In practice, however, the local Guards units of different border cities, especially in the most vehemently invaded province of Khuzistan, had already become involved in the war rather independently, although disorganized, ill-equipped and in small numbers. As opposed to the army, the lack of a binding structure had allowed volunteer Guards in other parts of the country to freely travel to cities under attack to join local forces, and to engage in defence, although minimally—the organizational coordination required was almost non-existent.³⁵

Initial structures and small military achievements

The Guards' first major step for organizing their presence in the war was taken only about four months into the war with the establishment of the *Operation Headquarters of the South*.³⁶ Even at this point, this establishment was not formally in charge, since the IRGC's top command was still torn on the issue of its role in the war. It was just a bottom-up formation initiated by a few young commanders present in the war zone with the goal of coordinating the activities already in progress.

About six months into the war, the Guards started performing mini-operations deploying their limited technical ability and light weaponry, receiving some assistance from former army men who had joined the Guards during the revolution.³⁷ While the army's rather unsuccessful attempts within this time period had given the Islamists a stronger platform for pushing their political agenda forward, the Guards' assertive presence on the field, even though on a small scale, strengthened the IRGC's position in the war. The IRGC commanders were convinced that they could and should claim a stronger stance. The authorities started to see how such a stance could potentially work. It was at this stage that the zealous voluntary forces started to prove themselves not only reliable, but also essential.³⁸

With the power-political balance changing to the advantage of the Islamists, finalized by the deposal of the liberal-nationalist president in June 1981, the IRGC started enjoying more political support. It took the initiative in somewhat larger operations in cooperation with

³²Both military and political analysts of the war believe that Banisadr's move was a miscalculation. The Iranian Army officials also admit to the army's technical difficulties at the time (see note 33). See Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, vol. 2: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990) and Forozan, *Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran* as analytical examples.

³³Three operations were conducted between 15 October 1980 and 7 January 1981. According to army reports, they were planned hastily due to the president's insistence that an offensive be conducted at any price: Markaz-i Pajuhish-ha'yi Niru-yi Zamini, *Taqvim-i tarikh-i difa'-i muqaddas* [Chronology of the Sacred Defence], vol. 5 (Tehran: Markaz-i Asnad-i Inqilab-i Islami, 1386[2007]), p. 315. The last and largest operation turned out to be the most controversial, as two battalions of the Guards that were deployed under the army's command suffered intense casualties as a result of the many technical deficiencies associated with the operation (ibid.).

³⁴Rashid, 'Sharayit va zarurat'ha'.

³⁵Husayn Alayi, *Ravand-i Jang-i Iran va Iraq* [The Unfolding of the Iran–Iraq War], vol. 1 (Tehran: Marz va Bum, 1391[2012]), pp. 200–206.

³⁶Rashid, 'Sharayit va zarurat'ha', p. 3.

³⁷Mujtaba Ja'fari, *Atlas-i nabard'ha-yi mandigar: 'Amaliyat-i niru-yi zamini dar hasht sal difa'-i muqaddas* [The Atlas of Unforgettable Battles: Army's Operations in the Eight Years of Defence] (Tehran: Nashr-i surah-i sabz, 2012).

³⁸Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam*; Schahgaldian, *The Iranian Military*.

the army, and gradually assumed an organizational pattern more akin to classical armies, at least on the surface. This constellation of changes was the springboard for the IRGC to ascend to political prominence—both during the war, when it played a significant role in deciding whether and how to continue the war effort after reclaiming the conceded territory, and after the war, when it resisted the demobilization initiative put forward by the post-war government and relied instead on its financial and political assets to gradually monopolize the country's economy.³⁹ Before the turn of events from summer 1981 to spring 1982, however, it was difficult to predict on what basis this nascent militia would survive the pressures of war, if at all. This is the puzzle addressed in this article. In what follows I will analyse a variety of personal, insider narratives of these early years to address the underpinnings of the IRGC's gradual institutionalization as an independent military.

Emotional spirituality as charisma: formation of a bonding interpretation

Guards commanders considered the Islamic-revolutionary identity and the zeal accompanying it to be the main source that made the transformation of the Guards in the first two years possible—the transformation from teenagers that the army did not take seriously enough to recruit, into a military force too powerful to follow the army's lead. As the wartime chief commander, Mohsen Rezai, points out retrospectively:

the revolutionary forces were able to provide everything and learn everything... The way they naturally came together in a system proved much more effective than a non-natural [i.e. pre-planned] system. In a naturally formed system, combatants can fight alongside each other instinctively, yet in an orderly and systematic way. During the war we discovered spectacular leaders... They were trained by the revolution, having Imam [Khomeini], 'ashura culture, devotion, self-denial and resistance as their guiding principles.⁴⁰

As pointed out earlier, the question remains, though: *How* could Islamic-revolutionary fervour make up for the structural and technical deficiencies of a nascent military organization? What could it mean to have such principles at the heart of a military organization, and in what sense would they enable a 'naturally formed system', before the entity started to transform into a more conventional one?

The most salient common feature of the studied veterans' writings about this premature phase of the IRGC's activity is a spiritual and subsequently charismatic understanding they have formed of their personal and collective presence in the war. This recognition of charisma is *not* the same as the belief in the value of martyrdom, but an experience partly inspired by a particular, collective interpretation of it. In this section I will first demonstrate the general recognition of numerous manifestations of charisma in both officers and men. Then I will analyse the settings with which the charisma was intertwined.

Charismatic command

Certain characteristics of leaders and commanders are particularly appreciated in the war memoirs under study, both by fellow officers and by the rank and file. Commanders of different ranks are quite unanimously remembered as charismatic. Co-combatants report

³⁹Ansari, 'The Revolution Will Be Mercantitized'; Kandil, *The Power Triangle*.

⁴⁰All excerpts have been translated from Farsi to English by the author. Citation information of the Farsi publications is available upon request.

themselves to have felt a certain charm in their presence and tell stories of their spiritually inspired conduct. Within the memoirs, this charm has been manifested in a number of different ways.

First and foremost is a commitment to the Islamic Revolution and especially its leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, which is itself inseparable from devotion to Shiite beliefs, stories and practices. This commitment, however, is only seen as a charismatic attraction—as opposed to a minimum requirement—when it presents itself in the form of a deep spiritual bond—a connection to ‘what is vital in [their] lives.’⁴¹ A young IRGC deputy asserts the following in praise of his direct commander, as he met him at the outbreak of war:

[...] He had an astonishingly great reverence for Islam, the revolution and Imam [Khomeini]. He was committed to the institution of supreme leadership and the Imam in every possible sense. He had once had the chance to visit the Imam; whenever he talked about it, he was overcome by a spiritual mood.

This style of expressing spiritual affinity to Islamic ideals and Khomeini as their manifestation is in fact heavily influenced by the Iranian–Shia culture of celebrating the saints’ deeds and mourning their martyrdom, as explained before. It is in this milieu that recollections such as the following should be interpreted: as an appreciation of a commander’s emotional spirituality. A veteran remembers one of the prominent Guard commanders’ spiritual experience in an informal event of *rowza*:

From the beginning to the end of the *rowza*, he was in prostration. Maybe he didn’t want others to see his face overwhelmed by emotions.... The *rowza* was finally over, and we were still waiting for him to lift his forehead off the ground. We had covered the ground in the trench with three layers of blankets. [When he finally got up,] even the one at the bottom was wet with his tears.

The respect generated by recognizing the commanders’ spirituality would in turn allow subordinates to trust their seemingly irrational and spontaneous decision-making. For instance, a highly respected battalion commander is remembered to have made such a decision right before a well-planned operation towards the end of the war’s first year:

Everything was ready for an offensive operation. The reconnaissance work was completed and we had gathered information about all strategic locations. He was sitting on the ground with his rosary in his hand, listening to [fellow commanders] talk. After all had spoken, he paused for a while and then said: ‘Fellows, I suggest the operation be postponed for a few days... I have no tactical reason to defend my suggestion. Thank God we are ready, as is the army. But I just feel it’s better if we postpone it for a few days... I have a premonition something is going to happen in the next few days—something big.’

Knowing him and the purity of his spirit, I did not object. I knew he was right. Others respected him with silence as well, and the operation was postponed for a few days.

In his post hoc recollection of the event, the author concludes that the subject of the premonition was the assassination of the Islamist president and his prime minister, which occurred shortly after the narrated event.

Technical skills as a gift of God

Although praising the emotional spirituality comes first in both officers’ and men’s positive perceptions of one another, military-organizational skills are not excluded from the picture.

⁴¹Shils, ‘Charisma, Order, and Status’, p. 201.

However, such technical abilities are almost never appreciated without being accompanied by the religious charm.

An orderly and systematic leadership style, for instance, was appreciated, especially in young, inexperienced commanders. The same was true about technical military knowledge and skill. This is how a Guard recalls his first encounter with one of the younger founding fathers about four months into the war:

There was a striking attractiveness and certainty to his tone that caught my attention. I realized that he's well familiar with an armoured personal carrier's function. He was also knowledgeable about the Ba'th Army's equipment. He had done substantive and precise studies of operation locations... I was so deeply charmed by his words that I used to hold my breath not to miss a single one. He talked about sandy pathways and swamps, training forces, the general unfolding of war, the enemy's capabilities, and spirituality in war.

As in many other instances, in this excerpt military knowledge and skill are mentioned and praised juxtaposed to a spiritual charisma and alongside the commander's emphasis on 'spirituality in war'.

Even if charisma was attributed to general leadership skills per se, it was not inconsistent with the emotional spirituality and the ethos of modesty stemming from it. To the contrary, they were quite inseparable. Rigour, determination, knowledge and systematic leadership were frequently paired with the individual's spiritual and religious characteristics. Sometimes military skills were explicitly seen as a result of the leaders' devotion and spirituality. In such cases, leadership strengths and military skills were seen as a gift of God; a talent appearing where it was most needed, yet least expected. In other words, the lack of professional background allowed the observers to attribute these characteristics to the commanders' religious purity, thereby appreciating them more deeply.

Quite often, the commanders would not only overlook the organization's lack of classical military skills, but also treat it as a blessing. They considered it an opening that allowed for creativity in responding to the peculiarities of the war. In his daily reports of the frontline, the IRGC reconnaissance commander writes:

The war has provided us with a golden opportunity to develop the existing talents. Our forces have a revolutionary character to them and do not blindly follow imported [military-organizational] principles. As a result, they are able think outside the box and, deploying their constructive thinking, come up with innovative methods against which the enemy cannot easily resist.

This implies that in the Guards' search for a unique organizational identity and authority, the non-professional nature of the organization was seen not only as divinely inspired, but also as more effective than a professional, experienced parallel—a claim still controversial in the Iranian discourse on the war.

The charismatic soldiers and the ethic of brotherhood

Infusing the warrior's image with religious charisma was not just one-directional, from men to officers. The command's writings also suggest a respect for the men's Shia-inspired charm on battle days.

Quite in congruence with other revolutionary armies, the IRGC was striving for an egalitarian brotherly modesty. On many occasions, the commanders did not care to introduce themselves as such; they would rather avoid clarifying the hierarchy and, instead, maintain order by strengthening bonds of brotherhood with the rank and file. However, this modesty

was not simply a strategic move to create 'buddy-relationships' with the subordinates,⁴² so that small groups would operate more smoothly. Rather, it stemmed from the command's belief in the rank and file's potential or actual charisma—a belief that they were, or could be, pure souls connected to the holy. A fellow Guard praises one of the prominent IRGC commanders based on his appreciation of the rank and file's spirituality:

He loved the Basijis.⁴³ ... Once I told him after a meeting: 'look how faithful and brave these Basiji kids are...' I was still not finished when he slapped himself on the forehead with shame. His mood had changed. He said: 'Shame on us that we're *their* commanders; they are way above us [spiritually]. But we go about preaching and teaching *them*!'

Evaluating soldiers in terms of their religious connectedness instead of any other standards of motivation and efficiency was quite commonplace, as this excerpt suggests, which led to a strong sense of belonging to and responsibility towards them among the commanders.

In addition to commanders, combatants frequently report having observed extraordinary characteristics, sometimes miracle-like events, stemming from their comrades-in-arms' piety and purity of soul. A veteran remembers a young religious fellow as the source of such a miracle that once saved their lives:

Our company was lost in the operation region. ... No route seemed to take us anywhere. In this situation, one of the fellows was using empty cartridges, placing them on the sand, to write the words 'O Fatima'; so purely and innocently. He was one of those brothers who would simply pray to our lady Fatima when facing a problem. He had caught everyone's attention. Only one cartridge was needed to finish the phrase... He was crying and whispering words of prayer. As soon as he put the last cartridge in place, we heard a car engine from afar. Now everyone was overwhelmed with tears... This was how I survived the ordeal at our lady Fatima's mercy.

The Karbala imagery

Volunteer recruits or Basijis demonstrate a specifically religious image of the war in their writings. Having grown up with Shia narratives of martyrdom in Karbala, which were invigorated through the revolution, the soldiers' emotional interpretation of the war took shape in the form of a re-enactment of the Karbala story: that of an innocent pious polity that prefers to sacrifice its whole being rather than surrender to the evil. In his will, one of the veterans identifies the Karbala story emphatically as the thrust behind the Basijis' presence in the war:

What attraction dragged us out of the warmth of our homes to the battlefield and led us to wholeheartedly embrace all the pain?... The magnificent and glorious scenes our Guards create here, their selflessness and goodwill... should be seen through the logic of love and spirituality... Today, from the battlefield we announce that we have heard the Hussein of our time calling for comrades and have lovingly accepted the mission of martyrdom.

Although the charisma of being ready to join Hussein was felt and recognized everywhere and every day, it was only in active combat that the height of the story, i.e. the saints being martyred on the battlefield, was felt immediately. Combatants were anxious to get involved

⁴²Little, Roger William, 'Buddy Relations and Combat Performance', in *The New Military; Changing Patterns of Organization*, vol. 1, ed. Morris Janowitz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1964), pp. 195–224.

⁴³Volunteers who served under the IRGC were mainly recruited under a sister organization, Basij-i Mostaz'afin (literally: Mobilization of the Oppressed). Basij was established when Khomeini issued a call for a nation in arms in November 1979. About a year after its official foundation in 1980, Basij was officially co-opted under the IRGC and acted as the main vessel for dispatching volunteers to the front. The volunteers sent to the front through Basij were commonly known as Basijis.

in offensive operations, because it was through such involvement that they found the opportunity to realize the image. Respecting the religious code of ethics when treating comrades and commanders and recognizing their everyday spiritual charm were only the bare minimum: the condition for re-enactment of the saints' lives reached its perfect emotional height when the combatants found the opportunity to become martyrs themselves. A veteran recalls standing among fellow Guards right before a large-scale operation, experiencing the high of this re-enactment:

I remember these words going through my mind: 'Oh Hussein, do you see how your comrades love following your footsteps? If there was no crowd to have your back in Karbala, do you now hear these beloved brothers chanting your name? They live upon your revolution, and they desperately await martyrdom in your cause.'

Even though the soldiers' everyday life on the battlefield was imbued with spiritual experiences, it was active involvement in the battle that they cherished most strongly and looked forward to anxiously. It was in the operations that they got to directly 'connect' to that existential level that lay behind the Shiite discourse by leaving their 'selves' behind. A Guard has documented his disappointment at a night when he learned he had to stay back at the stronghold:

We reached the trench and I saw another group of fellows preparing for an offensive. ... Only there I realized my hopes for participating in the offensive and killing some Iraqis had been vain and [...] that we were only backups. So disappointed. Although I somehow expected it... we were too inexperienced to expect that chance.

In other words, being involved in active combat was the most genuine setting for bringing together the Shiite images of holy martyrdom and the personal experience of war; for actualizing, and receiving even stronger recognition of, the emotional spirituality that fed the war culture.

Charisma: diffused but not routinized

To conclude this section, in the published diaries and memoirs of the veterans, a strong tendency to bring together Shiite religious spirituality and the war experience is observable. Infusion of everyday life with particular images of the Shia tradition led combatants to a sacred understanding of their voluntary presence in battle. In the context of this immediate understanding, anyone who stepped up for self-sacrifice would be deemed charismatic. As the instances of spiritually inspired self-sacrifice were frequent in the battlefield, the charisma was manifested frequently in both officers and men. Despite its everyday and at-hand characteristic, however, it was not disenchanting. The very combination of Shiite imagery and the war condition that created the charismatic aura in the first place ensured its preservation as well. Manifestations of the charisma, of the emotional spirituality, were not mundane norms or 'words and practices' of those few who were connected to 'vital forces' on the top, to go back to theories of charismatic diffusion. Every believer had the opportunity to display genuine charm by doing what was readily at hand on a battlefield: stepping up for self-sacrifice. It was this long-lasting, omnipresent charisma that became the veterans' common channel for interpreting their life at war, acknowledged in commanders' spontaneity of decision-making and God-given skills, as well as in volunteers' will to martyrdom. This is not to claim that the Guards survived against the odds because they were spiritually committed; but that they survived because they themselves collectively recognized each other as

spiritual, and reinforced this perception routinely. In the absence of rigid organizational boundaries and principles, as I will demonstrate, these mutual recognitions filled the gap when they were relied on in practice.

Filling the military void: acting upon the shared understanding

The mere presence of an everyday spiritual charm would not fill the void of a military-organizational scaffolding automatically. The shared understanding and experience that made the realization of charisma possible for almost all believers were confirmed and strengthened through various words and deeds during the war. As I will argue in this section, it was through such confirmations that shared principles were institutionalized, which in turn filled the void of military order and structure in this nascent militia. Next I will address the ways in which the shared understanding was translated into tangible norms and principles during the first year of the war, thereby providing—at least temporary—sources of order in the absence of more conventional sources.

Boundaries of organizational identity

Guards relied on their religiously inspired perception of charismatic presence to form an opinion about their co-combatants. Such opinions would in turn determine the boundaries between them and their ‘others’. This act of othering is clearest in their encounters with their number one rival—the regular army.

Guards of different ranks tended to prioritize a charismatic presence, observed either as mere spirituality or as devotionally gained military experience, over professional training and ethos. When interacting with army officers, it was rarely their mastery of military knowledge that appealed to the Guards. In the personal narratives, an army man is mentioned respectfully only when he possesses the emotional commitment revered among the Guards themselves. A regional Guards commander explicitly states how such a trait made a particular army commander one of ‘them’:

When we arrived at the post-station, an army battalion joined us. The officer in their command was a pious young man. He was experienced and trustworthy. Before I had met him, I thought we were the only ones inheriting the revolution and giving it our everything; but he was ahead of us. ... When we were moving forward to the next station, where actual confrontation with the enemy was expected, he sat in a corner and cried. He greeted [us] warmly and said: ‘I can’t march forward, I have an order to stay here, but what I really want to do is to be at your side and fight’.

The most prominent example of such identification is the Guards’ affinity with Ali Sayad-Shirazi (Sayad), army chief of staff from 1981 onward. Sayad was highly esteemed among the Guards as he respected their religious passion and treated it as a complement to the army’s professionalism. The IRGC chief commander, Rezai, points to this affinity in an interview:

As a matter of fact, brother Sayad was able to coordinate himself with revolutionary forces because of his own revolutionary spirit. On the other hand, his classical military knowledge and his proper understanding of the army enabled him to not only command the army in a good way, but to be a pillar for the unification of all armed forces [i.e. the regular armed forces and the Guards].

On the contrary, when the familiar charm is not recognizable in an encounter with an army man, the Guards simply admit to their own lack of understanding of the technical language in passing and emphasize their sheer will to fight instead, with no appreciation of the army officers' technical ability. A regional commander's recollection of such an encounter is typical of Guards' memoirs:

A week before the war started, an army major was sent to [the southern city of] Ahvaz. [In the war room there] he presented plans and drew operational arrows. ... Since I wasn't a military man, I could not understand what he was trying to say. But I knew that we [i.e. the Guards] would need equipment. I said, 'Just give us some rocket launchers so we can fight!'

The fact that the Guards placed religious-charismatic presence ahead of technical ability is also observable from the point of view of the army men themselves. Recalling pre-war battles in Kurdistan, Sayad identifies the barrier in the way of the two forces' cooperation as one of 'spirit, motivation and culture'. The Guards, according to him, would not strictly follow technical commands and directions of army commanders, even those issued by himself, since they were too zealous to approach the goal patiently. Sayad remembers an instance where he could not control the passionate young Guards who constituted 4 groups out of the 14 under his command:

We had told them... that they should wait for a direct order before proceeding. ...When we started approaching the narrow pathway under the enemy's control, which we had planned to break through, I realized I'm losing track of those four groups. They were moving too fast and the rest were falling behind. I was stuck in the middle.

He remembers that they lost the Guards units before going through the pathway. They tried to clear the path by cannon fire, when they suddenly learned the IRGC units' whereabouts:

We heard a Guard's angry complaint over the walkie-talkie: 'We've passed through! Why are you firing at us?!' I don't know how they had managed to go through without the enemy noticing them.

When successful cooperations did happen, Sayad recalls, they were seen as a result of the Guards' recognizing bonds of brotherhood between the two sides:

During the early operations, since the Guards were still not heading in the direction of classical [independent] planning and performing of operations, we were moulded into one body. Based on the ethics of brotherhood, they had accepted that our decisions, which were based on experience and proper equipment and organization, were aligned with their spirit as well.

In other words, the religious-cultural boundaries of identity were so vehement that cooperation did not naturally follow the Guards' technical dependence on the army. It was only realized when the Guards were able to see the army men as spiritually dedicated brothers.

Secular and sacred order

Another way of transforming the shared Shia perception of the war into an organizational feature is observable when faith and devotion are deployed as principles of informal hierarchy. In the absence of a solidified military structure, shared religious-revolutionary beliefs, motivations and rituals, re-enacted in a predominant understanding of the war, came in handy for both commanders and soldiers to organize life on the front and maintain cohesion.

The Basiji volunteers for whom a very brief training period constituted their only exposure to quasi-military life were prone to defying orders if the orders were not in line with their

strong self-sacrificial will. Knowingly, commanders deployed the volunteers' Islamic-revolutionary fervour to encourage or impose compliance. A Guards veteran remembers how their commander used religious devoutness as a selection criterion and also tricked soldiers into taking orders by relying on their strong will to go to the front:

[The officer] wanted to send some of the soldiers back to the city of Shiraz to take care of some paperwork, but we were anxious to take part in an actual operation instead. At 8 am he gathered everyone and told us he was sending troops to the front to clear a minefield... To limit the number, he screened some out with the excuse that they are too old or sick or whatnot. [Since there were still too many volunteers] he finally said whoever could read the Quran better would have an advantage. He said and did all this so seriously that nobody suspected. It was only around 2 pm when we were in the bus that we realized we're headed back to the city and not to a minefield.

Interestingly, this event took place a few years into the war, when training the Basijis in military discipline was said to have improved substantively. Such deployments of the religious evaluation criteria acted in turn as a validation of the men's understanding that spirituality mattered more than other characteristics in the war.

At the level of platoon-size groups, religious charisma would lead to the natural emergence of a leader before one was officially assigned. The co-combatants' belief in a fellow's religious-charismatic characteristics was usually the required cutting edge. In the memoirs, such characteristics are frequently observed by combatants alongside religious devotion and spiritual purity, if not seen as directly stemming from such qualities. This is how a Guard veteran recalls the selection process of his direct commander:

He was fasting most of the days, as if he had taken an oath.... He was so humble that those who did not know him thought he was a simple soldier. ...When we returned to the base [from the training camp], we were asked to choose a commander from among ourselves. With no prior discussion, we unanimously chose him, and he became the commander of the 22 of us.

This is perhaps the most salient instance of a shared recognition of extraordinary characteristics filling in for the missing military structure. When there were no predefined military units and no previously assigned commander, the group unified itself around this collectively recognized charisma, giving way to a 'natural' solidarity, to go back to commander Rezaï's words.

Reliving the saints' lives: Shia rituals and the will to martyrdom

The strongest affirmation of the bonding understanding, however, was to be found in the emotional Shia rituals frequently held among the combatants. Rituals such as *rowza* played an undeniable role in reaffirming the charisma-infused understanding of the battle conditions. Akin to other motivational rituals performed in battle, they created a spiritual mood that, reportedly, led to group cohesion. Veterans have frequently mentioned that such rituals created a strong sense of brotherly solidarity and responsibility towards the others that, according to a veteran, 'no military organization was capable of creating'.

However, such rituals went beyond the function of creating moments of collective effervescence frequently observed in all militaries. Through their particular form and content, they strongly validated the predominant narrative, creating yet more opportunities for the emergence of charisma in every man. On the one hand, they reinforced the already formed perception of martyrdom, and even striving for it, as sacred. Such rituals reminded the

soldiers of the story they shared and loved about the way Hussein fought the battle; that he did not care that he was unable to defeat the well-equipped enemy, but saw the sheer act of fighting, and the inevitable death on the battlefield, as a glorious victory. A Basiji remembers how in the few hours before an operation, a ritualistic remembrance of Karbala affected him and his fellows:

The truck transporting us to the front got on the road and the guys saluted prophet Mohammad [in prayer for success]. We all started singing the battle rhyme: 'Pilgrims, be prepared, Karbala is waiting; promising news is heading to us from the front, the enemy is escaping.' We sang wholeheartedly and emotionally. Some broke into tears, and some laughed in order to prevent tears. This all had created a strong spiritual aura around us.

The emotional intensity of a pre-battle situation, which is not uncommon in other armies at war, was confirmed by the ritual as a divine moment—as a connection to the holy; as reliving the experience of religious icons like Hussein.

On the other hand, the habit of being emotionally affected by the stories narrated in Shia rituals, as explained earlier, strengthened the exalted emotional spirituality that in turn created a charismatic aura around the emotionally affected, as was shown in the example of a commander's crying in prostration during a *rowza*.

Religiously inspired charisma validated as the organizational principle

As various instances discussed here attest, therefore, the charisma perceived by the Guards to be diffused throughout the entity was officiated as a source of cohesion, compliance and order. It was deployed to establish a distinguishable organizational identity, especially in encounters with the regular army. It was also affirmed in practices that created and maintained internal order. In smaller units, commanders were informally elected by men based on their evaluation of his religious charm. They would in turn occasionally be rank-ordered by the command according to the same criteria. And, perhaps most significantly, frequently practised rituals ascertained the 'holiness' of the war experience, thereby legitimizing the shared reading as a definitive institution within the IRGC. They would strengthen both the predominant narrative of the war—the one that associated it with the battle of Karbala—and the practice of emotional spirituality that was a major source of the individuals' charismatic presence.

Conclusion

I have argued that the institutional survival of the IRGC in the first two years of the Iran–Iraq war can be attributed to a diffused, routinely accessible charisma in the everyday life on the front, the collective recognition of which was translated into organizational cohesion and structure through different instances of validation. If seen from the viewpoint of military-organizational studies, the IRGC's survival as an independent unit under extreme battle pressure remains puzzling. The IRGC lacked a rigid organizational structure (especially in terms of command), a trained and experienced officer corps and a disciplined rank and file. It also, during the first year of the war, did not enjoy the political support that it later acquired. Nevertheless, it not only resisted both fragmentation and absorption into the standing army, but rose in size and military strength throughout the war's second year, just ready to challenge the authority of the regular army in the years to come.

What held the nascent organization together as it entered the war was a commonly recognized charismatic presence which was not centred on a single individual, but diffused throughout the institution; a charisma that different levels of command and the rank and file were able to possess and be respected for. It maintained its vitality through its direct roots in everyday religious beliefs and emotions. Every experienced believer in Shiite narratives of martyrdom was a candidate to be directly connected to the 'vital force' he believed in. Therefore, despite what has come to be known as institutional charisma, the charm did not subside into mundanity as it was spread. The hermeneutic circle of perceiving and affirming the religious charisma institutionalized it as the defining feature of the IRGC: it created a characteristic organizational identity, a principle of hierarchy and a vibrant source of cohesion and motivation.

From an empirical perspective, the young IRGC was an exceptional case of a military organization as it maintained its bottom-up source of order and functionality under the pressure of a conventional war. The very religious-revolutionary fervour that brought the founders together and attracted the mass of volunteers to them constituted the source of order and solidarity when the war started. At least for the part of the IRGC illustrated in the selected memoirs, the institutional charisma did not lead smoothly to a rationally stratified institution, but to a cohesive, egalitarian whole that survived the extreme pressure of a frontline battle for more than a year—an experience that helped the organization thrive in the years to come.

This in-depth look at the IRGC's internal dynamics is only a first step towards mapping the IRGC's source of contemporary power in Iran and the Middle East, but is indispensable for following the organization's path to political prominence. It was arguably the consolidation of this very unconventional structure and its compatibility with the revolutionary ideology that gave the Guards as well as their political allies an advantage over rival factions and organizations. It is also a necessary first step towards a comprehensive understanding of currently active Islamic militias that are much harder to penetrate. It is generally assumed that the militias' ideology as articulated in scriptures would reveal such groups' driving force and organizing principles. By a closer look at the case of the IRGC, however, it becomes clear that the on-the-ground, everyday understanding of abstract ideologies and its affirmation through action play a more significant role in activating potential sources of cohesion and successful performance.

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