Born by Revolution, Raised by War

The Iran-Iraq War and the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

Marius A. Belstad

Master's Degree Thesis in Peace and Conflict Studies, Department of Political Science

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Marius A. Belstad
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Marius A. Belstad
Fredrikstad
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1 Introduction: Iran and the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

The period between 1978 and 1988 remains the most important decade for the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as the important events that took place within this timeframe continue to exert an immeasurable impact on the outlook of the modern Iranian state. The ten years between the beginning of the 1978-79 Revolution and the end of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War witnessed the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to become one of the most powerful institutions within the emerging post-revolutionary Iranian state-structure, a position the IRGC was to retain over the next twenty years following the War’s end. This paper aims to analyse how the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps developed from a hastily gathered and ill-trained militia in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution to become Iran’s largest armed force, providing both external and internal security, while at the same time penetrating Iranian society by engaging in politics, industry, education and other civilian spheres of activity. I will argue that the key to understanding the IRGC’s rise in power and influence is to be found in the eight year long Iran-Iraq War, and building on Charles Tilly’s theoretical framework of “war-making and state-making” I will show how the effects of the War played a determining role in shaping the outcome of the Iranian Revolution, as well as the formation of the governmental structures and institutions that emerged within the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In the turmoil that followed the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini on 5 May 1979 issued a decree for the creation of the Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Islami, literally meaning the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, more commonly known as the Revolutionary Guard (or often simply referred to as the “Sepah” or the “Pasdaran”). The IRGC was to play a determining role in helping the Khomeinists prevail in the internal struggle to secure their grip over the post-revolutionary Iranian state-structure. However from its inception the Revolutionary Guard was but one of many revolutionary organisations competing for influence over Iranian society, and it was not a given that the IRGC would become such an important institution within the emerging Islamic Republic of Iran. The Iraqi invasion in September 1980 profoundly changed the role and responsibilities of the Islamic

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Revolutionary Guard Corps, developing from a makeshift revolutionary militia focused on the domestic environment into a well-organised, full-fledged army charged with taking the lead in the Iranian war effort. Volunteers flocked to the IRGC as popular revolutionary fervour was channelled into the War against Iraq, and with the substantial increases in manpower the Revolutionary Guard came to outgrow the regular Iranian Army and become Iran’s principal institution of organised violence. The War at the same time altered the internal Iranian power balance and provided a convenient pretext for the Khomeinist regime to deal with political challengers at home, the IRGC utilising its newfound power to undermine and defeat its internal rivals. The Revolutionary Guard’s increased influence also warranted its infiltration into the civilian spheres of the Islamic Republic, becoming an important political actor in its own right, engaging in the distribution of goods and benefits to its main constituents, and developing a substantial weapons industry to name but a few of the IRGC’s extensive activities. This paper aims to shed light on these above mentioned processes to explain exactly how the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps came to occupy such an important role within the post-revolutionary Iranian state, focusing on the IRGC’s development from its early beginnings in the Iranian Revolution to become a large and powerful organisation wielding considerable influence over multiple sectors of the Iranian state at the end of the Iran-Iraq War.

Since the end of the eight year struggle between Iran and Iraq, the IRGC has been established as one of Iran’s main power-centres, and arguably today the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps seems stronger than ever. To show but a few examples of the IRGC’s importance in present-day Iran, the current Iranian president, Mahmud Ahmedinejad, and about fifty percent of his ministers have a background from the IRGC, and the Revolutionary Guards played a pivotal role in quieting the huge protests after Ahmedinejad’s re-election as president in 2009. The much debated Iranian nuclear research centres and power-plants are built on the premises of the Revolutionary Guards who play a key role in their operation and activities. In addition IRGC-members exercise a lot of influence over Iranian society through personal networks, and enjoy benefits and privileges like tax exemptions, first call on scarce goods and have control over a large shadow economy, engaging in black-market profiteering. The IRGC’s reach extends to virtually every sector of the Iranian market, from laser eye surgery and automobile manufacturing to engineering, construction and real estate, prompting Iranian dissident Mohsen Sazegara, one of the IRGC’s early founders, to assert that the Revolutionary
Guard today constitutes something like a “Communist party, the KGB, a business complex, and the mafia” all in one organisation. It is my aim in this paper to show that the precursors to the IRGC’s extensive penetration of the Iranian state can be found in developments that took place during the Iran-Iraq War, and that the War was the major factor conditioning the rise and shape of the IRGC’s substantial organisation. In order to fully understand how the IRGC came to occupy such a prominent position in Iranian society and political life, it is essential to study its early origins and history, starting with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ creation in the course of the Iranian Revolution. I will argue that the Iran-Iraq War that followed shortly after and was a direct consequence of the Revolution, in many ways was the defining moment of the IRGC, which still derives much of its legitimacy from its performance in the War. Thus even though this paper is mainly concerned with analysing and explaining historical events from the Islamic Republic’s first decade, it is also highly relevant for understanding the situation in Iran today. Analysing the rise of the IRGC during the ten year period between 1978 and 1988, I will make the overall argument that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was born by Revolution, and raised by War.

2 How Wars shape States: Exploring theories of war, state-building, revolutions and armies

How exactly does warfare influence the shaping of governmental institutions within a state? Or, to be more specific regarding the case at hand, in what ways did the Iran-Iraq War contribute to the rise of the Revolutionary Guard to become one of the most powerful new institutions within the post-revolutionary Iranian state-structure? As should be clear from the introduction above, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps grew into becoming a very multifaceted and quite complicated organisation in the course of the Iran-Iraq War. The difficulty of accurately defining the IRGC, or “fitting” it into a certain typology or broader category that captures the many dimensions of this complex institution, makes it equally hard to find an overarching theoretical framework to help analyse the Revolutionary Guard’s rise in power and influence within the post-revolutionary Iranian state. Nevertheless there are some suggestive theories that might aid us along the way in this endeavour by drawing focus to one or a few aspects of the IRGC at a time. Charles Tilly’s theory of “war-making and

state-making” constitutes a valuable framework in this regard, highlighting how the preparation for and prosecution of warfare leads to the development of stronger and more powerful governmental organisations within a state. Tilly’s theory of how war acts as a catalyst conditioning and shaping the rise of a state’s internal institutions is however not without its fair share of critiques, and I will discuss the most commonly voiced of these in order to justify the appliance of Tilly’s framework as a tool to better understand the development of the IRGC in the course of the Iran-Iraq War. Before turning to Tilly’s framework however, it is also important to emphasise that the rise of the Revolutionary Guard cannot be understood without reference to the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution, and drawing on insights from studies by Theda Skocpol and Jonathan R. Adelman is very helpful in understanding the important links between revolutions, armies and war. Taken together, these theories go a long way in offering a guiding framework to help explain the development of the IRGC from a revolutionary militia into a full-fledged army, engaging in intense international warfare and gaining increasingly more influence within the new post-revolutionary Iranian state-structure.

2.1 Definitions, choice of theory and scope of analysis

Before turning to the theoretical frameworks, some preliminary definitions and clarifications are in order. First of all, the principal aim of this study, to investigate the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps during the Iran-Iraq War, means that it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the development of the Iranian state as a whole. To more accurately narrow down the focus of my analysis, it can be useful to begin with a widely accepted definition of the very term “state” itself, provided by the standards of international law, where a state, to be recognised as such, needs to fulfil four basic requirements; a clearly defined territory, a permanent population, a government wielding authority over the population in the territory, and independence in relations with other states. Out of these four criteria of statehood, this paper is solely focused on the one requirement of government, and not with the historical development of the Iranian state in its entirety to encompass all of these criteria. In any case, regarding Iran, the requirements of territory, population and independence remained more or less unaltered by the major events that are the subject of this paper, namely the 1978-79

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Revolution and the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. More to the point, this paper is concerned with analysing how these two momentous events influenced and shaped the last criteria of statehood; the emergence of new governmental structures in post-revolutionary Iran, and the role of the IRGC in this process. Central to my analysis will therefore be the concept of state-building, which will be used to denote the larger processes of establishing and building state institutions. It should be noted from the very outset that the concept of state-building in this paper will be differentiated from the often otherwise related term state-making, which will be used in strict accordance with Tilly’s theoretical framework, where it simply is defined as state-controlled violence aimed at eliminating or neutralizing internal rivals. State-making is thus to be understood as but one of Tilly’s four “state-activities”, together with war-making, protection and extraction (as will be further discussed below), which together influence and shape the wider process of state-building.

Studying the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps within a theory of how war effects state-building certainly warrants some further justification. Turning to Tilly’s framework of war and state-making, the potential effect of warfare on all of the four above mentioned criteria of statehood should be recognised (incorporating/losing territory and population, gaining/subverting independence), but again, in accordance with this paper, the bulk of Tilly’s theory is focused on the shaping of governmental institutions. The important question thus remains as to which degree the IRGC can be said to represent the Iranian government as such, or whether it rather represents one political faction among others within the state. The latter might seem a good description of the IRGC today, especially in light of the organisation’s later development after the end of the War and the death of its creator and main political ally Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. With the death of Khomeini the Islamic Republic lost its uniting father figure and was left more open to political factionalism. However, as will be shown in this paper, the Revolutionary Guard’s early development was closely tied to the rise of the Khomeinist regime to dominate the Iranian state, and with the IRGC performing many important state functions in this process, as well as later, it is

\footnote{Formally Iran’s independence was acknowledged when the last Allied troops left the country following the end of World War II, although the US continued to enjoy considerable influence through their close relationship with the Shah. As regards territory and population, Iranians often draw their roots way back historically to the empire of Cyrus the Great, approximately year 559 BC, which although a truth with moderations clearly testifies to the belief in a defined homeland and people, although Iran’s borders today are a product of relatively modern times.}

\footnote{Tilly, Charles (1985):"War Making and State Making as Organized Crime" p.169-187 in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer & Theda Skocpol (eds.): Bringing the State Back In p.181.}
therefore safe to say that the IRGC played an important role in post-revolutionary Iranian state-building as part of the emerging governmental structure. Charles Tilly’s framework of war and state-making thus constitutes a valuable tool for my analysis of how the Iran-Iraq War contributed to the rise of the IRGC to become one of the most dominating institutions within the new Iranian state after 1979.

Utilising insights from Tilly’s framework of how warfare conditions state-building to analyse the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps during the Iran-Iraq War certainly also has its limitations. First of all, it is important to keep in mind that the Iran-Iraq War had major repercussions not only for the Revolutionary Guard, but also for other governmental institutions and Iranian society as a whole, not to mention the War’s regional and international dimensions, which I will not devote much attention in this paper. The complex organisation of the Iranian state, consisting of a wide and intricate network of different institutions with varying responsibilities and areas of influence, cannot possibly be explained by reference to the IRGC alone, and as such this paper is merely concerned with but one dimension of the Iranian state-building experience that took place during the Iran-Iraq War. Second, it is also important to acknowledge that although war is a major factor in shaping governmental institutions, it is by no means the sole source of state-building, and no such claim is made either by Tilly or in this paper. It is important to recognise that other factors, like geopolitical and socio-economic contexts, also play vital parts in any state-building process. Nevertheless the development of the IRGC into such a powerful and influential organisation, which importance in Iranian society arguably has grown even greater since the war-years, clearly makes this one of the most enduring impacts that the War left on the Iranian state-structure, making the rise of the Revolutionary Guards an important area of study deserving of further attention. As Rasler & Thompson assert on a general level, different types of wars have varying impacts on different societies. To this we might add that the timing of a war is also very important, and to fully understand the far-reaching effects of the Iran-Iraq War on the development of the IRGC it is unavoidable to begin with analysing the watershed event of the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution.

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6 Consult the accompanied literature-list for texts offering a wider coverage of these aspects of the Iran-Iraq War.
2.2 Revolution, Armies and War

Studying the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War would of course make little sense without reference to the before-happening Iranian Revolution of 1978-79. The Revolution and the War were intimately bound together, as I will go into more specific detail about later, in section 3.5 (From Revolution to War). A very important point that however should be stressed right away is that it was the Revolution, in sweeping away the established regime of Mohammed Reza Shah, which brought with it the requirements of renewed state-building in Iran, understood as the creation of new governmental institutions capable of exerting influence and power over the Iranian population and territory. The Shah’s state was viewed as an instrument of oppression by the Iranian revolutionaries, and therefore many of the distrusted institutions created by the Shah were dismantled, re-organised or temporarily closed down in the course of the Revolution. Those organisations allowed to persist, like the regular Iranian Army, were subject to purges, had their influence severely circumscribed and were kept under strict surveillance. As a result, there were few existing organisations which the revolutionary authorities were willing to trust faced with such a serious challenge as represented by the Iraqi invasion. This might help explain why the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps became such an important institution within the post-revolutionary Iranian state-structure, as it constituted one of few institutions capable of both supplying the needed manpower, and deemed trustworthy enough by the Khomeinist regime, to perform many vital functions as the Iranian society became engulfed in the War. The Revolution and the War must therefore be seen in conjunction to fully explain how the IRGC expanded its influence over different spheres of the Iranian state.

It is hardly surprising that revolutions, given their usually violent nature, regularly are followed by even more violence, often in the form of international warfare. Studying the English, French, Russian and Chinese revolutions, Adelman concludes that in general revolutions tend to promote wars and intervention by external powers. Skocpol, comparing these “classic” older revolutions with newer ones such as in Cuba, Vietnam and Iran, notes the same pattern, commenting that revolutions seem to make wars more likely because domestic conflicts often spill over to involve foreign partners and because revolutions create

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perceived threats and opportunities for other, often neighbouring, states. Skocpol further asserts that the way in which revolutionary leaders mobilise mass popular support in the course of the struggle for state power in turn increases the potential to build strong new state institutions. Furthermore, the task at which the revolutionised regimes in the modern world seemingly have performed the best is in the mobilisation of citizen support for protracted international warfare, excelling at motivating the population for making supreme sacrifices in war. Revolutions thus often lead to a markedly raised capacity for a nation to wage humanly costly wars, a conclusion also derived at by Adelman, and an assessment that seems to very well describe developments in the case of Iran. Skocpol attributes this outcome to geopolitical circumstances and the political relationship established between the state-building leadership and the rebellious lower classes in the early days of the revolution. Moreover, the revolutionary enthusiasm derived from defeating internal enemies can easily be converted into the task of mass military mobilisation against external threats, with guerrilla armies, urban militias and committees of surveillance having served as splendid agencies of military recruitment from the French to the Iranian Revolution. Going from revolution to war, it is only natural that the new revolutionary armies come to play a very important part in post-revolutionary state-building, and in the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran this role was filled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

As already mentioned, and as I will return to later, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps certainly developed to become much more than an ordinary conventional army. Nevertheless the IRGC’s basic structure is clearly based on that of a military institution, and as Adelman notes, without the creation of a strong and capable revolutionary army, any revolution has a poor chance of success. Many important tasks usually befall the new army in a revolutionary setting, not only including defending the revolution and its accomplishments from domestic counterrevolutionaries and external enemies, but often also playing a major role in the reconstruction and rebuilding of society, given the inherit disintegration of the old state-order implied by the revolution itself. This makes the revolutionary army paramount in the

14 Skocpol (1988) p.149-152.
15 Adelman (1985) p.4-5.
establishment and consolidation of a new state-structure. According to Adelman, the institution of the military usually goes through four steps in the course of a revolution: firstly, before the revolution takes place, the old army is closely tied up with the old order and largely viewed as inefficient, corrupt and expensive by the population. In the second phase, a new army rises, after or before the actual seizure of power, to defend the gains of the revolution. In the third phase the new consolidated revolutionary army, backed by a new centralized and capable government, sweeps aside internal domestic foes (what Tilly would label state-making) and often wins major victories against strong external enemies (war-making in Tilly’s terminology, as I will return to below). This is then followed by a fourth phase in which there is a tendency towards decline in revolutionary fervour both within the new army and the new government, but as this paper is mainly concerned with analysing the rise of the Revolutionary Guards, and noting that the IRGC in any case still remains quite dedicated to its revolutionary mission and ideals, this last phase is of little relevance to us here.\textsuperscript{16} However the first three steps seem to accurately describe the development of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a military organisation, as will be clearly demonstrated in the remainder of this paper.

Summing up Skocpol and Adelman’s findings, revolutions often lead to mass mobilisation of a new strong revolutionary army, which is charged with many important tasks in the post-revolutionary setting. At the same time revolutions tend to markedly increase the chance of interstate warfare due to perceived threats or opportunities by other states, and the possibility of domestic conflicts spilling over to include foreign sponsors. As will be shown, these premises very much seem to hold true in the case of Iran, where the Revolution lead to the creation of the IRGC and was followed by the Iran-Iraq War. Turning to Tilly’s framework then becomes a natural next step in order to explore how war-making in turn influences the course of state-building. Given the fact that revolutions usually bring with them the requirements of establishing new state institutions to replace the old ones, the effects of engaging in intense interstate warfare are likely to shape the formation of these institutions to an even larger degree in a society that is in the process of rebuilding itself from the impact of a revolution.

2.3 Tilly’s theory of war-making and state-making

Charles Tilly’s framework of war-making and state-making takes as its starting point the different uses of state-controlled violence which can be used and combined in varying ways to influence the process of state-building. Tilly asserts that, under the general heading of organised violence, the agents of states characteristically carry out four different activities:

1. War making: Eliminating or neutralizing their own rivals outside the territories in which they have clear and continuous priority as wielders of force
2. State making: Eliminating or neutralizing their rivals inside those territories
3. Protection: Eliminating or neutralizing the enemies of their clients
4. Extraction: Acquiring the means of carrying out the first three activities – war making, state making, and protection.¹⁷

These four state-activities can each take a number of forms and overlap in varying degrees; for instance, extraction can range from outright plunder to bureaucratised taxation, and waging war on external enemies might entail eliminating or neutralising the enemies of one’s own clients. Yet all four are dependent on the state’s ability to monopolise the means of violence, and each of them, if carried out effectively, tends to reinforce the others. Thus, a state that successfully eradicates its internal rivals strengthens its ability to extract resources, to wage war, and to protect its chief supporters.¹⁸ Tilly envisions that, in an “idealized sequence” taking place over a longer period of time, war-making will initiate a process leading to the rise of a state-apparatus along the following lines:

In an idealized sequence, a great lord made war so effectively as to become dominant in a substantial territory, but that war making led to increased extraction of the means of war – men, arms, food, lodging, transportation, supplies, and/or the money to buy them – from the population within that territory. The building up of war making capacity likewise increased the capacity to extract. The very activity of extraction, if successful, entailed the elimination, neutralization, or cooptation of the great lord's local rivals; thus, it led to state making. As a by-product, it created organization in the form of tax collection agencies, police forces, courts, exchequers, account keepers; thus it again led to state making. To a lesser extent, war making likewise led to state making through the expansion of military organization itself, as a standing army, war industries, supporting bureaucracies, and (rather later) schools grew up within the state apparatus. All of these structures checked potential rivals and opponents. In the course of making war, extracting resources, and building up the state apparatus, the managers of states formed alliances with specific social classes. The members of those classes loaned

resources, provided technical services, or helped ensure the compliance of the rest of the population, all in return for a measure of protection against their own rivals and enemies.  

Tilly thus imagines the interaction between the four state-activities to function as shown in figure 1.1 below, in which war-making occupies the central role, being the only activity directly influencing all the other variables.

![Figure 1.1. Tilly’s model of War-making and State-making](source: Tilly (1985) p.183)

Rasler & Thompson’s study of war and state-making supports Tilly’s basic argument that war is one of the most significant and enduring sources of state-building. However Rasler & Thompson expand Tilly’s simple model to include far more details and mechanisms, ending up with a far more complicated structure. Some of Rasler & Thompson’s adjustments, like including numerous external factors that might influence or lead to the activity of war-making, do not concern us here as this paper is concerned with exploring the connections between revolution, war and state-building, and not the causes of war in general. Other of Rasler & Thompson’s criticisms are of more interest, for example I agree that the relationship between Tilly’s four state-activities is likely more reciprocal than his rigid model allows for. I especially believe this to be true in the case at hand, where the impact of going almost straight from revolution to war necessitated the prosecution of war-making, state-making, extraction and protection in parallel by the new revolutionary regime in Tehran, making the four activities influence each other much more in tandem and over a relatively much shorter
period of time than allowed for in Tilly’s “idealized sequence”. Rasler & Thompson also question the feasibility of maintaining clear-cut boundaries between the activities of war-making, meaning war on external enemies, and state-making, defined as “war” on internal enemies or rivals. Often this distinction will be blurred in reality, and again Iran is a case in point where the Revolutionary Guards engaged in warfare against both external and internal rivals, classifying both as enemies of the new state or simply “the enemies of Islam”. However I will maintain the distinction between the “external” and the “internal” functions of the IRGC to structure my analysis, and instead highlight along the way how performance in either activity influenced and led to empowerment in other spheres within the emerging Iranian state-structure.

2.4 Applying Tilly’s framework to the case of Iran

It should be made clear from the start that the development of post-revolutionary institutions in Iran in many ways does not conform strictly to Tilly’s “idealized sequence” of state-building. One obvious difference is that Tilly’s framework imagines as it starting point the total absence of any meaningful state-like formation, while in the case of Iran a modern state certainly existed before the advent of the 1978-79 Revolution. Iran’s revolutionaries were however very sceptical of the state they inherited, which was largely viewed as an instrument of the Shah’s oppression, and as mentioned the Revolution swept away many of the established institutions of the Shah’s regime. Moreover, driven by the conception that the state was ultimately a reactionary tool aimed at subduing the population, the post-revolutionary regime adopted a strategy of creating multiple mutually independent institutions to counterbalance each other, aimed at preventing any one institution of becoming too powerful and dominating the others.

Although sceptical to the idea of the modern state, the revolutionary authorities nevertheless ended up creating new capable and powerful governmental institutions, especially as the political faction closest to Khomeini, supported by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, grew to dominate the power-centres of the post-revolutionary Iranian state in the course of the Iran-Iraq War. War therefore remained a major source of shaping state-building in Iran, even though the creation of the Islamic Republic did

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23 Rasler & Thompson (1989) p.11.
not take place in a total vacuum of “state-ness”, and Tilly’s framework of war-making and state-making should thus better be understood as a continuing process influencing not only the emergence, but also the further development of state-structures.

A more profound and commonly voiced critique of Charles Tilly’s model of war-making and state-making concerns its applicability across different cases and time periods. Like most of the research conducted within the field of the emergence of the modern nation-state, Tilly’s framework is inherently derived from a study of the European state-building experience from roughly post-1500, making many scholars question its validity in relation to later processes of state-formation in a non-European context. Sørensen has pointed to the apparent absence of war-making and state-making in the Tillyan sense leading to successful state-building in the third world, where many states remain weak and underdeveloped in terms of effective institutions wielding authority over their respective territory and population. Sørensen attributes this outcome mainly to the prevailing conventions of the present international system, where strong norms against territorial expansion through aggressive warfare in effect give third world countries what he calls “a certified life insurance, deposited with the United Nations, which guarantees the absence of external mortal danger”. In other words, post-colonial countries are guaranteed sovereign statehood as long as the international community continues to view existing borders as legal and legitimate, while attempts to change them by force are not. This decreases the power-holders’ long term considerations and incentives to build strong and durable state-structures, instead opting for seeking quick revenues, and facing no serious external threats, third world armies tend to face inwards and focus on the domestic realm. Unlike in Europe, where state-formation took place within a context of facing deadly external threats, Sørensen therefore argues that war-making constitutes a less important source of state-building in the contemporary third world and that the Eurocentric preoccupation with the constructive effects of war-making is in need of revision.

Although Sørensen’s assessments certainly should be kept in mind, a conclusion more favourable to the validity of Tilly’s theory is found in a study of state-building in the third phase.

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world conducted by Cameron Thies. Using a sample of 83 post-colonial developing countries between 1975 and 2000, Thies finds that the presence of external rivals significantly increases a state’s ability to extract tax revenues from its population. The ability to extract taxes is seen as a measurement of the effectiveness of state institutions, in accordance with Tilly’s extraction, thus indicating a higher degree of state-building. The key independent variable in the study, external rivalry, is defined as the threat of external war, which, allowing for the inclusion of preparations for war, can be said to constitute a milder version of Tilly’s concept of war-making. Thies asserts that as rivalry is found to have a positive effect on state-building, actual interstate warfare might to an even larger degree lead to the development of stronger state institutions in the third world. In any case many of the post-colonial developing countries are still relatively young compared to their European counterparts, and as they often have been created along the lines of the European model of statehood, Tilly’s insights might still be relevant although meeting with a mixed track-record when it comes to explaining state-building in the third world.

Directing our focus closer to the geographical area under study in this paper, Schwarz draws attention to the remarkable absence of studies on the interplay between war-making and state-formation when it comes to the Middle East. He also comments on the notable absence of the concept of rentierism as a factor conditioning state-building. Schwarz defines rents as state income from abroad derived by selling natural resources, especially oil and gas. This very much pertains to the case of Iran as one of the world’s major oil-exporting countries. Following Schwarz, the idea is that in a rentier-state oil-income, or income from any other natural resources, reduces the need for the state to extract resources from its society, thus reducing the need to develop effective state institutions, like tax-collecting agencies, for this purpose. Thus, according to Schwarz, rentierism sets off the Tillyan process that links war-making to state-formation by offsetting the need to extract further resources from society, and regionally-specific contextual factors like these should be devoted more attention in the analysis of non-European state-building. Although it is hard to disagree with Schwarz on

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this last point, I nevertheless justify treating the rise of the IRGC within Tilly’s theoretical framework of war-making and state-making for two reasons. First of all, as part of the riots that lead up to the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution oil workers went on strike, closing down many oil refineries and most of the Iranian oil fields. The victory of the Revolution, with its emphasis on ridding Iran of foreign influence, in turn led to a mass exodus of the foreign workforce which for decades had occupied a central role in the Iranian oil-industry as managers and technical experts, while the Iranian workers themselves had largely been confined to less paid lower-level jobs within the oil-industry. This left the new Iranian regime incapable of resuming oil-production at pre-revolutionary levels and resulted in a substantial drop in oil-revenues. This was then further compounded by the effects of the Iran-Iraq War, with a string of successful Iraqi attacks on Iranian oil-installations resulting in the crippling of the Iranian production-capability and infrastructure, while international trade embargos imposed on Iran at the same time increasingly lead to the shortage of essential equipment and spare parts. Secondly, and relating to my first point, the War with Iraq proved to be so lengthy and costly that the Iranian regime had to extract as much resources as possible from its population, not being able to function simply as a rentier state, and thus allowing warfare to exert a considerable impact on the emerging Iranian state-structure. As should be clear from the above discussion however, Tilly’s theory of war and state-making by no means constitutes an undisputable, universally applicable framework for analysing every aspect of the state-building process. Nevertheless it seems to accurately capture some of the most important processes leading to the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps during the Iran-Iraq War, and as such functions well to help structure my analysis.

2.5 Thesis-structure: From Revolution to War and the rise of the IRGC

Utilising Tilly’s framework as a basis, I will first focus my analysis on the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in war-making, that is to say the external war against Iraq, in chapter 4. This chapter will also include a discussion of how the IRGC’s role in the war effort could later be used to cultivate a large amount of legitimacy, derived from the Revolutionary Guard’s performance in the “sacred defence” of the Islamic Republic and the Revolution. In the following chapter I will then turn my analysis to the IRGC’s elimination and neutralisation of domestic rivals, what is labelled state-making following Tilly’s terminology.

Here I will focus on the IRGC’s internal functions, showing how the Revolutionary Guard increasingly came to monopolise the means of violence and also took on an active political role within the Iranian state. The Tillyan concept of protection will then briefly be treated in chapter 6, showing how the members of the IRGC, also constituting the main supporters of the emerging Iranian regime of Ayatollah Khomeini, received special rights and privileges in return for ensuring that the rest of the population remained in compliance with the authorities. The Revolutionary Guard’s role in the extraction of resources will not be treated separately, but rather as this final of Tilly’s four state-activities is simply defined as “[a]cquiring the means of carrying out the first three activities”, it will be addressed implicitly throughout the paper.35 Given the Revolutionary Guard’s extensive involvement in all four of Tilly’s state-activities, it is no wonder the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps grew to become one of the most powerful institutions within the new Iranian state during the Iran-Iraq War. However the IRGC also developed to engage in activities that went beyond the simple employment of organised violence, dimensions that are equally important to fully understand and get a complete picture of the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

In addition to growing into Iran’s largest armed force in the course of the War, the IRGC also expanded its role into what we would typically characterise as non-military sectors, like industry, education and the economy. The way in which the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps developed from an inherently military organisation into these other fields of activity have by some researchers, like Wehrey et al. and Wiig, been compared to similar experiences in countries like Russia, China and Pakistan.36 Much like in Iran, these countries witnessed the rise of a strong army to defend a newly established regime, following communist revolutions in Russia and China and after gaining independence in the case of Pakistan. The role of the army in Pakistan perhaps constitutes the most similar example to that of the IRGC in Iran, as the Pakistani military substantially expanded its reach into the agricultural, manufacturing, construction and service sectors and established extensive networks linking the army to the different activities of the state.37 The Pakistani military also developed into a key player in domestic politics, again much comparable to the role of the IRGC in Iran. Of course the similarities between these cases should not in any way be overstated, and I will

briefly return to some important differences between the IRGC and the Soviet and Chinese communist armies in chapter 5. However, although comparing the rise of the IRGC in Iran to other similar cases certainly could yield new important insights into the mechanisms that prompt military institutions to expand their influence over society, little research has been done within this area, and it will not be devoted much attention in this paper.

Arguably the development of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps beyond the military sphere can in many ways be predicted within Tilly’s framework of war-making and state-making. Tilly himself notes the seemingly extraordinary importance of strong military organisations in third world countries, asserting that:

> To a larger degree, states that have come into being recently […] have acquired their military organization from outside, without the same internal forging of mutual constraints between rulers and ruled. To the extent that outside states continue to supply military goods and expertise in return for commodities, military alliance or both, the new states harbor powerful, unconstrained organisations that easily overshadow all other organizations within their territories. 38

The role of the military thus becomes even more important in the state-building process of these newer, post-World War II states, and Tilly asserts that “the managers of those military organisations exercise extraordinary power”, meaning that dominating the means of violence can easily be converted into wielding considerable influence also within the civilian spheres of these states. 39 Moreover, returning to Tilly’s “idealized sequence”, quoted at length in section 2.3, Tilly mentions the rise of war-industries, schools and other functions within the state-apparatus as by-products of the four state-activities of war-making, state-making, protection and extraction. 40 With the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps engaging heavily in all four of these state-activities, it is perhaps only to be expected that the IRGC also came to exert substantial influence over the arms industry, the educational sector and other spheres within the emerging post-revolutionary Iranian state. Dominating the means of organised violence, which is the precondition for successfully carrying out Tilly’s four activities, then provides a reasonable explanation for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps also occupying such a central role in the overall outcome of the Iranian state-building process that took place in the course of the Iran-Iraq War. I will return to the expanding roles of the IRGC into fields

like industry, education and the economy in chapter 6, but before jumping that far ahead, I will start out by depicting the background and the main events of the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution, an event of paramount importance to understand the subsequent rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps during the Iran-Iraq War.

3 Born by Revolution: Historical backdrop and the creation of the IRGC

The birth of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was closely tied to the events of the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution. The different forces that united to overthrow the regime of Mohammed Reza Shah were many and with diverging agendas, and as soon as the Revolution had prevailed, the coalition began to give way to internal disagreements over the future direction of the Iranian state. It was against this backdrop of revolutionary turmoil that Ayatollah Khomeini on 5 May 1979 issued a decree for the creation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and as its name implies, the IRGC was charged with safeguarding the gains of what increasingly became known as the “Islamic” Revolution. From its inception the Revolutionary Guard enjoyed a close relationship with the political forces closest to Khomeini. The IRGC was however but one of many organisations vying for influence in the wake of the 1978-79 Revolution, and it was not a given that the Revolutionary Guard would develop into such a powerful institution within the new Iranian state. The advent of the Iraqi invasion in 1980 exerted a considerable influence on the emerging structures of the Islamic Republic, and in order to gain a better understanding of the War as well as the early developments of the IRGC, the background of Iranian Revolution becomes a natural place to start my analysis.

3.1 The background of the Revolution: The authoritarian regime of Mohammed Reza Shah

The roots of the 1978-79 Revolution can be traced way back in Iranian history. It can be argued to be the result of an Iranian political awakening which was initiated by the earlier Constitutional Revolution of 1905, or be seen as the culmination of a battle to rid the country of foreign influence that started early in the 1800s with the infringements made on Persian sovereignty and territory by the expanding colonial powers of Great Britain and Russia. These events, along with many others, are no doubt important in Iranian history, and the long term
processes of political awakening and struggle against foreign domination remain important underlying factors of the 1978-79 Revolution. However for the purpose of this paper I will focus on the more immediate background of the wave of protests and upheavals that swept through Iran in 1978 and 1979, eventually resulting in the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and giving birth to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The success of the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution meant the downfall of the regime of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who was to be the last Shah of Iran. The Pahlavi-dynasty was founded by Mohammed Reza’s father, Reza Shah, who after being one of the key participants in a successful governmental coup in February 1921 had secured increasingly more power in his own hands before deposing of the existing Qajar-dynasty and grabbing the Iranian throne for himself in 1925. Reza Shah had developed an increasingly authoritarian political system, until he was forced to abdicate following the Allied occupation of Iran in August 1941 during the Second World War.\(^\text{41}\) Reza Shah had made no secret of his pro-German sympathies leading up to the war, and when the Allies made the decision to secure Iran for Allied war purposes, not least as a strategically important supply route to the Soviet Union, he was accordingly removed from power.\(^\text{42}\) Reza Shah’s son, the then 21-years old Mohammed Reza, was however allowed to inherit the office of Shah after his father, and was installed on the Iranian throne on 17 September 1941.\(^\text{43}\) The Allies at first encouraged an opening of the Iranian political system, but with the international climate shifting from World War to Cold War and with the popular elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq leading a movement for the nationalisation of the Iranian oil reserves, Great Britain and the US felt their interests in the Gulf-region threatened. They found the rather politically sidelined Mohammed Reza Shah a willing ally, and after a CIA-instigated coup against the Mosaddeq-government in August 1953, the Shah was brought back in charge and with American help started monopolising power over Iranian society.

Mohammed Reza Shah thus had to endure the stigma of being installed as Iranian ruler by foreign powers, and by many of his opponents he was denounced as little more than an


\(^{43}\) Some consideration was given to the restoration of the Qajar-dynasty, but this proved unpractical as the remaining Qajar heir was serving in the Royal Navy and had a poor command of Farsi, see Ansari (2003) p.83.
“American puppet”. There is no doubt that the Shah relied heavily on American backing to keep in power, and the US also increasingly came to view the Shah as an important ally in the Gulf. To secure his grip over Iranian society and keep domestic political dissent to a minimum, the Shah was helped by the US in setting up the notorious internal security services, the SAVAK, in 1957, which received training and technical assistance from the CIA and FBI as well as the Israeli intelligence service. In addition Mohammed Reza, much like his father, cultivated the rise and expansion of the armed forces as the base of his political power, and with the help of the US the size of the Army was increased from some 120,000 to over 200,000 men in the decade from 1953 to 1963, and by 1977 it totalled some 410,000 men, making Iran the strongest military power in the region. In return for American aid and equipment, the Shah followed an overwhelmingly pro-Western policy, bringing Iran into the Baghdad Pact in 1955, and by 1968, when Great Britain announced that it would no longer be able to service its imperial obligations east of Suez after 1971, the Shah was anxious to flex his military muscle and fill the gap. The British and American governments were more than happy to see an allied Iran taking responsibility for the security of the Persian Gulf, and from 1972 the Nixon administration encouraged the Shah to take on this role by agreeing to sell him whatever sophisticated military equipment he wanted short of nuclear armaments. Leaning on a heavy flow of oil-income, especially after the oil crisis of 1973 (in which the Shah himself played a key role), the Shah thus kept in power by relying on American support, the might of his Army and strict political suppression of the increasingly discontent Iranian people.

Mohammed Reza Shah’s domestic policy also provoked widespread opposition among the Iranian population. One of his most unpopular decisions, which also seemed to confirm his dependency on the US, was when the Shah in 1964 granted the passing of a bill guaranteeing legal immunity to all American “government” personnel in Iran. The bill was widely criticized as a return to the age of foreign capitulations, and was condemned among others by the increasingly more popular and politically active Ayatollah Khomeini, who was sent into exile shortly thereafter. Through the better part of his reign the Shah, again much like his

47 When a $200 million US-loan to Iran was accepted the same day as the immunities bill was passed, many concluded that the Shah had sold Iranian sovereignty to the Americans. See Ansari (2006) p.49-51.
father, followed a policy of attempting to modernise Iran along Western lines. This was seen not least in the policy plan he launched with much fanfare in 1963, which the Shah simply referred to as “The White Revolution”. This “revolution from above” was intended to initiate and complete a social and political transformation of the country, but in the end did little to address the plights of the population. Ayatollah Khomeini voiced strong opposition against the White Revolution, attacking it among other things for the seizure of private property entailed in the land reform and the granting of voting rights to women.\(^48\) The Shah’s policies also brought with them an increasing cultural Westernisation which was resented by many segments of the Iranian population, not least the bazaaris and the ulama (Islamic clergy), whose prestige and positions were attacked. Western immigrants, movies, clothing and habits were transforming the traditional Iranian society, and for many Iranians Western culture came to be associated with moral decay.\(^49\) The battle against “Westoxication” increasingly became linked with the opposition against the Shah’s American-friendly regime, and in many ways the 1978-79 Revolution came to be defined against the US as well as the Shah.\(^50\) The US-hostage crisis that followed in the wake of the Revolution must be seen in this light. In the end the Shah’s failure to win-over large segments of the Iranian population with his domestic as well as foreign policies, combined with his own extravagant and luxurious lifestyle, made him increasingly more alienated and unpopular among the Iranian masses. Mohammed Reza’s rule was coming under attack from a whole range of actors demanding changes in Iranian society; forces with different goals and agendas, but united in their common opposition against the Shah’s autocratic regime.

3.2 Different forces and ideologies behind the Revolution

The complex chain of events that initiated what was to be known as the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution can hardly be done justice to in this relatively short analysis. Like many other revolutions the rapidly evolving dynamics of the situation tend to leave observers bewildered, and in any case the true nature and characteristics of the Iranian Revolution still remain contested and contentious. It is however clear that the Revolution was a defining moment of momentous importance to Iranian society, and the riots that broke out in Qom in January 1978

\(^{50}\) The term ”Westoxication” (Gharbzadegi) first appeared in the 1960s in the writings of Jalal Al-e Ahmad, whose ideas were later taken up and developed further by ideologists like Ali Shariati and played an important part in the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution.
are often cited as the beginning of the unravelling of the Shah’s regime. These uprisings followed the publication of a newspaper article attacking Ayatollah Khomeini, who by this time had become the very symbol of royalist opposition from his exile in Iraq and later Paris.\textsuperscript{51} The initial protests seemed almost trivial, and could probably easily have been put down by the Shah’s extensive security apparatus, which seemed bigger and stronger than ever in the eyes of many foreign observers. In the event the Shah however seemed unsecure and unable to act promptly, and hesitated to give the orders for the Army to attack and disperse the crowds. Perhaps influenced by then US President Carter’s new emphasis on human rights, the Shah was reluctant to openly apply force on his own population, and even went as far as “recognising” the Revolution and turning on his own supporters in an effort to appease the demonstrators.\textsuperscript{52} As the uprisings and demonstrations spread throughout the country in 1978 it however became clear that the days of the Shah’s regime were numbered, and with approximately two million people rallying in the streets of Tehran, the Shah fled the country in the middle of January 1979. Soon thereafter, on February 1, Ayatollah Khomeini returned triumphantly from his exile and was greeted as a hero by the cheering crowds, and soon declared the victory of the Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Iranian people had risen up against the Shah, but although most accepted Khomeini as a unifying symbol of the Revolution, the crowds were driven by a large array of different ideologies, and had very different views on the future structure and organisation of the new Iranian state.

The main elements uniting against the Shah’s regime can roughly be divided into three different groups; the modern middle class, the traditional middle class and the working-class.\textsuperscript{53} The modern middle class consisted of the part of the population that had been trained and educated by the Pahlavi-state’s new modern institutions. These often Western-influenced students and technocrats were dissatisfied with the lack of political freedoms and opportunities under the Shah’s rule, and played a very important role in initialising the Revolution through the circulation of open protest-letters and organisation of opposition.

\textsuperscript{51} Dating the beginning of the Revolution to these riots in Qom is of course a major simplification of a very complex process. For example, Ervand Abrahamian argues that the first sparks of the Revolution can be found earlier, in clashes between the police and students that broke out after a series of politically centered poetry-reading sessions at Aryamehr University on 19 November 1977, see Abrahamian (1982) p.505-6.
\textsuperscript{52} Ansari (2006) p.40-1.
groups and rallies against the regime after police control was relaxed in Iran in 1977. The traditional middle class however provided the revolutionary movement with the required mass mobilisation of the population. The main components of this class, the ulama and the bazaaris, were traditional forces who felt their prestige severely threatened by the Shah’s policies of modernisation and secularisation. The rise of large government-owned industrial enterprises, banks and Iran’s integration into the world-market combined to undermine the position of the bazaari merchants, while the clergy experienced growing frustration as many of their traditional functions and sources of influence over society, like providing education and judicial responsibilities, were taken over by state-driven institutions like schools and secular courts. The bazaaris and the ulama had historically enjoyed a close-knit relationship, and once again they found themselves natural allies against the policies of the Pahlavi-state. They therefore wasted little time in utilising their extensive networks, especially the ulama’s religious networks and easy access to large crowds through mosque-services and religious decrees (fatwas), to mobilise opposition on a massive scale against the Shah’s regime when the opportunity arose throughout 1978 and into 1979.

A third group that also figured prominently in the revolutionary struggle was the working class. Although the importance of this group’s contribution to the revolutionary effort is somewhat contested, Ervand Abrahamian concludes that “[i]f the two middle classes were the main bulwarks of the revolution, the urban working class was its chief battering ram.” The Iranian working class was largely a result of the Pahlavi-state’s industrialisation policies, and suffered from poor, often hazardous, working-conditions and a lack of rights and labour-regulations under the autocratic rule of the Shah. Somewhat absent from the early uprisings, the working class increasingly brought its full weight to bare on the regime from the summer of 1978, crippling the economy by calling massive strikes in the oil-, transport- and factory-industries, providing much of the youth that defiantly challenged the military authorities, many of the martyrs of the revolutionary struggle, and the bulk of the vast crowds that marched in the streets demanding the Shah’s resignation.

The opposition groups that united against the Shah in the 1978-79 Revolution were also largely driven by three different, although often overlapping, ideological threads shaping their expectations for post-revolutionary Iran. The first was represented by liberal-bourgeois political parties, like the National Front and the Freedom Movement headed by Mehdi Bazargan, who was appointed as leader of the Provisional Revolutionary Government by Ayatollah Khomeini following the triumph of the Revolution in February 1979. These parties drew most of their members from the modern middle class and saw the Revolution as a shift from an authoritarian regime to a liberal democratic system, emphasising freedom from repression and individual rights like the right to private enterprise and property. On the other side of the political scale were parties on the left, mostly made up of and supported by students and some intellectuals and workers. The biggest of these parties was the Tudeh-party, followed by the more militant Fedaiyen-e Khalq and “Islamic Marxist” Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK). Parties on the left ranged from Stalinist to Maoist to Trotskyist, and from adhering to secularist to strict Islamic doctrines, but most of them shared the view of the Revolution as a radical transformation of Iran’s socioeconomic structure, and propagated the nationalisation of key industrial sectors and the removal of all imperialist ties.

The third ideological strand underpinning the Revolution was represented by the fundamentalist ulama, and drew its support heavily from the traditional middle class and the rural and urban poor. Although the ulama by no means constituted a unified political group, with some supporting a liberal democratic political system while still others were leaning towards the left, many of the most prominent members of the clergy supported the program of the Islamic Republic Party (IRP), created with the approval of Ayatollah Khomeini in February 1979. The IRP called for the establishment of an Islamic Republic along the lines of Khomeini’s concept of velayat-e faqih, rule of the Islamic jurist, a doctrine which also enjoyed considerable support among various factions both on the right and the left side of the political spectrum. Among the IRP’s most influential members were Ayatollah Behesti, Ayatollah Mosavi Ardbili, Ayatollah Mahdavi Kani, and Hojjatislams Khamenei, Bahonar and Hashemi Rafsanjani. When the alliance of forces behind the Revolution began to give way to ideological disagreements over what was to replace the Pahlavi monarchy, the

fundamentalist *ulama* and the IRP used a number of methods to undermine the opposition; making use of their extensive religious networks to mobilise crowds, appointing IRP friendly officials to important posts, controlling propaganda networks, playing on the popularity of Ayatollah Khomeini himself, and, not least, intimidating competitors through the control of armed revolutionary organisations like the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

3.3 Created by decree: The relationship between the IRGC and the Ayatollahs

Shortly after declaring the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a decree to the Revolutionary Council, an institution created and dominated by Khomeinists which functioned almost as a shadow government in parallel with the Provisional Revolutionary Government headed by Mehdi Bazargan, for the creation of a popular militia to protect against possible counterrevolutionary threats. On 5 May 1979 the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was officially created, and the envisioned role of the IRGC was soon thereafter expressed in the constitution of the new Islamic Republic of Iran, ratified on 15 November 1979, where article 150 reads as follows:

> The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, organized in the early days of the triumph of the Revolution, is to be maintained so that it may continue in its role of guarding the Revolution and its achievements. The scope of duties of the Corps, and its areas of responsibility, in relation to the duties and areas of responsibility of the other armed forces, are to be determined by law, with emphasis on brotherly cooperation and harmony among them.  

The primary function of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was thus defined as protecting the gains of the Revolution, a task open to wide interpretation and that with time would warrant the penetration of the IRGC into many fields of activity within the Iranian state. The creation and later expansion of the IRGC also largely seems to conform to the pattern noted by Adelman whereby new and powerful armies rise to prominence during the course of a revolution. In conjunction with Adelman’s framework, the IRGC was assigned many important tasks within the post-revolutionary Iranian state, and the Khomeini-dominated Revolutionary Council further specified the functions of the Revolutionary Guard to encompass a wide range of duties within eight broad fields of activity:

62 *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, (1979), English translation, available online at [URL]
• assisting police and security forces in the apprehension or liquidation of counterrevolutionary elements
• battling armed counterrevolutionaries
• defending against attacks and the activities of foreign forces inside the country
• coordinating and cooperating with the country’s armed forces
• training subordinate IRGC personnel in moral, ideological, and politico-military matters
• assisting the Islamic Republic in the implementation of the Islamic Revolution
• supporting liberation movements and their call for justice of the oppressed people of the world under the tutelage of the leader of the Revolution of the Islamic Republic
• utilising the human resources and expertise of the IRGC to deal with national calamities and unexpected catastrophes and supporting the developmental plans of the Islamic Republic to completely maximize the IRGC’s resources.63

In practice however, the IRGC would develop to take on even additional responsibilities to those listed above and expand into many fields of activity probably not envisaged by its creators, which I will return to and discuss at length in the following chapters.

As already mentioned, the Revolutionary Guard was closely tied to Ayatollah Khomeini and dedicated to his Islamic ideology and view of the Revolution. This is not surprising given the fact that the IRGC was created by order from Khomeini himself, and many of Khomeini’s closest associates in the IRP enjoyed close relations with the leadership of the Revolutionary Guard. The Revolutionary Guard’s armed forces provided the IRP with the means to force through their decrees and policies, undermining their political competitors and aiding the fundamentalist ulama in securing their vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran.64 With time, the Khomeinists came to rely heavily on the IRGC to expand and retain their power over Iranian society, and the Revolutionary Guard in turn relied on the fundamentalist ulama to back the further increase of the IRGC’s influence, responsibilities and importance within the new Iranian state. As will be shown throughout this paper, the close relationship between the political camp of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps lead to the rise of both to dominate the new Iranian state-structure, a point that should not be forgotten even though this analysis is mainly focused on the development of the Revolutionary Guard

64 Workman (1994) p.92.
alone. It was however not a given that the IRGC would become such an important institution within the new Iranian state, as from its creation in 1979 the IRGC constituted but one of a wide array of armed groups and security forces that vied for influence in the revolutionary turmoil that followed the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

3.4 Revolutionary turmoil: The IRGC and other armed revolutionary organisations

In the chaotic aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, the IRGC was just one of several armed organisations competing for power within the post-revolutionary state. Many of the forces that had helped toppled the Shah’s regime, like the Fedaiyen-e Khalq and Mujahedin-e Khalq, had employed their own organised militias in the struggle, and many more armed groups were created more or less spontaneously during the course of the Revolution, as the raiding of armories and army barracks made weapons widely available to opposition groups.65 The existence of many independent armed groupings certainly represented a potential threat to any one political faction trying to impose its authority over the post-revolutionary Iranian state, and the proficiency of the many Khomeini-friendly Islamist paramilitary organisations in street violence and the forcible silencing of dissent became an important source of power for the fundamentalist ulama. The Khomeinist IRP had ties to many of the newly created militias, among others to the violent groups called hezbollah, that were used to disrupt demonstrations and attack dissidents.66 Like the IRGC, these groups generally operated outside of the sphere and jurisdiction of the regular police and army forces controlled by the Provisional Revolutionary Government of Bazargan, further undermining Bazargan’s ability to control developments within Iran.67

Although eventually growing to become the most important of the Islamist paramilitary organisations, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps faced its fair share of competitors in enforcing revolutionary ideals. A particular challenge to the IRGC’s authority was posed by the komitehs (committees), makeshift, freelance bands of local Islamists that took control and allocated to themselves the powers of justice and administration over assorted neighbourhoods throughout the major cities of the Islamic Republic. In Tehran alone roughly 1,000 komitehs operated in the months following the collapse of the Shah’s regime, arbitrarily

66 Keddie (2006) p.244. The Iranian hezbollah-groups should not be confused with the Lebanese Hezbollah created with Iranian support in 1982, both deriving their names from Arabic, meaning “party of God”.
arresting anyone they deemed posing a threat to the ideals of the Revolution. Although the komitehs and the IRGC essentially drew their members from the same pool of volunteers, there was often friction and disagreements between them. In the early days of the Revolution considerable influence also resided with the local “revolutionary tribunals”, organisations that sprung up around the country and functioned as de facto courts, summarily trying and executing thousands of people suspected of counterrevolutionary activity. The triumph of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps over these other organisations and centres of power was never preordained, but ultimately derived from the IRGC’s superior effectiveness as a guard for the emerging revolutionary regime of Ayatollah Khomeini, demonstrated thoroughly during the course of the all-important Iran-Iraq War.

3.5 From Revolution to War

The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 was closely linked to events sat in motion by the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution. In line with Skocpol’s findings, the Revolution markedly increased the risk of war due to both threats and opportunities perceived by the neighbouring Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein. In short, the slide to war was caused on the one hand by efforts by the Iranian revolutionary regime to incite a religious uprising in Iraq, especially appealing to the numerically superior Shia part of the population, sparking resentment among the Sunni-dominated elites of the ruling Iraqi Ba’th-party. Iran’s dedicated revolutionaries, much like the French and Russians before them, wanted to spread their revolutionary message throughout the neighbouring region, alarming not only the Iraqi regime but also the surrounding Arab monarchies and sheikdoms of the Gulf. On the other hand, the War was a result of Saddam Hussein’s perception of a historic “window of opportunity” for asserting Iraq’s role as the leading state in the Gulf-region and settling old scores with Iran. More specifically, Saddam Hussein wanted to readdress the grievances forced upon Iraq in the 1975 Algiers Accords, in which the military superior Iran of Mohammed Reza Shah had claimed extended sovereignty over the contested Shatt-al Arab waterway located at the border between the two countries. Saddam calculated that a short and decisive military operation would force the seemingly shaky and insecure Iranian regime to accept a peace on Iraqi terms, acknowledging Iraqi superiority and full sovereignty over the Shatt-al Arab. The Iraqi leadership even entertained hopes that the oil-rich Iranian province of Khuzestan with its

A sizeable Arab population would rebel and could be “liberated” by the Iraqi war effort. After some minor border clashes, Saddam Hussein therefore publicly declared the 1975 Algiers agreement null and void and ordered the Iraqi army to start its military assault on Iran on 22 September 1980.

Saddam Hussein’s assessment of the situation was not totally unfounded, as the Iranian Revolution markedly had reduced Iran’s military capabilities. The powerful Iranian Army of Mohammed Reza Shah had eventually opted to declare its neutrality in the course of the 1978-79 Revolution, and thus continued to exist as an organisation, but it had nonetheless been drastically reduced in numbers in the period preceding the War due to large-scale desertions and purges following the victory of the Revolution. As mentioned, the Iranian military had been one of the main pillars upon which the Shah’s power had rested, and it was largely viewed as an instrument of oppression, a symbol of Iran’s reliance on the US and an unnecessary expenditure by Iran’s revolutionaries. It was also seen as one of the most dangerous sources of potential counter-revolution, and indeed there had been several attempted military coups against the Islamic Republic before the War, the last and most serious one in July 1980, adding to the revolutionary regime’s distrust of the Army. As a result, the Army was down from 285,000 to around 150,000 troops at the outbreak of hostilities. Perhaps even more damaging for the Iranian Army’s ability to conduct military operations was the forced removal of some 12,000 skilled and trained officers, constituting between 30 and 50 percent of the Iranian officer corps from the rank of major to colonel. The lack of expertise was further compounded by equipment being neglected and military installations being shut down by the revolutionary regime during its first years in power, which were spent securing the revolution at home rather than contemplating attacks from abroad, as I will return to in chapter 5. In spite of these difficulties on the Iranian side however, Saddam Hussein’s gamble that the time was ripe to strike a blow to his next door neighbour was to prove a major miscalculation. For the fundamentalist ulama the War was treated as the perfect opportunity to demonstrate the resilience and vitality of the Iranian Revolution to the world, and at the same time served to divert the population’s attention away

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71 Chubin & Tripp (1988) p.35.
from the internal political infighting that had plagued the Revolution’s early period. Khomeini and the fundamentalist ulama framed the Iraqi attack as a “war against Islam”, and as the Iranian people quickly mobilised and rallied to the defence of their country with great patriotic zeal, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps developed to take on the size and shape of a full-fledged conventional army to counter the Iraqi threat posed against the gains of the Islamic Revolution.

4 Raised by War: The IRGC and the Iran-Iraq War

The rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, like the formation of the post-revolutionary Iranian state as whole, was heavily influenced by the momentous impact of the eight years long War with Iraq from 1980 to 1988. During the course of the War the IRGC developed from a relatively small, makeshift militia, mainly concerned with the internal affairs of the Islamic Republic, to a large, well-organised army engaging in intense international warfare, or war-making following Tilly’s terminology. The IRGC grew to outnumber the regular Iranian Army, and was heavily favoured and praised by the revolutionary regime, even though the IRGC’s performance on the battlefield must be said to have been mixed at best. Nevertheless the Revolutionary Guard could take pride over the important and committed role it had played in the “sacred defence” of the Islamic Republic, and at the end of the War the IRGC clearly stood out as one of the most powerful and influential organisations within the Iranian state-structure.

4.1 The IRGC and the regular Iranian Army

As mentioned, one of the hallmarks of the emerging post-revolutionary Iranian regime was the balancing of different institutions to keep each other in check, and this was perhaps most clearly seen in the competition between the regular Iranian Army, the Artesh, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These organisations were however originally charged with different missions as the Revolutionary Guards were primarily meant to be the guardians of the Revolution domestically and little attention was paid to the need for external defence in

74 Ayatollah Khomeini was among those who later expressed that the War had come at a good time, allowing him and his associates in the IRP to secure their grip over the post-revolutionary Iranian state. See Ansari (2006) p.49-50, Chubin & Tripp (1988) p.39-40.
the early days after the fall of the Shah’s regime. The IRGC was thus largely focused on internal threats to the Islamic Republic and the Revolution, as I will come back to in the next chapter, as opposed to the strictly external focus of the regular Iranian Army inherited from the Shah’s days. The Iraqi invasion however quickly prompted the revolutionary regime, and especially the IRP, to advocate the rise and expansion of the Revolutionary Guards to conduct large-scale military combat operations, unwilling to leave the faith of the Islamic Republic in the hands of the still strongly distrusted remnants of the professional and modernised Army of the Shah. The War thus became a defining moment for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, greatly expanding its responsibilities and importance within the emerging Iranian state-structure.

Relations between the IRGC and the regular Army throughout the War remained tainted by mutual suspicions, resentments, political differences and uncertainty. A particularly recurring point of contention between the two organisations concerned the reliance on different military tactics, the professional military insisting on well-planned and well-organised operations, while the ideologically driven Revolutionary Guards argued that zeal, determination and superiority in manpower were enough. Commenting on the difference between the two institutions, IRGC commander Mohsen Reza’i asserted that:

Unlike the army [...] the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps is in charge of safeguarding the revolution and its gains [...]. we in the Revolution Guards give primary importance to the ideological and political dimensions more than the military ones.

The IRGC saw itself as embodying the spirit of the Iranian Revolution, where the will and dedication of the Iranian people had won out over the professional, modern and “culturally contaminated” security organisations of the Shah, and sought to prosecute the War against Iraq along the same lines. This in practice meant a heavy reliance on lightly armed and manpower-intensive infantry attacks, while the regular Army stressed the importance of conventional tactics incorporating modern, mechanised means of warfare. The constant rivalry severely complicated the ability of the IRGC and the Army to perform joint combat

75 Chubin & Tripp (1988) p. 36.
77 Mohsen Reza’i, quoted in Chubin & Tripp (1988) p.44.
operations, and with the IRP tightening its grip over Iranian society, the Revolutionary Guards increasingly got the last say in the planning and execution of the Iranian war effort.

The already close relationship between the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the fundamentalist ulama became even more apparent in the course of the Iran-Iraq War. The “Islamification” of the War propounded by Khomeini and his associates in the IRP served to sustain the population’s revolutionary fervour, channelling mass popular support into the IRGC and the war effort against Iraq. As will be shown in the next chapter, the War also provided the IRP with a convenient pretext to silence their critics and marginalise all internal opposition, and at the same time warranted the enlargement of the IRGC for the dual task of fighting Iraq and keeping a check on the regular Iranian Army. Although the regular Army no doubt played an important role in the defence of Iran, the emerging revolutionary regime made no secret of its preference for the Revolutionary Guards, Khomeini in 1982 referring to the IRGC as the “solid pillar” of the Islamic Republic, and Ali Khamenei, then President and later Supreme Leader of Iran, in 1984 accrediting the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps with “a determining role in the process of revolution”. The IRGC also enjoyed numerous privileges over the Artesh, including superior pay and benefits, first call upon available arms and spare parts and better access to the civilian leadership. And with the Iranian population rushing to the defence of their country, the IRGC, absorbing and organising the thousands of highly motivated volunteers that flocked to the warfront, soon developed from a revolutionary militia into an organised armed force outnumbering and rivalling the structure of the regular Iranian Army.

4.2 From militia to full-fledged army: Organisational development of the IRGC and the Basij

As the Iran-Iraq War greatly increased the responsibilities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, it became necessary for the IRGC to develop a structure along the lines of a conventional army to absorb the substantial increases in manpower needed to effectively perform the task of engaging in international warfare. Originating from hastily gathered and

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81 Quoted in Chubin & Tripp (1988) p.45.
disorganised armed bands and supporters of Khomeini in the early period of the Revolution, the IRGC during the War grew into an organised professional institution with a formal command chain, recruitment and training structures, its own ministry, access to large reserves of manpower through the Basij-forces, and even established its own air- and naval forces to rival those of the regular Iranian Army. The extensive numerical increase in IRGC forces alone testify to the Revolutionary Guard’s rise in power and influence during the War, doubling from some 20,000 – 30,000 in 1980 to around 50,000 during the first year of warfare, this number further increasing nine-fold by 1987, the total forces of the IRGC consisting of close to 450,000 men as the War entered its final year.  

With the expansion of the IRGC’s role into military operations it developed a structure resembling that of the regular Iranian Army with units divided into corps, divisions and brigades. Like many other revolutionary armies, the IRGC developed its organisation to encompass training programs to absorb and instruct the large number of new recruits. Initially some training operations were conducted in cooperation with the regular Army, but the IRGC soon instituted their own training programs focusing on Guard tactics and weapons use, heavily imbued with the radical Islamic ideology propounded by Khomeini and his closest associates. Unlike other revolutionary armies, the formal structures established as the IRGC expanded its organisation did not make it “professionalised” and did not dampen its ideological zeal, as focus remained on perpetuating revolutionary militancy and retaining institutional independence from the regular Army. The IRGC’s manpower was mobilised through local-level branches of the IRGC that were established throughout Iran in parallel with the development of the IRGC’s national command structure. Many of the lower-level branches grew out of the komitehs or other groups that had seized power in their respective areas in the course of the Revolution, and above the local level the IRGC was organised into ten administrative regions, largely corresponding to the Iranian provinces. On top of these sat the Supreme Council of the Revolutionary Guard and the Guard Commander, formally meant to be reporting to the president, but in practice the IRGC has been much more prone to offer its loyalty to the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, and has in any case enjoyed a large

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degree of autonomy.84 The IRGC’s hierarchical structure functioned to penetrate Iranian society down to the local levels, and in addition to serving at the front many IRGC members were also charged with internal security missions, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Guards mobilised in the same region made up corps or divisions when sent to the battlefront, and very often Guards from one region had different commanders depending on whether they were currently serving at home or at the front.85

The social base of the IRGC will be treated more thoroughly in chapter 6, however the background of the Revolutionary Guard’s leadership will be treated here to explain the emergence of the IRGC’s command structure. When the IRGC was created by decree from Khomeini in May 1979, its original members consisted of some 6,000 militias who had fought the Shah’s regime even before 1978, and many of which had received guerrilla training with Palestinian and Lebanese groups. Connections with foreign organisations and militias, with the aim of exporting the Islamic Revolution, was to become a hallmark of the IRGC, and nowhere was this more clearly demonstrated than in Lebanon, where many IRGC members were (and continue to be) active in setting up, training and sponsoring Hezbollah, a Shia militant group that rose to wield considerable influence in the course of the Lebanese civil war (1975-90). Of the IRGC’s original members many belonged to the Mujahedin of the Islamic Revolution (MIR), a group loyal to Khomeini that was established in the course of the Revolution. Many MIR-members had broken off from the Mujahedin-e Khalq because of the MEK’s emphasis on Marxist over Islamic ideology, the MIR strongly supporting the Islamic character of the Iranian Revolution. MIR members provided the leadership and the core around which the rest of the IRGC formed, and this first group generally tended to be better educated and more politically sophisticated than the zealous volunteers that later flocked to the IRGC.86 After a rapid turnover in leadership, one of the IRGC’s early organisers and former MIR member Mohsen Reza’i was instituted as Revolutionary Guard Commander in September 1981, apparently at the Guard’s own behest, a position he was to retain in a period far exceeding the timeframe of the Iran-Iraq War.87

The IRGC’s institutional development was further compounded by the creation of the Ministry of the Revolutionary Guard in November 1982, headed throughout the War by Mohsen RafiqDust, another of the Guards early organisers. The Ministry’s functions were defined as providing for the Guard’s logistics, procurement, finances, legal and personnel services and serving as the IRGC’s liaison with the Maljes and the executive branch of the government. The Revolutionary Guard Ministry also managed the IRGC’s budgetary and financial administration, and serves as a major indicator of the increase in the IRGC’s complexity and transition from chaotic revolutionary militia to a more conventional organisational structure. The establishment of the IRGC Ministry followed directly from the Revolutionary Guard’s involvement in the War, but also took on many civilian tasks, as I will return to in chapter 6. The creation of the Ministry was also an attempt to put the IRGC under stronger civilian control by the political leadership, but by and large the Revolutionary Guard resisted intervention in their internal matters and kept control over advancements within their own ranks.

Both Revolutionary Guard Minister RafiqDust and IRGC Commander Reza’i were permanent members of the Supreme Defence Council, the body set up to coordinate and lead the overall Iranian war effort, and enjoyed a stability of tenure that was not matched by their counterparts representing the Artesh in the Council.

Militarily the IRGC also saw a substantial development during the Iran-Iraq War, expanding into many fields previously monopolised by the regular Iranian Army. Although relying heavily on ideologically zealous manpower in massive infantry attacks, the IRGC also grew to incorporate more sophisticated armed services during the course of the Iran-Iraq War. The Revolutionary Guard soon developed its own armoured and artillery support to reduce its reliance on the better-equipped regular Army within these fields, and from September 1986 the IRGC also started with advanced artillery training. The IRGC further rivalled the structure of the Artesh by creating its own Air Force and Naval Forces, thus expanding into many areas that had hitherto been the sole domain of the professional Iranian military inherited from the Shah’s days. The creation of the IRGC Air Force was endorsed by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1985, but did not play a significant role in the War due to the international arms embargo preventing Iran from importing new weapons or spare parts.

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for the aircrafts left behind by the former Shah’s Air Force. The IRGC Air Force did however
develop ten missile units responsible for air defence against Iraqi aircraft, and according to
press rapports it fired several surface-to-surface SCUD missiles against civilian installations
in Iraq. Despite its moderate participation in the war effort, the establishment of the IRGC Air
Force nevertheless served as a symbol of the Revolutionary Guard’s increased responsibilities
and influence, and the IRGC Air Force was to grow bigger and more capable in the years
following the War’s end. The IRGC Navy however saw more direct action in the Iran-Iraq
War. Unofficially in existence since 1982, it participated in the successful 1986 Fao offensive
(as I will return to below), and was formally inaugurated in 1987 to retaliate against Iraqi
attacks on Iranian shipping and oil. In the last year of the War, from 1987-88, the IRGC Navy
was lavished with resources and publicity for its challenge to the US naval build-up in the
Gulf, employing hit-and-run tactics from small naval crafts armed with RPG-7’s and missile
units armed with Chinese Silkworm surface-to-surface missiles to harass US ships and
reflagged tankers.92 The IRGC also developed a foreign wing, often referred to as the Quds-
forces, especially dedicated to spreading the ideology of the Revolution outside of the country
to the wider Middle Eastern region, and these forces were instrumental in the creation of
Hezbollah in Lebanon in 1982.93

Another important component of the Revolutionary Guard’s military forces was provided by
the Basij-e Mostazafan, meaning “the mobilisation of the oppressed”. The Basij was a mass
mobilising popular volunteer militia, created following the call from Ayatollah Khomeini to
establish a “20 million-man army” to defend the Islamic Republic from both internal and
external enemies following the Iraqi invasion. Although the Basij as an organisation was
officially separate from the IRGC during the War and had its own commander, in practice it
has always been part of the IRGC. The Basij was formally placed under Guard control 1
January 1981, and the IRGC recruited, organised, trained and commanded all Basij units,
although it was not until 2007 that the control structure of the Basij was officially merged
with that of the Revolutionary Guard.94 The Basij served as a reserve pool of manpower for
the IRGC, and military training for basijis generally consisted of a two week instruction
program in the use of grenades and automatic rifles, heavily imbued with religious and

ideological indoctrination with a focus on martyrdom and the promise of heaven for those killed in the War. The Basij was originally a volunteer and not a fixed force, whose members usually served a brief three month tour before returning to their homes, jobs or studies, and seasonal fluctuations made it hard to contemplate the exact capabilities of the basijis. The Basij nevertheless played an integral part in the Iranian war effort, and although the number of readily available basijis probably seldom exceeded 100,000 at any one time, by 1987 some 3 million Iranians had received Basij training, adding substantially to the potential power of the IRGC in a scenario of all-out mobilisation. The creation of the Basij was thus another development strongly contributing to the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in the course of the Iran-Iraq war.

4.3 The IRGC and military operations: Successes and failures in the “sacred defence”

Giving a detailed account of the eight year long military struggle between Iran and Iraq is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, but nevertheless a summary of the War’s main events and the role and tactics employed by the IRGC in the war effort is in order. As the Iraqi leadership had anticipated, the Iranian revolutionaries were caught off guard by the initial Iraqi offensives in September 1980, and Iraqi forces successfully occupied portions of Iranian territory along the border, encountering little or no co-ordinated resistance. Saddam Hussein then decided to halt Iraqi advances, in the belief that he had made his point and that the Iranian leaders would accept his terms for peace. The emerging Iranian regime was however unwilling to compromise, and framing the War as a test of the Revolution and a secular regime’s attack on Islam, Ayatollah Khomeini rejected any agreements with the Iraqi regime out of hand, proclaiming:

There is absolutely no question of peace or compromise and we shall never have any discussions with them; because they are corrupt and perpetrators of corruption.

Given precious time to organise a counter-attack, the Iranian Army in a combined effort with the rapidly expanding Revolutionary Guard and the newly established Basij carried out a string of successful military operations beginning in September 1981. Although the Islamic

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97 For a detailed account of the military operations of the Iran-Iraq War, see Karsh (2002).
Revolutionary Guard Corps at this time was still in a state of transition to take on its expanded responsibilities and probably did not number more than 50,000 men, IRGC Minister RafiqDust was later to proclaim that the IRGC’s successes in the War started with its first organised offensive that broke the siege of Iran’s southern city of Abadan in late 1981. The emerging Iranian regime’s preference for the further expansion of the IRGC was clearly seen in the budget presented in May the same year, which allocated four times greater the resources to the IRGC and other revolutionary organisations than to the regular Iranian Army. The early Iranian counteroffensives were however coordinated operations that combined the conventional warfare tactics of the regular Army with the revolutionary zeal of the IRGC and the Basij, and these operations proved quite successful as the last Iraqi forces were pushed out of Iranian territory by early summer 1982.

The retaking of all captured Iranian territory was a huge success for the Iranian armed forces, especially for the regular Army that had planned and taken the leadership in the major Iranian counteroffensives. In spite of the extensive purges and distrust, the Iranian Army had proved itself in the operations that drove out the Iraqi invaders, but as a reward the regular Army was sidelined as the leadership of the war effort was passed to the Revolutionary Guards by the emerging Iranian regime. The IRGC, adopting Khomeini’s uncompromising attitude towards the enemy, was determined to continue the War until the regime of Saddam Hussein was defeated, and spurred on by their successes in routing the Iraqi occupiers, the Iranian forces took the War into Iraqi territory from the middle of July 1982. However disagreements over tactics, objectives and use of resources plagued the relations between the Artesh and the Revolutionary Guards, complicating the planning, coordination and execution of combined military operations. As Khomeini and his associates increasingly secured their grip over the Iranian state, they came to rely more heavily on the large-scale “human-wave” infantry attacks mounted by the IRGC and the Basij, which came to be seen as a hallmark of the unconventional tactics employed by the Revolutionary Guards. In these attacks the less trained, lightly armed, but highly ideological motivated basijis were often used as little more than cannon fodder, being sent in advance to cross minefields and pave the way for the more

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103 Chubin & Tripp (1988) p.46.
heavily armed IRGC forces. However, lacking adequate armour, artillery and air support these attacks usually failed to breach the heavily fortified Iraqi defence-lines and were repulsed with heavy losses, and the next years of the War therefore came to be characterised by static warfare, with neither side being able to make any considerable breakthroughs. The regular Iranian Army was occasionally relied upon when the IRGC made little progress, but as soon as the Revolutionary Guard received a small success the Army was once again relegated to second position. The emerging Iranian regime dominated by the IRP continued its almost unequivocal support for the Revolutionary Guards, Rafsanjani describing the Basij forces as a “blessing from God”, and then Prime Minister Musavi in 1986 asserting that “Today we are stronger than ever. We have the Basij and the Corps”.

In an effort to bypass the military stalemate that had developed since 1982 and hoping to wear down the opponent’s will, the Iraqis, with the Iranians answering in kind, started targeting strategic interests like important economic installations, oil refineries, pipelines and civilian population centres in what became known as “the war of the cities”. Shipping bound for the other party also became a target as the War spread to the Gulf in what was correspondingly dubbed “the tanker war”. It was Saddam Hussein’s hope that the “tanker war” would bring stronger international and especially US support against Iran, as the US was dependent on the oil-supplies from the area. This strategy was partly successful in that it drove the US to increase its naval presence in the Gulf, putting Iran under increased pressure, although the IRGC Navy, as mentioned earlier, at times seemed eager at the prospect of challenging the US, which still was viewed as the principal enemy of the Islamic Revolution. Back on the main battlefield the IRGC achieved one of its greatest successes with the capture of the Iraqi Fao-peninsula in February 1986, Iran temporarily gaining the upper hand in the War. The capture of Fao was a combined operation where the IRGC and the regular Army cooperated closer than ever, with the Basij and the IRGC Navy also playing important roles in the offensive.

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By the end of 1986 the tide was however starting to turn in Iraq’s favour due to Iraq enjoying a steady flow of military supplies, weapons and economic aid from a worldwide array of actors fearing the consequences of an Iranian victory in the conflict. The support rendered to Iraq ranged from direct monetary assistance provided by Saudi-Arabia, Kuwait and other Arab states in the region, to access to the latest military technology and equipment from the US, the Soviet Union and some Western-European powers. Iran, on the other hand, found its operational capacity in heavy armaments like artillery, tanks, missiles and aircrafts diminishing, being subject to an international arms-embargo denying access to essential spare parts and new equipment. This allowed Iraq to go on the offensive again, and from mid-April until summer 1988, Fao and other Iranian positions in Iraq were recaptured, Iraq being able to carry the War back into Iranian territory for the first time since 1982. The turning tide, enormous costs and dwindling popular support of the War finally compelled the Iranian leadership to give up its uncompromising position. Also, by 1988 many of the Guards and basijis eager to die for Islam and the Revolution had already done so, and the high Iranian casualty-rate could not be sustained much longer. On 17 July 1988 it was announced that Iran would accept an armistice based on UN Resolution 598, passed by the Security Council one year earlier and calling for an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of all forces to the internationally recognised boundaries between the two countries. Thus after eight years of heavy fighting and huge costs, the War ended with both sides having to relinquish their original war-aims and pretty much settling for the status-quo that had prevailed between them before the outbreak of hostilities in 1980.

The IRGC’s heavy reliance throughout the War on “human-wave” tactics mounted by religiously zealous and ideologically committed men of all ages, and especially young boys (some of the basijis were reportedly no more than 10-11 years old), have by many outside observers been regarded as one of “the worst excesses associated with the ‘Islamic’ way of...
To mention but one example of the extreme human costs of these attacks, Operation Karbala 4, a major Iranian offensive in the direction of Basra launched on 24 December 1986, suffered a crushing defeat with the killing of some 10,000 Iranians over the short period of only three days. Another telling story of these attacks is provided by an Iraqi officer, describing the effect of these assaults on him and his men:

They chant “Allahu Akbar” and they keep coming, and we keep shooting, sweeping our 50 millimetre machine guns around like sickles. My men are eighteen, nineteen, just a few years older than these kids. I’ve seen them crying, and at times the officers have had to kick them back to their guns. Once we had Iranian kids cycling towards us, and my men all started laughing, and then these kids started lobbing their hand grenades and we stopped laughing and started shooting.

The Iranian leadership’s willingness to accept huge human losses stemmed in part from the desire to demonstrate the dedication of Iranian people and their resolve to carry on the War no matter what, hoping this would demoralize their less committed and dedicated foes. The IRGC-lead “human wave” attacks were however also adopted out of less ideological and more pragmatic reasons. While the Iranian armed forces at the beginning of the War could draw on the substantial resources left behind by the Shah’s massive military build-up, Iran’s capabilities in heavy armaments soon began to dwindle due to the international arms-embargo and the resulting lack of spare parts. The development of an indigenous Iranian weapons industry, further discussed in chapter 6, partly offset the effects of the arms-embargo, but could not compete with the steady flow of supplies enjoyed by the Iraqi armed forces. With Iraq thus increasing its superiority in heavy weapons and firepower, Iran’s only strategic advantage became that of greater relative strength in mobilised and available manpower. The IRGC’s tactics of massive frontal infantry assaults can therefore be seen as an attempt to make the best out of the limited resources available, and in spite of their extreme losses, operations of this kind actually also saw some measures of success, one example being the mentioned capture of Fao in 1986. In any case, whether condemned for their futility or regarded as born out of military necessity, the “human wave” attacks left the world with an impression of the Iranian people, and not least the IRGC, as willing to endure heavy sacrifices for the sake of the Revolution and its values, and the IRGC could later take pride in its crucial role played in the “sacred defence” of the Islamic Republic.

114 Chubin & Tripp p.46.
4.4 The legacy of the War: Deriving legitimacy from the war effort

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has in later times attempted to cultivate a large amount of legitimacy from its performance in the Iran-Iraq War. This might seem unwarranted in light of the IRGC’s at best mixed successes on the battlefield, and the outcome of the War did certainly not conform to the IRGC’s self-proclaimed war-aims. Much like its creator and main political ally Ayatollah Khomeini, the IRGC was staunchly opposed to ending the conflict with a negotiated agreement, and remained dedicated to the slogan of “War until victory”, which was usually defined as the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the export of the Islamic Revolution to Iraq. By 1988 however, a broad political consensus was forming around the need to end the War due to the successful Iraqi counterattacks, American assaults in the Gulf, the exhaustion caused by the “war of the cities” and the difficulty of recruiting volunteers and even conscripts for the Iranian armed forces. Political leaders like Khamenei started to emphasise that Iran’s endurance, sacrifices and national solidarity throughout the long War meant that Iran had already fulfilled its divine mission irrespective of obtaining a final victory, thus favouring an end to the hostilities while at the same time sheltering the armed forces and the IRGC of criticism. When Khomeini was finally convinced by his advisers that it was time to end the long and devastating War, he described the decision to forsake his earlier uncompromising position in favour of a settlement with the Iraqis as “more deadly than poison”. The IRGC reluctantly accepted Khomeini’s decision to endorse the armistice, although the relationship between the IRGC and many of its long-time political allies in the IRP, like Rafsanjani who advocated strongly for the adoption of the ceasefire, was damaged over this issue. Ayatollah Khomeini was however careful not to assign blame for the War ending without an Iranian victory, and Khomeini’s indispensible support and appreciation of the Revolutionary Guard’s proven commitment to his revolutionary message shielded the IRGC’s leadership from much criticism in the aftermath of the War.

In the end however, the IRGC had to take its share of the responsibility for the many defeats inflicted upon Iran leading up to the signing of the 1988 ceasefire, although the rivalry and lack of cooperation between the IRGC and the regular Army certainly also was an important reason for Iran “losing” the War and finally accepting the armistice.\textsuperscript{123} In many respects the Iran-Iraq War was a disaster for Iran, which was believed to have suffered approximately one million casualties\textsuperscript{124}, devastating damages to material and economic infrastructure, and while Iraq retained control of some slivers of Iranian territory, the Shatt-al Arab, in many ways the primary source of the conflict, remained contested and was anyway made almost inaccessible due to the large amounts of destroyed shipping blocking it up.\textsuperscript{125} The Iranian leadership and the IRGC had been forced to abandon the proclaimed war-aims of toppling Saddam Hussein’s regime and spreading the Revolution to Iraq, and for many the huge sacrifices endured by the Iranian population in the war effort therefore in the end seemed to amount to little. The decision to continue the War and go on the offensive in 1982, when a ceasefire similar to the one eventually adopted in 1988 was offered by Iraq, remains one of the most contested decisions in modern Iranian history.\textsuperscript{126} In light of these assessments the IRGC and the Iranian leadership might seem to have little to show for themselves at the end of the War, however focusing on the destructions and lack of victory remains but one side of the many implications and effects of the Iran-Iraq War.

Theorist G. Hossein Razi stresses the importance of performance as a vital part of the concept of legitimacy, and the performance of the IRGC during the War, although experiencing both successes and failures as outlined above, can also be evaluated in a more positive light.\textsuperscript{127} Chubin & Tripp, writing before the end of the war in 1988, assert that:

If Iraq succeeds in holding out for a return to the status quo ante bellum, it will have withstood a siege from a country three times its size. Iran, by contrast, can take little glory from a peace that takes it back to the pre-war settlement.\textsuperscript{128}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Katzman (1993) p.69.
  \item The total number of Iranian casualties remains disputed, Iranian officials putting the figure at the much more moderate 170,000-220,000 battlefield deaths, nevertheless representing a huge sacrifice by the country, see Ward (2009) p.297.
  \item Ansari (2003) p.239.
  \item Takeyh (2009) p.92.
  \item Razi, G. Hossein (1987):”The Nexus of Legitimacy and Performance: The Lessons of the Iranian Revolution” p.453-469 in Comparative Politics Vol. 19, No. 4 (Jul.).
  \item Chubin & Tripp (1988) p.11.
\end{itemize}
I however disagree with this assessment in that it fails to consider two important aspects of the Iran-Iraq War. First of all, Iraq was the original aggressor in the conflict, hoping to readdress the prevailing situation between the two countries, and as such, the return to a pre-war settlement, which is pretty much what happened in 1988, represented a triumph for the IRGC and the Iranian defence in denying Saddam Hussein his original war-aims. Secondly, and even more important, Iraq might have withstood the siege of a country three times its size, but Iran withstood the attack of a country enjoying at least three times strategic superiority in advanced weaponry, financial aid and international support.

As mentioned, the spread of Iranian religious fanaticism was by many countries experienced as a greater threat than that represented by the Iraqi Ba’ath dictatorship, and many actors therefore opted to back the Iraqi regime in the Iran-Iraq War. To give an indication of the balance in heavy military equipment during the final years of the conflict, in 1987 estimates put Iraq’s capacities in battle tanks and combat aircrafts at 4,800 and 400-500 respectively, while the corresponding numbers for Iran at the time were approximated at 900-1,250 and 80-105. Against these odds, the Iranian achievement of obtaining a peace based on the pre-war settlement must be seen in a more favourable light than Chubin & Tripp allow for, and certainly the value of this achievement has been cultivated almost like a victory by the Iranian regime and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps themselves. Another factor contributing positively to the IRGC’s performance was the fact that the Iran-Iraq War constituted the first war in 150 years in which the Iranians had fought without losing territory or relinquishing Iranian independence, and through fierce determination and huge sacrifice Iran had inflicted defeat upon the invading forces and resisted the pressure from the world’s greatest superpowers. Although not being able to claim a military victory from the conflict, the IRGC could therefore none the less derive a huge amount of prestige from having managed to put up a formidable fight in what IRGC Commander Mohsen Reza’i characterised as “the war against the whole world”.

129 Numbers are taken from Chubin & Tripp (1988) p.294, 303, and although only estimates clearly show the tactical advantage in heavy armaments enjoyed by the Iraqis in the last years of the War.
131 IRGC Commander Mohsen Reza’i described the War in these terms in late 1987, quoted in Chubin & Tripp (1988) p.48.
Another important dimension of legitimacy is whether the population perceive the ruling institutions’ authority as rightful, in other words the degree to which a regime or the political leadership is viewed as representative of the nation and embodying the values of society.\textsuperscript{132} Although a difficult concept to measure accurately, the regime of Khomeini and the IRGC must be said to have developed considerably also within this aspect of legitimacy in the course of the Iran-Iraq War. As showed earlier, the Iranian people were driven by many varying ideologies in the Revolution against the Pahlavi state, and had different views on what would represent a new legitimate Iranian state after the fall of the Shah’s regime. Khomeini’s vision of an Islamic Republic therefore had its fair share of opponents, and as will be shown in the next chapter the Revolutionary Guard originated as a politically motivated militia and was instrumental in securing the fundamentalist ulama’s grip over Iranian society. At the outset of the 1978-79 Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini was very sceptical about the merits of Iranian nationalism as an ideology to harness mass popular support, and failed to appreciate nationalism as one of the main forces behind the successful uprisings against the Shah’s regime; for Khomeini the Revolution was driven by the forces of Islam, its constituents was the wider Islamic umma (meaning the world wide community of Muslims), and the Revolution’s ideology was thus claimed to be universal and applicable throughout the Muslim world. In the course of the eight years long War however, the Khomeinist regime increasingly resorted to invoking nationalism as well as religious fervour to motivate its troops and populace at home, thus appealing to a wider segment of the Iranian population.\textsuperscript{133} During the War, the IRGC also developed to become a truly national actor, defending not just its politically likeminded compatriots but the whole country against the Iraqi onslaught. Iranians not initially positively inclined towards the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or the ideology of the fundamentalist ulama therefore to a larger degree found themselves fighting for the same basic value of Iranian independence in the face of external danger, and, whether they liked it or not, had to acknowledge the IRGC’s very important role in defending the Iranian nation. By the end of the War the Khomeinist regime had come more to terms with Iranian nationalism, and the Revolutionary Guard, as a symbol of national resistance, came to represent the Iranian people to a much larger degree than before the War, adding to its legitimacy as one of the new Iranian state’s most powerful institutions.

\textsuperscript{133} Chubin & Tripp (1988) p.248.
Returning to Tilly’s framework, Tilly binds the concept of legitimacy to the control of the means of violence, defining it as follows:

Legitimacy is the probability that other authorities will act to confirm the decisions of a given authority. Other authorities, I would add, are much more likely to confirm the decisions of a challenged authority that controls substantial force; not only fear of retaliation, but also desire to maintain a stable environment recommend that general rule. The rule underscores the importance of the authority’s monopoly of force. A tendency to monopolies the means of violence makes a government’s claim to provide protection, in either the comforting or the ominous sense of the word, more credible and more difficult to resist.134

Following this definition, the rise of the Revolutionary Guard to control substantial armed forces in the course of the War in itself worked to increase the IRGC’s legitimacy. As mentioned, by the end of the War the IRGC totalled approximately 450,000 men, numerically outgrowing the regular Army which consisted of some 200,000 soldiers.135 The IRGC thus became the principal institution of organised violence in Iran, and the IRGC’s role in the defence of the homeland in turn legitimised the Revolutionary Guard’s claim to provide protection, whether desired or not by the population. The IRGC’s rise to dominate the means of violence internally will be addressed in the next chapter, however it is clear that both the IRGC’s performance in the Iran-Iraq War, its important role in defending the country against external attack, and its development into a powerful organisation all served to bolster its legitimacy as one of the most influential institutions within the Iranian state-structure.

Although a highly contested and devastating event, the Iran-Iraq War also brought a sense of solidarity, a shared experience of historical dimensions that reinforced the collective spirit of the Iranian population. In this sense the War proved to be an empowering experience both for the Iranian society and the state, which in contrast to Iraq emerged from the conflict with a renewed self-confidence and minimal debt.136 In any case, the War was not just a passing event in Iran, but continues to haunt the Islamic Republic and shape many of its deliberations even twenty years later. The many martyrs of the War are commemorated and celebrated in countless ceremonies, movies and newspapers, and far from being forgotten the War remains alive in the public’s consciousness and the government’s calculations. Much like in the US

following World War II, war veterans are gradually dominating Iran’s national affairs, and service in the War, particularly within the IRGC, is often seen as an important prerequisite for business connections and political prominence. The legacy of the War and the important part played by the IRGC in the defence of the homeland therefore continues to have far-reaching consequences for the Iranian state, conforming well to Tilly’s assertion that war-making remains a very important factor in the process of state-building.

4.5 Summary: The IRGC, war-making and institutional development

There is no doubt that the eight year long War with Iraq had a profound influence on the emerging post-revolutionary Iranian state-structure, and not least for the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Engaging in war-making, understood as one of Tilly’s four state-activities, prompted the development of the IRGC from a relatively small and domestically focused revolutionary militia to become Iran’s largest and most powerful armed force. Mass popular support and revolutionary zeal was channelled into the IRGC and the war effort, and to take on its new responsibilities the IRGC expanded its organisation to encompass formal recruitment and training procedures, a clear command structure, its own Ministry and control of the Basij volunteer forces. The IRGC developed along the lines of a conventional military, with divisions, corps and brigades, and moved into fields previously dominated by the Artesh by establishing its own mechanised forces, artillery units, Air Force and Navy. Numerically the Revolutionary Guard expanded to outgrow the regular Iranian Army inherited form the Shah’s days, and was strongly favoured by the emerging regime of Ayatollah Khomeini, enjoying superior pay and benefits and first call upon available weaponry and spare parts. Although the IRGC’s performance on the battlefield was mixed, it could later bolster its legitimacy from the crucial role it played in the “sacred defence” of the Islamic Republic, and no doubt by the end of the War the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps had risen to become the most powerful armed external force of the new Iranian state. However the Iran-Iraq War also had a huge effect on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as an internal institution, and next I turn to the IRGC’s developing role in “state-making” during the War, meaning the elimination and domination of domestic rivals within the emerging post-revolutionary Iranian state-structure.

5 The War at Home: The IRGC and “State-making”

On the eve of the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution it was unclear whether Iran would become the theocratic regime envisioned by Khomeini or a state controlled by the more moderate forces. As mentioned, the coalition that had successfully defeated the regime of Mohammed Reza Shah soon gave way to internal disagreements, and in the ensuing revolutionary turmoil the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was but one organisation competing for influence within the new post-revolutionary state. The IRGC’s internal role was however greatly expanded in parallel with its increased external responsibilities in the course of the Iran-Iraq War, as the substantial increases in IRGC manpower markedly changed the internal power-balance between the different political factions. The Revolutionary Guard joined forces with Khomeini’s associates in the IRP and found the War a useful pretext to silence internal opposition and secure their grip over Iranian society. The Revolutionary Guard first played an important role in undermining the liberal government of Mehdi Bazargan, before turning against the Islamic Republic’s first elected president Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr and striking a devastating blow to the Iranian forces on the left side of the political spectrum. The IRGC’s extensive involvement in state-making, in the Tillyan sense of defeating internal enemies, lead to the Revolutionary Guard taking on many internal security and policing functions, monopolising the means of violence to a degree that significantly increased the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ power and influence within the emerging Islamic Republic of Iran. During the War the IRGC also became an important political actor in its own right, setting the precedent for later extensive involvement in the civilian political sphere of the Iranian state.

5.1 Providing order and preventing internal rebellions

From its inception on 5 May 1979, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps largely focused on ensuring internal security in the post-revolutionary setting. Adhering to the Islamic ideology propagated by Ayatollah Khomeini, the IRGC became an important armed instrument for consolidating the Revolution’s hold on power, eradicating power-structures left from the Shah, administrating revolutionary justice, and preventing and combating potential counterrevolution. As stated in the 1979 Iranian Constitution, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ role within the Islamic Republic was defined as “guarding the Revolution and

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its achievements”, a responsibility open to wide interpretation and that with time would warrant the IRGC’s expansion into many areas within the new Iranian state. In the immediate period after the Revolution however, the IRGC’s first task was to restore order and dislodge other revolutionaries from government buildings and military bases. Soon thereafter, the IRGC became the principal institution responsible for suppressing uprisings by separatist Kurds, Baluchs, and Turkmen, and other groups that rebelled in the turmoil that followed the victory of the Revolution. Although operating independently from the Provisional Revolutionary Government of Bazargan, the IRGC thus performed a vital national function in keeping the Iranian territory intact, and all ethnic or partially ethnic risings were defeated. Strong Kurdish resistance however lead to the Revolutionary Guard adopting more of a military structure, a development that was further compounded with the IRGC’s expanded external role in the wake of the Iraqi invasion in September 1980. The Revolutionary Guards were also given law enforcement authority, ran prisons, protected government facilities and served as bodyguards for regime leaders in the early period after the Iranian Revolution.

It did not take long however before the IRGC, committed to the Islamic ideology conveyed by the fundamentalist ulama, found themselves at odds with the liberal Provisional Revolutionary Government of Mehdi Bazargan. Although it was Ayatollah Khomeini himself who had appointed Bazargan as prime minister of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, he also used his power-base in the Revolutionary Council and the Revolutionary Guard to undermine Bazargan’s leadership. This was seen in the Khomeinists frequent use of the IRGC to enforce decrees and decisions not favoured by the Bazargan-government, and according to Katzman, the IRGC also played an important part in the occupation of the US Embassy in Tehran from November 1979 to January 1981, the students responsible for this action enjoying close ties to the IRGC and the MIR that constituted the core group of the Guards. The Embassy takeover on November 4 sealed Bazargan’s fate by exposing his total lack of control over events within Iran, and he and his likeminded Cabinet resigned from their posts a few days later.

139 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, (1979), English translation, available online at [URL]
143 Katzman (1993) p.36.
the Revolutionary Guards, and he was not to be the last victim as the fundamentalist ulama close to Khomeini and the IRGC made the best out of the circumstances provided by the Iran-Iraq War and worked together to secure their grip over the post-revolutionary Iranian state-structure.

5.2 The War and the removal of Bani-Sadr

The next target of the fundamentalist ulama and the IRGC in their battle to control the outcome of the Revolution was the western-educated layman Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, who politically belonged closer to the left side of the political spectrum, propagating a somewhat Marxist-inspired Islamic ideology, almost drifting towards anarchistic tendencies in his political writings.\textsuperscript{144} Shortly after the fall of Bazargan’s Provisional Revolutionary Government, Bani-Sadr was elected as the first president of the Islamic Republic in January 1980. Bani-Sadr had been a close associate of Khomeini during Khomeini’s exile in France, and Khomeini backed his candidacy for the presidency where Bani-Sadr ran as an independent and won an overwhelming victory with 10.7 million votes out of a total of 14 million.\textsuperscript{145} At the same time however, the IRP dominated the elections to the Maljes, where Rafsanjani was elected speaker, and from its power-base here the fundamentalist ulama posed a serious challenge to Bani-Sadr’s authority. As president, Bani-Sadr formally controlled the country’s armed forces, but like earlier the Revolutionary Guard remained loyal to Khomeini alone and actively undermined Bani-Sadr. The IRGC continued its attacks against the Kurds despite Bani-Sadr calling for a ceasefire, and cooperated with the US Embassy hostage takers to thwart Bani-Sadr’s attempts at negotiating the release of the hostages.\textsuperscript{146} The Revolutionary Guards also broke up pro-Bani-Sadr demonstrations and tacitly approved the ransacking of the political headquarters of the IRP’s opponents.\textsuperscript{147} The Iraqi invasion in September 1980 did not make things any easier for Bani-Sadr, as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps greatly expanded its organisation and responsibilities within the Iranian state.

In many ways the War came at a good time for Khomeini and his associates, who used it as a pretext to increase internal repression, strike hard against their rivals and tighten their grip

\textsuperscript{144} Keddie (2006) p.208-212.
\textsuperscript{145} Keddie (2006) p.250.
\textsuperscript{146} Ward (2009) p.233.
\textsuperscript{147} Katzman (1993) p.55-6.
over the Islamic Republic. The War functioned to keep revolutionary fervour alive, and at the same time served to concentrate the minds of the population on the foreign enemy and away from domestic political disagreements. According to Bani-Sadr, had there not been a War, he and his followers might have triumphed in the internal battle with the fundamentalist ulama in the IRP.\(^\text{148}\) With the War being a fact, Bani-Sadr focused his efforts on the defence of the country, and not holding much sway over the IRGC forces, Bani-Sadr opted to reinvigorate and rely on the regular Iranian Army to repulse the Iraqi invaders. Bani-Sadr’s role as commander of the armed forces was however severely circumscribed with the establishment of the Khomeinist-dominated Supreme Defence Council to plan and lead the Iranian war effort, and the Revolutionary Guards and the IRP were highly suspect of Bani-Sadr’s close relations with the regular Army, seeing this as a possible base for Bani-Sadr instigating a coup against them.\(^\text{149}\) Bani-Sadr and his activities were therefore closely monitored by the IRP as they advocated the expansion of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to take the lead in Iran’s war effort. IRGC Minister Mohsen RafiqDust, commenting on the IRGC’s expanded role in the wake of the War, asserts that:

> When we wanted to send the IRGC to the battlefronts, this force did not have the necessary military formation or organization. The IRGC was not created to defend the country’s borders but rather the main aim for the creation of the IRGC was to defend the Islamic revolution. It was at this time that we realized that the imposed war was not against our borders but rather that it was aimed against the Islamic revolution and was bent on its destruction. Therefore, we felt the need to mobilize the IRGC. But when the IRGC wanted to enter the war as a popular force it was faced with problems and obstacles put in its way by the ruling clique [of Bani-Sadr] at that time.\(^\text{150}\)

In his political battle with the IRP and the Revolutionary Guard, Bani-Sadr on his side complained that “[t]he mullahs had access to the radio, the newspapers, and the Friday prayers. We had to do without all of that”.\(^\text{151}\) Regarding the IRP’s aims, Bani-Sadr asserted that “[t]he objective, among other things, was to dominate the army, then disband it and replace it with the Revolutionary Guards”, and to achieve this goal the fundamentalist ulama made sure available arms went to the IRGC and constantly harassed and talked about the regular Iranian Army in negative terms.\(^\text{152}\) One example Bani-Sadr gives of the difficult conditions under which he was trying to lead the war effort was when a Basij unit seemingly

^{149}\) Takeyh (2009) p.91.  
haphazardly decided to arrest the commander in chief of the Army’s ground forces over his purported failure to produce the “correct” papers, Bani-Sadr having to send his own guards to obtain the Army officer’s release.\textsuperscript{153} Bani-Sadr further described how the IRP undermined his authority by publishing articles every day that denounced him and the regular Army as useless, and passed new laws that meant young men were incorporated into the Basij instead of being under his control as commander in chief of the armed forces. Bani-Sadr also claimed the fundamentalist \textit{ulama} purposely advocated the continuation of the War so that they could build up the Revolutionary Guard to replace the Army, and even asserted that his own appointment as commander in chief of the armed forces was part of a plot by the mullahs to discredit him, faced with the overwhelming challenge of responding to the Iraqi invasion with only the neglected and disorganised remnants of the Shah’s Army at his disposal.\textsuperscript{154} Bani-Sadr’s assessments about his own downfall and political enemies should certainly be treated as a truth with moderations, recognising that Bani-Sadr hardly can be regarded as a neutral source of information within these areas, but nevertheless his closeness to events provide valuable insights into some of the dynamics at work in the early domestic power-struggles within the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In the disputes between the IRP and Bani-Sadr, Ayatollah Khomeini often shifted between supporting one side over the other and regularly urged the two sides to compromise, but in the spring of 1981 Khomeini finally broke completely with his old friend and associate Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr. The constant challenges to his authority and the many disagreements with the fundamentalist \textit{ulama} compelled Bani-Sadr to write a letter to Khomeini where he criticised Khomeini’s leadership, and in response Khomeini shortly after made use of his constitutional power as Supreme Leader to dismiss Bani-Sadr as president, the pretext being the lack of progress made in the War.\textsuperscript{155} Bani-Sadr, fearing persecution from the IRP and the Revolutionary Guard, went into hiding on June 15 1981 and soon thereafter fled the country, while the armed forces suffered a new round of purges to further remove any potential threats to the Khomeinist regime. Bani-Sadr had never tried to create a party or a coalition to back his political power as president, and from hiding he chose to ally with the Mujahedin-e Khalq to

\textsuperscript{154} Bani-Sadr (1991) p.110, 179-81, 68.
call for an uprising against the fundamentalist *ulama*. With the removal of Bani-Sadr, the IRP however controlled all the major influential political institutions within the post-revolutionary state, and the MEK and the political left were to be the next targets of the clerical regime and the Revolutionary Guards in what increasingly came to resemble a coordinated campaign to eliminate all internal rivals within the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran.

5.3 Altering the internal power balance: The defeat of the MEK and the Tudeh Party

Unlike the political factions represented by Bazargan and Bani-Sadr, the remaining Iranian leftist groups posed a more serious challenge to the fundamentalist *ulama* due to their possession of well-organised armed militias to back their cause. In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, the MEK and the Fedaiyen-e Khalq controlled between 15,000 and 20,000 armed guerrillas, and even the Tudeh party, which generally abstained from the use of violence, had some 7,000 armed men and women in Tehran alone. Together these forces roughly equalled the size of the many Islamic paramilitary groups which numbered some 20,000 fighters in total, and in addition to this another 20,000 armed Iranians were in the streets after the military armories were looted following the fall of the Shah. The Islamic groups however lacked the structure and coherence of the leftist forces, and the creation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was partly meant to unite and organise the many different Khomeini-oriented militias and armed bands into one institution. As noted, the IRGC originated from some 6,000 fighters at its inception, and grew to number some 20,000–30,000 in total manpower by 1980. This number then increased substantially to around 50,000 in 1981 with the IRGC’s expanded responsibilities in the wake of the Iran-Iraq War, meaning the Revolutionary Guard had markedly surpassed its leftist rivals in armed and available manpower. One of the War’s most important consequences was therefore seen in the altering of the internal Iranian power balance, making the IRP and the Revolutionary Guards able to outgrow and challenge the organisations located on the left side of the political spectrum.

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Like Bani-Sadr and the more liberal political groups that had participated in the rise against the Shah’s regime, many of the forces on the left side of the political spectrum had accepted the prominence of Ayatollah Khomeini as a “uniting figure” of the Revolution with the belief that he would eventually retire from the political arena once the Revolution had triumphed. Many leftists, including the Tudeh party, therefore initially opted to support the IRP in undermining the more liberal forces, hoping to strengthen their own position within the Iranian state. In the summer of 1981 however, the Mujahedin-e Khalq opted to support Bani-Sadr and call for a rebellion against the increasingly authoritarian regime of the fundamentalist ulama. The MEK organised demonstrations in support of Bani-Sadr, but these were brutally repressed by the IRGC and other pro-Khomeini revolutionary militias, and turned increasingly hostile and violent as demonstrators were killed in clashes, persecuted, arrested and executed.

The MEK, with its long history of guerrilla warfare, was itself no stranger to violence, and in response to the suppression of its supporters it stepped up its attacks against the emerging Khomeinist regime. On 28 June 1981 a massive bomb at the IRP’s headquarters killed over 70 people, including the IRP’s founder and general secretary Ayatollah Behesti, four cabinet members, six deputy ministers and twenty-seven parliament members. The MEK was widely believed to be responsible for the bomb-attack, and this episode served to further justify the fundamentalist ulama’s violent campaign of suppression against the Iranian left. Battles in the street, execution of MEK-guerrillas, closure of the leftist press and fierce persecution followed, and within a year the Khomeinist regime had executed around 6,000 of its opponents. The Mujahedin-e Khalq suffered a severe blow when the organisation’s main hideout in Tehran was discovered and many of its commanders were killed, prompting Masud Rajavi, the MEK’s top leader, to escape into exile along with Bani-Sadr to continue their resistance against the emerging post-revolutionary regime from abroad, although no longer representing any meaningful threat to the IRP and the Revolutionary Guard’s domination of the Iranian state.

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After the Mujahedin-e Khalq had been thoroughly defeated, with many of its remaining members fleeing the country, the fundamentalist ulama turned their attention towards the remaining political leftist parties in the post-revolutionary Iranian power-struggle. The Tudeh party, the oldest and largest leftist party with the best-known leaders, had long backed the emerging revolutionary regime, and Khomeinists had used Tudeh support to help put down their other opponents and to facilitate relations with Moscow. Until 1983 the Tudeh was allowed to publish and spread its influence, but in early 1983 the IRP-dominated regime turned on the Tudeh, accusing the party of spying for the Soviet Union and plotting to overthrow the government.\(^{163}\) Over seventy prominent Tudeh members were arrested, while thirty-two Tudeh affiliated military officers were executed and hundreds of others purged from the armed forces.\(^{164}\) A similar fate befell the Fedaiyen-e Khalq, which in any case was plagued by internal disagreements and had split into competing factions in the period following the Revolution, and both the Tudeh Party and the Fedaiyen-e Khalq were declared illegal in May 1983. Although MEK, Fedaiyen and Tudeh cells continued to harass the regime for some years to come, they posed no serious threat to the IRP-dominated government after 1983, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps had played a pivotal role in ensuring the victory of Khomeini’s vision of the Islamic Republic.

5.4 Internal security and policing functions

In addition to securing the triumph of the fundamentalist ulama over their political competitors, the IRGC also performed a range of other internal duties within the post-revolutionary state. One of the Revolutionary Guard’s tasks from its inception was the indoctrination of revolutionary values, a task directly linked to the IRGC’s role as the loyal vanguard of Islamic ideology and Ayatollah Khomeini’s teachings. The Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader in the IRGC became a major channel for indoctrination, both within and outside the IRGC itself, especially propagating the doctrine of velayat-e faqih. During the Iran-Iraq War, this office oversaw the deployment of over 18,000 clerics to bolster battlefield morale both among the regular Army soldiers and the

Revolutionary Guards, emphasising Shia ideology and the value of martyrdom. The IRGC also ensured popular adherence to Islamic law regulating social life by developing sub-units that policed the major cities looking for transgressors, like women not dressed strictly to Islamic conformity, youths playing Western music, or those eating during the daylight hours of the holy month of Ramadan. These units even entered homes to search for violations of Islamic custom, demonstrating the depth to which the IRGC penetrated post-revolutionary Iranian society.

As showed in the previous chapter, the Iran-Iraq War prompted the IRGC to develop a clear command structure and a nationwide organisation that penetrated society down to the local levels. In addition to its engagement in the war effort, the Revolutionary Guard continued to exert its influence on the domestic scene through the liquidation and relentless persecution of the opponents of the revolutionary state, separatists, and other “morally corrupt” individuals. According to Bani-Sadr, attacking and arresting people in the streets and the use of torture against “enemies of the Revolution” were common practices of the IRGC, and Bani-Sadr further asserts that by 1984 “[t]he Guards had infiltrated all of the regime’s vital institutions”. In addition to defeating its main political rivals, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps also absorbed many of the other revolutionary organisations and early competitors like the hezbollah-groups and the local komitehs. The komitehs, often highly unpopular due to their excessive use of violence, were reigned in and gave up their administrative tasks when the Islamic government formed, and many komiteh guards were made to take tours to serve the IRGC at the battlefront and eventually became part of the Revolutionary Guard themselves. The remnants of the komitehs were finally voted to merge with the police and gendarmerie in 1990, and thus were dissolved while the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps persisted and expanded its organisational responsibilities. The IRGC developed to become the Islamic Republic’s principal organisation for intelligence and security in the course of the War, and although parts of its domestic intelligence role was ceded to the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) in 1983, the IRGC undoubtedly remained one of the most powerful internal institutions in Iran in light of its continued

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166 Katzman (1993) p.84.
168 Bani-Sadr (1991) p.151, 191. Again it must be noted that Bani-Sadr’s statements should be regarded as truths with moderations, given his intensive political battle with the fundamentalist ulama and dislike of the IRGC.
policing and security missions. In sum, the IRGC increasingly came to monopolise the means of violence both externally, as showed in the previous chapter, and domestically within the post-revolutionary Iranian state-structure, a development that sets the Revolutionary Guard apart from other cases where somewhat similar armed forces were created in the wake of revolutionary struggles.

Returning to Adelman’s earlier mentioned findings about the phases that military institutions usually go through in the course of a revolution, the first three steps seem to conform well to events as they took place in the course of the Iranian Revolution. The old Army was closely tied up with the Shah’s regime and was widely discredited, although allowed to persist, and the IRGC rose to prominence and proved its mettle by sweeping away internal challengers and holding its own against the Iraqi attackers. As showed, the Revolutionary Guard’s responsibilities however went far beyond those of an ordinary military organisation, and the IRGC’s role in providing internal order and security is what most clearly distinguishes it from other revolutionary armies, a comparison with the two major communist revolutions in the Soviet Union and China clearly demonstrating this point. In these countries domestic intelligence functions were not performed by the Red Army or the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), but by the civilian KGB and the Ministry of State Security in the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China respectively. Moreover the IRGC proved a lot less hesitant to use force internally to disperse or arrest demonstrators than their more “professionalised” counterparts in these countries, and seemingly the Guard’s ideological commitment to uphold the principles of the Islamic Revolution was not dampened by its organisational development and specialisation.

One major difference that might explain the IRGC’s extensive domestic role compared to the Soviet Army and the PLA is that the Revolutionary Guard was not subordinated to an organised ruling political party in the same way as the communist armed forces were controlled by the communist regimes. Even though the IRGC cooperated closely with the Islamic Republic Party in defeating internal enemies and securing the fundamentalist _ulama’s_ vision of the Iranian Revolution, the IRP was increasingly torn by factional disputes and was

170 Wehrey et al. (2009) p.54.
finally dissolved in 1987, another example of the IRGC outliving the other revolutionary organisations established in the early days after the fall of the Shah’s regime. The Revolutionary Guards considered themselves free from civilian political authority other than the Supreme Leader and kept control over advancements within their own ranks, and the IRGC itself constituted Iran’s most powerful security service. Unlike the PLA, the Red Army and also the French revolutionary army, the IRGC was not created in the same way by the civilian leadership or a political party, but developed from a pre-existing structure of underground guerrilla groups and militias that battled the Shah alongside, not subordinate to, the revolutionary clerics. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps thus had independent roots in the Iranian Revolution before being united into a coherent institution following the decree from Ayatollah Khomeini, and although certainly fulfilling an important role as both the eyes, ears and spear tip of the emerging Khomeinist regime, the IRGC at the same time came to exert considerable political influence in its own right during the Iran-Iraq War.

5.5 Political role and influence of the IRGC

From its early beginnings, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was involved in the political struggle to control the outcome of the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution. The IRGC’s strong support of the ideology propagated by Khomeini and his associates naturally gave it a political outlook, but the Revolutionary Guard also increasingly wielded substantial political influence on its own merits. The IRGC’s engagement in politics however seems to be a direct contradiction of Ayatollah Khomeini’s order to all armed forces to stay clear of politicisation, Khomeini’s official chronicler Hamid Ansari quoting Khomeini as asserting:

I insist that the armed forces obey the laws regarding the prevention of the military forces from entering into politics, and stay away from political parties, groups and [political] fronts. The armed forces [consisting of] the military, the police force, the guards, and the Basij should not enter into any [political] party or groups, and steer clear from political games. Guard Commander Mohsen Reza’i on the other hand defended the IRGC’s active political role, also by referring to purported statements by Ayatollah Khomeini:

Once someone had asked Imam [Khomeini] as to why he lends so much support to the IRGC. The Imam had answered “why not?” and the interlocutor had warned him that it may result in staging a coup

175 Quoted in Wehrey et al. (2009) p.78.
[if the IRGC became too strong]. The Imam had answered, “It doesn’t matter; it stays in the family [if they stage a coup]; as they are our own guys.” Revolutionary Guard Minister Mohsen RafiqDust further justified the politicisation of the IRGC on the grounds that the Revolutionary Guard was meant to defend the Revolution also from within, unlike the regular Army, and the IRGC’s mission to defend the purity of the Islamic Revolution, as codified in the Constitution, arguably is a political one as much as a military one. The IRGC thus clearly differentiated itself from the more professional militaries, like the regular Iranian Army, which are to be depoliticised, solely focused on external defence, and remain loyal to whatever civilian regime is in power. Quite to the contrary the Revolutionary Guard did not consider itself confined to the military sector alone, and from its creation regarded it as its mission to play an active role also within other spheres of the post-revolutionary Iranian state. Whether the IRGC should engage in politics or not still remains a contested debate, particularly in the post-Khomeini era, but it is however clear that the Revolutionary Guard’s increased power and institutional strength in the course of the Iran-Iraq War resulted in substantial political influence within the post-revolutionary Iranian state.

As mentioned, the IRGC to a large degree resisted civilian authority and controlled advancements within its own ranks, and being a largely independent element in the coalition that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power made the Revolutionary Guard a major political actor. The complicated state-structure created in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution with its multiple power-centres and checks and balances to prevent any one institution from getting too powerful (indeed the decision to retain the regular Iranian Army even after the War was largely driven by the desire to balance the power of the IRGC), resulted in a drift towards “behind the scenes” bargaining and informal decision-making that greatly favoured the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. With the huge expansion of the IRGC’s organisation in the wake of the Iran-Iraq War, the Revolutionary Guard greatly increased its importance and power, making it able to determine and influence the appointment of officials in many other institutions, including the civilian leadership and even the regular Iranian Army. This was seen in the IRGC’s successful pressure to reinsert and promote Ali Sayyid-

Shirazi as commander of the regular Army’s ground forces in March 1981, and later the promotion of Ali Shamkhani, one of the Guard’s most prominent figures after Reza’i, to become commander of the regular Navy in October 1989.\textsuperscript{181} The IRGC’s considerable influence over rivaling organizations stands in clear contrast to other institutions inability to affect the internal composition and workings of the IRGC, testifying to the Revolutionary Guard’s extensive institutional strength and independence.

In addition to constituting an inherently political project from its inception, many former and current Revolutionary Guards also rose to prominent positions within the post-revolutionary Iranian government. Early examples include Hasan Abedi-Jafari, a former member of the IRGC Supreme Council who served as Minister of Commerce until 1988, and Ali Mohammad Besharati, an anti-Shah guerrilla, former director of the Guard’s Intelligence Unit, and former member of the IRGC Supreme Council, who became Deputy Foreign Minister in 1984.\textsuperscript{182} Narrowing down the concept of “political power” to simply imply the holding of important offices within the civilian state-structure, the IRGC therefore still constituted a political force to be reckoned with. This is however not to say that IRGC-personnel remained a united and coherent group as they reverted into politics, as factional disputes also existed within the Revolutionary Guard and some former members distanced themselves from earlier hard-line policies. Nevertheless service in the IRGC presented an increasingly regular venue for entering into civilian Iranian politics, and an important part of the IRGC’s political influence stemmed from the creation of networks formed at the front among the IRGC combatants during the War. These networks also included the IRGC’s counterparts in affiliated organizations, as I will return to in the next chapter.\textsuperscript{183} Mobilising support through these substantial networks was a major source of political influence, and many state officials gained, retained or lost their positions due to IRGC backing (or lack thereof). Shortly after the War, at the time of Khomeini’s death in 1989, Guard or former Guard organisers, associates and members held 5 out of 25 Cabinet positions in the Iranian government, setting a strong precursor for the IRGC’s later substantial involvements in civilian politics, not least experienced with the former Revolutionary Guard Mahmud Ahmedinejad ascending to the

\textsuperscript{182} Katzman (1993) p.124-5.
\textsuperscript{183} Wiig (2007) has written extensively about the IRGC’s revolutionary networks that were formed in the course of the Iran-Iraq War, see p.30-37.
The roots of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ political prominence can thus be found in the extensive internal role and the large informal networks developed in the course of the Iran-Iraq War, contributing further to the rise of the IRGC to become one of the most powerful institutions within the post-revolutionary Iranian state.

5.6 Summary: State-making and the evolving internal role of IRGC

In the early period following the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was mainly focused on ensuring the survival of the Revolution by providing order, security and preventing internal rebellions. From its creation the IRGC identified itself closely with the Islamic political ideology purveyed by the fundamentalist ulama close to Ayatollah Khomeini, and soon became heavily engaged in the activity of state-making, in the Tillyan sense of eliminating or neutralising internal rivals within the emerging Iranian state-structure. This was clearly evidenced already in the first year following the victory of Revolution with the IRGC’s important role in undermining the Provisional Revolutionary Government of Mehdi Bazargan. With the advent of the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC greatly expanded its organisation, responsibilities and capabilities, significantly increasing its domestic as well as external influence. The extensive rise in armed and available IRGC-manpower tilted the internal Iranian power balance decisively in their favour, making the Revolutionary Guards and their allies in the IRP able to defeat their political rivals one by one, as the internal opposition failed to unite against the fundamentalist ulama but instead worked against each other in the hope of increasing their own political power. After the removal of Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr from the presidency in the summer of 1981, the IRGC and the IRP launched a vigorous campaign against the Mujahedin-e Khalq and other leftist parties, and by the end of 1983 all political competition was effectively removed from the struggle to dominate the post-revolutionary Iranian state. The IRGC continued to expand its internal security and policing functions, surpassing and absorbing many of the other revolutionary organisations created in the aftermath of the Revolution, and developed to become the Islamic Republic’s principal institution for intelligence and security in the course of the Iran-Iraq War. The Revolutionary Guard thus increasingly monopolised the means of violence within the Iranian state, and further compounded by its institutional independency and substantial networks created at the battlefront, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps came to be an

important and influential political actor in its own right, setting the precedent for later extensive involvement in politics. The government sector was however not the only civilian sphere infiltrated by the expanding IRGC-organisation, and next I turn my attention beyond the IRGC’s use of organised violence to shed light on the Revolutionary Guard’s social base and development into other fields of activity during the Iran-Iraq War.

6 The “Mobilisation of the Oppressed”: Class-base, Privileges and the Expanding Roles of the IRPC

As the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps expanded its responsibilities in the wake of the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC witnessed huge increases in manpower to perform its new duties. Many volunteers flocked to the IRGC driven by ideological conviction and a desire to defend the country and the Revolution, while others were more opportunistic, the IRGC offering a chance of upward social mobility and providing special perks and benefits for its members. Together with its closely affiliated sister-organisations the Revolutionary Guard played an important role in bringing the Iranian Revolution from the cities to the countryside, and the IRGC managed to draw substantial support from Iran’s rural areas. The needs of the War also prompted the Revolutionary Guard to develop its own weapons industry, having to rely on self-sufficiency in the face of the international arms embargo. The IRGC further penetrated the civilian spheres of the Islamic Republic by establishing its own schools, research facilities and engaging in the procurement and distribution of goods, to name but a few of the IRGC’s extensive activities. By the end of the War the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps constituted a small independent “business empire” in addition to its role as the principal organisation of state-controlled violence in Iran, adding to its overall position as one of the most powerful institutions within the post-revolutionary Iranian state-structure.

6.1 Class-base of the IRGC: Recruitment, privileges and “protection”

When the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was created in the direct aftermath of the Iranian Revolution it functioned to absorb many of Iran’s newly mobilised social forces, especially those elements motivated by the Islamic revolutionary ideology conveyed by the fundamentalist ulama under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. As mentioned, the bulk of the IRGC’s original members and organisers were urban anti-Shah guerrillas, like the
Mujahedin of the Islamic Revolution, many of whom had experience from training with armed militias and resistance groups in other countries like the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in Lebanon.\textsuperscript{185} This core group then took on new elements from private militias put together by revolutionary clerics from their mosque congregations, absorbing many smaller and local revolutionary organisations like the komitehs. The early Revolutionary Guards largely came from the same social baseline, being lower middle class urban, nonclerical militants that strongly supported the Islamic character of the Iranian Revolution.\textsuperscript{186}

With the advent of the Iran-Iraq War, the Revolutionary Guard experienced a rapid expansion in manpower, and much of the IRGC’s rank and file were filled with zealous volunteers drawn from the urban poor. As the Revolution spread to the countryside, discussed in more detail in the next section, members also flocked to the IRGC from the rural areas, and the Basij-forces were largely created from highly ideologically and religiously motivated young and elderly volunteers from small towns and villages, many of whom were illiterates and in general less well-educated and politically sophisticated than the more cosmopolitan core of the Revolutionary Guards.\textsuperscript{187} Additional IRGC personnel were recruited from high school and university students, the government bureaucracy and factory workers. The IRGC also increasingly managed to incorporate non-ideological groups and rally them in support of the Khomeinist clerics, as somewhat more opportunistic but equally militant youths were drawn to the IRGC from urban slums and unemployment, regarding the IRGC as a tool for personal advancement providing possibilities for upward social mobility and offering better pay and benefits than the regular Army. The fact that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps played an important role in the distribution of goods made scarce by the War, controlling food rationing, price controls and petrol rationing among other things, also gave incentives to join the IRGC as the Revolutionary Guards often used their control over these resources to benefit themselves and the “true” supporters of the Revolution.\textsuperscript{188} In addition the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was given exceptional power to call upon manpower from all sectors for the war effort as needed, and probably began to take conscripts by the mid 1980s as the War dragged on and the IRGC’s numbers were depleted in the costly “human wave”

\textsuperscript{188} Chubin & Tripp (1988) p.70, 134.
operations, although conscription was not officially announced until 1987 along with harsh punishments for deserters.\textsuperscript{189} Even parts of the population not originally committed to the IRGC’s Islamic ideology thus had a kind of “double” incentive to become part of the organisation; on the one hand membership could provide personal benefits and privileges, and on the other hand refusal to join could result in severe punishment.

With the huge increases in IRGC manpower during the War, extended attention was given to the religious and civic indoctrination of all Revolutionary Guard units to ensure their adherence to the Islamic doctrines and principles propagated by Ayatollah Khomeini.\textsuperscript{190} This was seen in the earlier mentioned heavily ideologically imbued instruction programs instituted for the \textit{basijis}, the deployment of thousands of clerics to the front to boost battlefield morale, and also in the teachings emphasised at the IRGC’s own schools, as I will return to later. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps thus largely managed to retain revolutionary fervour within its ranks and remained dedicated to its mission of guarding the Revolution and its achievements. The lower middle class Islamic militants and the urban and rural poor became the main constituents of the IRGC, allied with the Khomeinist regime backed by the traditional forces represented by the \textit{bazaaris} and the \textit{ulama}. These social classes thus stood to gain the most from the Revolutionary Guard and the fundamentalist \textit{ulama}’s rise in power to dominate the Islamic Republic and define the content of the Iranian Revolution.

Turning to Tilly’s framework, it is clear that the IRGC engaged in the state-activity of \textit{protection}, meaning “eliminating or neutralizing the enemies of their clients”, on behalf of the above mentioned groups as the Revolutionary Guard and the Khomeinist regime defeated internal rivals and secured their grip over Iranian society.\textsuperscript{191} Again it is worth quoting part of Tilly’s “idealized sequence” of how war influences state-building:

\begin{quote}
In the course of making war, extracting resources, and building up the state apparatus, the managers of states formed alliances with specific social classes. The members of those classes loaned resources,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{190} Ward (2009) p.228.
\textsuperscript{191} Tilly (1985) p.181.
provided technical services, or helped ensure the compliance of the rest of the population, all in return for a measure of protection against their own rivals and enemies.\textsuperscript{192}

This seems to describe well how the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps rose to prominence within the post-revolutionary Iranian state, relying on the support from the religiously zealous lower middle classes and the poor masses to ensure the compliance of the rest of society, and in return offering protection as well as special perks and benefits for its main constituents. The concept of protection also relates to the IRGC’s legitimacy as discussed earlier, in that the Revolutionary Guard’s ability to provide protection at the same time served to bolster the IRGC’s legitimacy, especially in the eyes of the above mentioned classes that made up the IRGC’s main supporters and gained the most from the Revolutionary Guard’s rise in power and influence. Ayatollah Khomeini many times returned to the theme that the “oppressed Iranian masses” were to be the primary beneficiaries of the Islamic Revolution, and with the revolutionary ideology spreading to the countryside, the Revolution truly became a mass mobilising event.\textsuperscript{193}

6.2 The IRGC and sister-organisations: Mass mobilisation and bringing the Revolution to the countryside

As Skocpol concludes from her studies of social revolutions, one of the tasks at which revolutionary leaders seem to excel is the mobilisation of mass popular support, especially in the face of engaging in external warfare.\textsuperscript{194} In Iran the Revolution became a truly national event when the rebellion was brought to the countryside, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps played an important role in this process. Skocpol asserts that “the logic of state-building through which social revolutions are successfully accomplished promotes both authoritarianism and popular mobilisation”, and in Iran this was exemplified as the Revolution brought an authoritarian clerical regime to power, but at the same time gave Iranians who never before had been involved in the national political life a chance to actively contribute to the formation of the new state-structure through enlisting in organisations like the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.\textsuperscript{195} This gave the Revolution popular appeal among the masses that had been subjugated and left out of politics all together under the Shah’s regime. Iran’s rural areas thus provided a huge potential number of volunteers for the

\textsuperscript{192} Tilly (1985) p.183.
\textsuperscript{193} Workman (1994) p.92-3.
\textsuperscript{194} Skocpol (1988) p.149-50.
\textsuperscript{195} Skocpol (1988) p.149, 165.
revolutionary organisations, and the fundamentalist ulama and the Revolutionary Guards were best situated to draw upon support from the countryside following the Iranian Revolution. As mentioned, the clergy could make use of their extensive religious networks to gain access to large crowds, also in Iran’s rural areas, and the IRGC developed its own substantial structure down to the local levels in the course of the War, with recruitment offices in towns and villages. However one additional factor also contributed greatly to the Revolutionary Guard’s penetration of the Iranian countryside; the IRGC’s close affiliation with other revolutionary organisations dedicated to spreading the ideology of the Khomeinist vision of the Iranian Revolution.

The Jahad-e Sazandegi, meaning the “Construction Jihad” (or “Construction Crusade”), was created in the wake of the Revolution as the IRGC’s civilian counterpart, and was instrumental in gathering support for the Revolutionary Guard in the rural areas. The “Construction Jihad” engaged in development and specialised in construction efforts, and cooperated closely with the IRGC to implement government policies and to reorganise the Iranian countryside.¹⁹⁶ Like the Revolutionary Guards and the basijis, the “Construction Jihad” drew its members from the same pool of committed believers and volunteers, and mobilised youths by sending them to rural areas to aid the poor with cheap or free housing, and also sanctioned some seizures of urban homes and rural lands by the poor.¹⁹⁷ When the Iran-Iraq War broke out, the “Construction Jihad” in effect became the IRGC’s “Corps of Engineers”, setting up defensive emplacements, providing technological know-how, building roads and bridges for tactical operations and developing weapons industries, as I will return to in the next section. In the course of the War, the separation between the Jahad-e Sazandegi and the Revolutionary Guard became less and less visible, as the “Construction Jihad” more or less developed into a sub-organisation of the IRGC.¹⁹⁸ The Jahad-e Sazandegi served to significantly bolster the Revolutionary Guard’s popularity, especially in the countryside, and the IRGC also coopered closely with other institutions to achieve this end.

Two other organisations closely affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Khomeinist regime were the Bonyad-e Mostazafan, the “Foundation of the Oppressed”, and the Bonyad-e Shahidan, the “Martyr’s Foundation”. The Bonyad-e Mostazafan received the fortunes left by the former Shah’s Pahlavi Foundation and other properties confiscated in the course of the Revolution, including hundreds of companies, factories, housing units, agricultural lands and substantial holdings in the West. These massive assets were then used to reward the loyal supporters of the fundamentalist ulama and the Revolutionary Guards.199 With the advent of the Iran-Iraq War, the Bonyad-e Shahidan was created and given large funds dedicated to the war effort, especially to take care of the families of War martyrs and wounded personnel from the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij. The families of martyrs received a grant of 2 million rials (roughly $30,000 at the time), while those crippled and long-service volunteers were given priority in acquiring scarce goods, jobs and housing, all intended to ensure continued commitment to the emerging Khomeinist regime and the war effort in face of the high Iranian casualty-rates.200 These organisations, together with the “Construction Jihad”, thus functioned to shield the IRGC’s main constituencies from the worst impacts of the War, and were very important for the Revolutionary Guard and its allies in the IRP to retain mass popular support within the Iranian population.

With the help of the IRGC’s affiliated organisations, Iran’s rural areas became a substantial powerbase for the Revolutionary Guard and the Khomeinist regime. Bani-Sadr comments on how the Khomeinists undermined his authority as president by taking control over the countryside, asserting that “[i]n each city, the mullahs exercised unlimited economic power. They sent the Guards to seize factories, land, machinery, goods”.201 Securing the support of Iran’s rural population was thus an important step in the IRGC and fundamentalist ulama’s rise to dominate the Iranian state-structure, and according to Wehrey et al. the Revolutionary Guards still seem to have a large following in the Iranian countryside, asserting in 2009 that:

> [P]ublic perceptions of the IRGC appear split between urban areas, where it is seen as the regime’s shock-troop force for quelling dissent and enforcing strict social mores, and rural areas, where its

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201 Bani-Sadr (1991) p.124. Again, Bani-Sadr’s statements about his political enemies must be considered as truths with modervations, but at least describes some of the processes by which the Khomeinist regime and the IRGC came to wield considerable influence over the Iranian countryside.
construction projects and promises of upward mobility through training have induced a more favorable view among certain marginalized population segments.\textsuperscript{202}

The IRGC’s affiliated organisations also made up an important part of the extensive revolutionary social networks created in the course of the Iran-Iraq War, as discussed earlier, which former and current Revolutionary Guard members could draw upon to exert considerable influence over Iranian society, also within the political sphere. The close relationship between the IRGC and the above mentioned institutions were cemented by the large degree to which Guard members rotated in and out of or served simultaneously in these organisations, one example being Ali Reza Afshar, an early leader of the “Construction Jihad” who was also a member of the Revolutionary Guard and later became the Guard’s official spokesman and Chief of Staff to Commander Reza’i, and also witnessed by Revolutionary Guard Minister Mohsen RafiqDust becoming head of the \textit{Bonyad-e Mostazafan} after the War’s end in 1988.\textsuperscript{203} In addition the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ close association with these affiliated organisations represents an early example of the IRGC’s infiltration into other areas of state activity beyond strictly being an institution for organised violence, a development that was to be carried a lot further in the course of the Iran-Iraq War.

6.3 Self-sufficiency: Arms-embargo and the evolving Iranian arms industry

With the Iran-Iraq War dragging on and Iran being subject to an international arms embargo, the Iranian armed forces soon found the substantial war materials left behind in the Shah’s arsenals depleted. Prevented from importing spare parts, weapons and ammunition, Iran had to resort to what Revolutionary Guard Commander Mohsen Reza’i referred to as “innovation and creativity” to sustain the war effort, culminating in the creation of a substantial indigenous arms industry aimed at providing self-sufficiency for the Iranian armed forces.\textsuperscript{204}

The developing Iranian arms industry was controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps through the IRGC Ministry from the Ministry’s inception in 1982, and Katzman asserts that:

To a greater degree than perhaps any Guard subunit, its weapons research and production apparatus demonstrate the Guard’s ability to combine highly educated technocrats and experts and scientific

\textsuperscript{202} Wehrey et al. (2009) p.xiv-xv (Summary).
\textsuperscript{203} Katzman (1993) p.42, 128. The IRGC Ministry was dissolved after the War as a new combined Defence Ministry was created, see Katzman (1993) p.102-4.
\textsuperscript{204} Chubin & Tripp (1988) p.48.
In its weapons research program the Revolutionary Guard cooperated closely with the more technically capable “Construction Jihad”, but also with the regular Iranian Army and personnel characterised as “industrialists and technocrats” by Guard Minister Mohsen RafiQDust. Nevertheless the IRGC made sure that it itself remained the main benefactor of the arms industry, and more often than not kept most of its production for use by its own Revolutionary Guard forces.

In 1983 a Deputy Minister for Industries was established within the IRGC Ministry, responsible for the work of 13 industrial groups charged with research related to arms production. This work included retro-fitting, reconditioning and repair of existing equipment, production of munitions, shells and light arms, work on anti-tank missiles, air defence (SAM) and surface-to-surface missiles (SSM), and research for future production of submarines, aircrafts and drones. By 1986-87 the Revolutionary Guard’s domestic military production facilities were directing 37 secret weapons development projects, concentrating on light propeller air craft for the IRGC Air Force and missile manufacturing capabilities with some Chinese and North Korean help. The Revolutionary Guard, together with the “Construction Jihad”, is said to have produced, among other things, their own amphibious armoured personnel carriers, submarines, tugboats, tanks, hovercrafts and helicopters. By 1987 IRGC Minister RafiQDust claimed that Iran could produce 70-80 percent of its own ammunition, and Revolutionary Guard Commander Reza’i claimed self-sufficiency in bullets and mortar-shells, production of RPG-7s and other anti-tank missiles underway, and also that Iran would soon manufacture its own SAMs and SSMs. The Iranian Defence Minister further reported that Iran could produce 47 types of ammunition, as compared to only 7 types in 1979, and by the end of the War Iran claimed to have 240 weapons factories up and running. Reports also suggest that the Iranian nuclear research program, subject to a heated international debate in later times, originated during the Iran-Iraq War. The program might have been started as early as 1986, when the Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdolqazem Khan visited central Iranian

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construction facilities, but first became evident in 1987 when an Iranian nuclear research centre was established by the IRGC in west Tehran.\textsuperscript{210} In sum, although some of the IRGC’s claims about its own achievements and capabilities were clearly overstated, the Iranian arms industry did develop significantly in the course of the Iran-Iraq War and played a very important part in the overall Iranian war effort, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was, and still continues to be, heavily involved in all of Iran’s major weapons research programs.

The burgeoning Iranian arms industry served multiple purposes for the emerging post-revolutionary regime. First of all it reduced Iran’s dependency on foreign arms, ammunition and war material, reducing the effect of the international arms embargo and allowing Iran to sustain its war effort. The weapons research programs also served to affirm the regime’s belief in self-reliance, seemingly proving that Iran could hold its own as an independent nation by relying on its own resources, and not least the domestic arms industry functioned as a cheaper substitute for expensive imports provided by “sanction busters” and the unstable military black market.\textsuperscript{211} With the expansion of the indigenous arms industry the IRGC Ministry was also able to centralise the allocation and acquisition of weapons, as in the first few years of the War each Guard had been responsible for providing his own weaponry, usually required by looting the Shah’s armouries or captured in battle from the Iraqi armed forces. The central allocation of arms was an important factor for the IRGC’s development into a national rather than a private or local force, as Katzman, quoting Max Weber, asserts that the transition from private to national control over the legitimate use of force in a society is a major indicator of nation-building.\textsuperscript{212} The centralisation of the armed forces was thus at the same time an indicator of the consolidation of the Khomeinist revolutionary regime, contributing to the regime’s legitimacy as the supreme wielder of force. The IRGC’s expansion into weapons production also served to increase its power by putting it in charge of the distribution of available arms, and as the Iranian weapons industry developed, the Revolutionary Guard acquired extensive new capabilities within the fields of manufacturing, construction, technology and research. These new organisational capacities could later be put

\textsuperscript{210} Wiig (2007) p.36.
\textsuperscript{211} Chubin & Tripp (1988) p.129.
to use also within the regular Iranian civilian economy, adding to the overall influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps within the post-revolutionary state.

6.4 Providing education and procurement of goods
The Revolutionary Guard also expanded its reach into other civilian activities in the course of the Iran-Iraq War, including the educational sector. The Revolutionary Guard had early on developed purely military training programs for its member, but in 1982 this was taken a step further when the IRGC inaugurated its own “high school”, the Imam Sadegh School, which combined general education with military training and Islamic ideology. Students spent parts of the provided two and a half year program in IRGC military camps to prepare for participation in the War, and by the end of 1984 the IRGC had established branches of its high school in all of its administrative districts throughout Iran.213 The Revolutionary Guard further expanded its educational capabilities by moving into higher education in 1986, with the opening of the Imam Hossein University. The University had an early capacity of some 800 students and graduated its first class in 1988, offering advanced studies in military sciences, engineering, management and medical science.214 The IRGC’s educational programs was thus clearly aimed at providing the necessary competence and expertise needed for the war effort, and like the more specialised military instruction programs instituted for the Revolutionary Guard’s armed services, they were heavily imbued with Islamic ideology.

With the IRGC’s development into a substantial organisation in the course of the Iran-Iraq War, the Revolutionary Guard also came to be an important actor in the procurement and distribution of goods and resources. As mentioned, the IRGC was responsible for distributing many goods made scarce by the War, and frequently made use of these to the advantage of its own members and supporters. The IRGC also came to control many airfields, ports and border patrol stations in light of its expanded military responsibilities, which represented the Revolutionary Guard with an opportunity to export and import merchandise without government supervision. The IRGC increasingly used these entry points to deal in goods outside of the regular Iranian market, securing luxury goods for its own members and

distributing popular sought after merchandise at high prices. It is not clear when the Revolutionary Guard started engaging in black-market profiteering, nor is the full extent of this underground shadow economy known, but it is safe to assume that these activities derived from the IRGC’s extensive control over scarce goods, rationing, price controls and border entry points during the Iran-Iraq War. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ active role in the procurement and handling of goods thus set the precursor for later substantial involvement within the Iranian economy, both legal and black-market, and together with the IRGC’s educational role represented a further penetration of the civilian spheres of the Iranian state.

6.5 Summary: The expanding roles of the IRGC and the end of the War
The question then remains as to what can account for the development of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from being a military organisation to engage in civilian activities like industry, education and the economy. Once more, the War seems to be the determining influence explaining the expansion of the IRGC into these sectors of the Iranian state. The needs of the Iran-Iraq War was certainly what prompted the IRGC to engage in weapons manufacturing and research, being unable to rely on supplies from the international market due to the Western-led arms embargo. Likewise, the desire to prepare young people for service in the War is what drove the Revolutionary Guard to institute training programs, schools and the Imam Hossein University. The IRGC’s penetration of the economic sphere followed from its important role in the distribution of goods made scarce by the War and its close relationship with affiliated organisations controlling substantial funds and competence, all of which were used to benefit the Revolutionary Guard’s supporters and channelled into the war effort. The IRGC’s control of ports, air fields and other entry points into the country was also a by-product of the War, which gave the Revolutionary Guards the opportunity to engage in black-market profiteering. In sum therefore, all of these activities can be argued to originate with the advent of the Iran-Iraq War, lending support to Tilly’s theory of war as a major factor conditioning state-building. As mentioned earlier, the IRGC’s task of “guarding the Revolution and its achievements”, as defined in the 1979 Iranian Constitution, offered few restraints as to limiting the IRGC’s penetration of society, and could be used to justify the Revolutionary Guard’s intervention into all of these sectors within the Islamic Republic.

As the War drew to a close it was clear that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its main constituents in the “oppressed” classes were among the groups that had gained the most from the transformation of Iranian society brought about by the war effort. Reversing the effects of the War by limiting the size or scope of duties of the IRGC in a time of peace thus presented a difficult political and social problem for the Islamic Republic, and Chubin & Tripp, writing in the last year of the War before the end of hostilities, comment upon this issue:

Growing from some 30,000 in 1980, by 1986 they [the Revolutionary Guards] had become a force of over 200,000 with internal and external security missions, with their own Commander, Minister, and Ministry, with plans to expand into specialized areas such as special forces, as well as into an air and naval arm. Expanded numerically and in mission, virtually an independent empire, (the Guards’ budget in part is not accountable to the Maljes), and with their special perks and benefits, the Guards Corps have become a formidable interest group. They would certainly resist the withdrawal of their privileges or their contraction to their previous internal security mission.217

Later events were to prove Chubin & Tripp correct in this assessment, with the Revolutionary Guard retaining its position and influence within the Iranian state-structure even after the end of the War. Furthermore, as shown in the introduction, today the IRGC is arguably more powerful than ever within the Islamic Republic of Iran. The roots of the Revolutionary Guard’s dominant position in Iranian society can clearly be traced to developments that took place in the course of the decade between 1978 and 1988, testifying to the considerable influence exerted on the post-revolutionary Iranian state-building process by the Iran-Iraq War, and supporting the overall conclusion that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was born by Revolution, and raised by War.

7 Conclusion: Born by Revolution, Raised by War

Created by decree from Ayatollah Khomeini on 5 May 1979 in the chaotic aftermath of the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps grew to become one of the most powerful institutions within the Iranian state in the course of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. Given the inherit collapse of existing governmental structures and organisations implied

by the Revolution, the following War exerted a considerable influence on the emerging post-
revolutionary Iranian state-structure. This development conforms well to Charles Tilly’s
framework of “war-making and state-making”, where war is seen as the catalyst driving and
conditioning the state-building process through the four state-activities of war-making, state-
making, protection and extraction. Tilly’s theory however meets with a mixed track record
when it comes to explaining state-building in a non-European context, and differs from the
Iranian experience in some important respects. First of all, the Iranian state-building I have
been concerned with in this paper does not conform strictly to Tilly’s “idealized sequence”
which takes place over centuries of time and with the absence of any state-like entity as its
starting-point, but rather happened within a relatively short period of time following a
revolution that swept away a distrusted established regime and many of its institutions.
Furthermore, the end result of Tilly’s “idealized sequence”, strong, durable institutions within
a coherent state-structure, arguably only partially fits the reality of the Islamic Republic of
Iran, which is still largely ridden by factionalism and internal dissent. Nevertheless, noting
that the Islamic Republic remains young compared to its European counterparts, Tilly’s
theoretical framework does provide valuable insights into how wars influence the course of
state-building. Understanding Tilly’s framework of “war-making and state-making” as a
continuing process influencing not only the emergence, but also the further development of
state-structures, therefore makes it a valuable tool to help study the effects of the Iran-Iraq
War on the post-revolutionary Iranian state-building experience. The Revolutionary Guard’s
substantial engagement in all of Tilly’s state-activities helps explain the rise of the IRGC to
such a dominant position in Iranian society, becoming the Islamic Republic’s most powerful
armed force both externally and domestically. The IRGC also developed beyond solely being
an organisation of organised violence to become an important actor within the civilian spheres
of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the many important roles and responsibilities taken on by
the Revolutionary Guard in the course of the Iran-Iraq War set the precursors for the IRGC’s
future extensive penetration of the Iranian state.

To fully understand the rise of the Revolutionary Guard it is essential to take the effects of the
Iranian Revolution into consideration. It was the Iranian Revolution that swept away the
established regime of Mohammed Reza Shah and thus brought with it the requirements of
renewed state-building efforts in Iran. The many Iranian social forces that had united to
overthrow the authoritarian regime of Mohammed Reza Shah were however driven by a large
array of different ideologies, and as soon as the Revolution had triumphed the coalition gave way to internal disagreements between different political factions over the future direction of the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran. From its inception the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was therefore but one of many armed revolutionary organisations that vied for influence over the post-revolutionary Iranian society, facing challenges to its authority from both the right and left side of the political spectrum as well as from the local komitehs and the revolutionary tribunals. With the Islamic Republic still engulfed in revolutionary turmoil, Saddam Hussein perceived an opportunity to readress old grievances against Iran, and in the wake of the Iran-Iraq War the lack of organisations deemed suitable and trustworthy for performing essential war-related functions resulted in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps greatly expanding its role and responsibilities within the emerging Iranian state.

Engaging in war-making, understood as one of Tilly’s four state-activities, prompted the IRGC to develop from a relatively small and domestically focused revolutionary militia into a full-fledged, well-organised military force rivalling the regular Iranian Army. With the Iraqi invasion in September 1980, mass popular support and revolutionary fervour was channelled into the IRGC as the emerging Khomeinist regime advocated the rise of the Revolutionary Guards to take the lead in the Iranian war effort. To take on its new responsibilities the IRGC expanded its organisation to encompass formal recruitment and training programs, its own Ministry, control of the Basij volunteer forces, and a clear command structure penetrating Iranian society down to the local levels. The IRGC developed along the lines of a conventional military force, with divisions, corps and brigades, and moved into fields previously dominated by the Artesh by establishing its own mechanised forces, artillery units, Air Force and Navy. As volunteers flocked to the battlefront, the Revolutionary Guard swelled in numbers, doubling from some 20,000 – 30,000 in 1980 to around 50,000 during the first year of warfare. By 1987 the total forces of the IRGC numbered close to 450,000 men, outgrowing the regular Iranian Army and making the IRGC Iran’s most powerful external force. The effects of the War on the institutional development of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps at the same time had major repercussions for its increasingly important internal role within the Islamic Republic.
From its creation the IRGC identified itself closely with the Islamic political ideology conveyed by the fundamentalist *ulama* close to Ayatollah Khomeini, and soon became heavily engaged in the activity of state-making, in the Tillyan sense of eliminating or neutralising internal rivals within the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran. This was witnessed already in 1979 with the IRGC’s important role in undermining the Provisional Revolutionary Government of Mehdi Bazargan, and with the advent of the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC greatly expanded its organisation, responsibilities and capabilities. The extensive rise in armed and available IRGC-manpower altered the internal Iranian power balance decisively, the Revolutionary Guards joining forces with the Khomeinist Islamic Republic Party and finding the War a convenient pretext to suppress their political rivals. After the removal of Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr from the presidency in the summer of 1981, the IRGC and the IRP launched a vigorous campaign against the Mujahedin-e Khalq and other leftist parties, and by the end of 1983 all political competition was effectively removed from the struggle to dominate the post-revolutionary Iranian state. The IRGC continued to expand its internal security and policing functions, surpassing and absorbing many of the other revolutionary organisations created in the aftermath of the Revolution, and developed to become the Islamic Republic’s principal institution for both external and domestic intelligence and security in the course of the Iran-Iraq War. The needs of the War also prompted the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to extend its reach into the civilian spheres of the Islamic Republic, further adding to the IRGC’s overall influence over Iranian society.

With the IRGC’s expanded responsibilities in the wake of the Iran-Iraq War, the Revolutionary Guard also engaged in the protection of its main supporters to increase and sustain its manpower and ensure the compliance of the rest of the population. The IRGC’s core of lower middle class militants was joined by substantial numbers drawn from the urban and rural poor to fill the Revolutionary Guard’s rank and file. These “oppressed classes” became the main constituents of the IRGC, made up of zealous volunteers motivated by religious and ideological fervour, and somewhat more opportunistic cadres regarding the IRGC as a tool for personal advancement, providing possibilities for upward social mobility and offering better pay and benefits than the regular Army. The IRGC’s penetration of the economic sphere followed from its important role in the distribution of goods made scarce by the War and its close relationship with affiliated organisations controlling substantial funds and competence, all of which were used to benefit the Revolutionary Guard’s supporters and
channelled into the war effort. The needs of the Iran-Iraq War also prompted the IRGC to engage in weapons manufacturing and research, being unable to rely on foreign supplies due to the international arms embargo, and preparing the population for service in the War drove the Revolutionary Guard to institute formal educational and training programs. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ role as defined in the 1979 Iranian Constitution, charged with “guarding the Revolution and its achievements”, offered few restraints as to limiting the IRGC’s penetration of society, and could be used to justify the Revolutionary Guard’s expansion to wield substantial influence over various sectors within the Islamic Republic in the course of the War.

Far from being forgotten, the important events of the decade between 1978 and 1988 continue to exert a considerable impact on the shape and modern outlook of the Iranian state. Many of the developments that took place in the course of War can also to some extent be seen as precursors to the IRGC’s dominating position in Iran today. Although the IRGC’s performance on the battlefield was mixed at best, it continues to try to cultivate a large amount of legitimacy from the crucial role it played in the “sacred defence” of the Islamic Republic. The Revolutionary Guard’s influence within domestic Iranian politics was experienced already during the War-years with former and current Guards holding important government offices, which can be seen as setting the precedent for later extensive political involvement, witnessed not least with the former Revolutionary Guard Mahmud Ahmedinejad ascending to the presidency in 2005. The IRGC’s control of scarce goods, ports, air fields and other entry points into the country was also a by-product of the War, which gave the Revolutionary Guards the opportunity to engage in widespread black-market profiteering. In addition, through the burgeoning Iranian weapons industry the Revolutionary Guard acquired extensive new capabilities within the fields of manufacturing, construction, technology and research that later could be put to use within the civilian Iranian economy.

Given all the above mentioned developments, there can be little doubt as to the extensive impact exerted on the Iranian state-building process by the Iran-Iraq War, one of the most important consequences being the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to become one of the most powerful institutions within the Iranian state-structure. With the IRGC constituting such a powerful organisation at the end of the War, it was well positioned to
resist any substantial infringements made on its privileges, influence and revolutionary mission, and the Revolutionary Guard has managed to retain its position as one of the most important institutions within the post-revolutionary Iranian state-structure. Although later events since the War’s end certainly also shaped and conditioned the IRGC’s further development, it is clear that the prominent position of the Revolutionary Guard in Iranian society today cannot be fully understood without reference to the important roles taken on by the IRGC in the course of the all-important Iran-Iraq War. Born as a revolutionary militia among many in the turmoil of the Iranian Revolution, the War remains the major explanatory factor that raised the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to become one of the most powerful and influential institutions within the Islamic Republic of Iran.
Literature


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