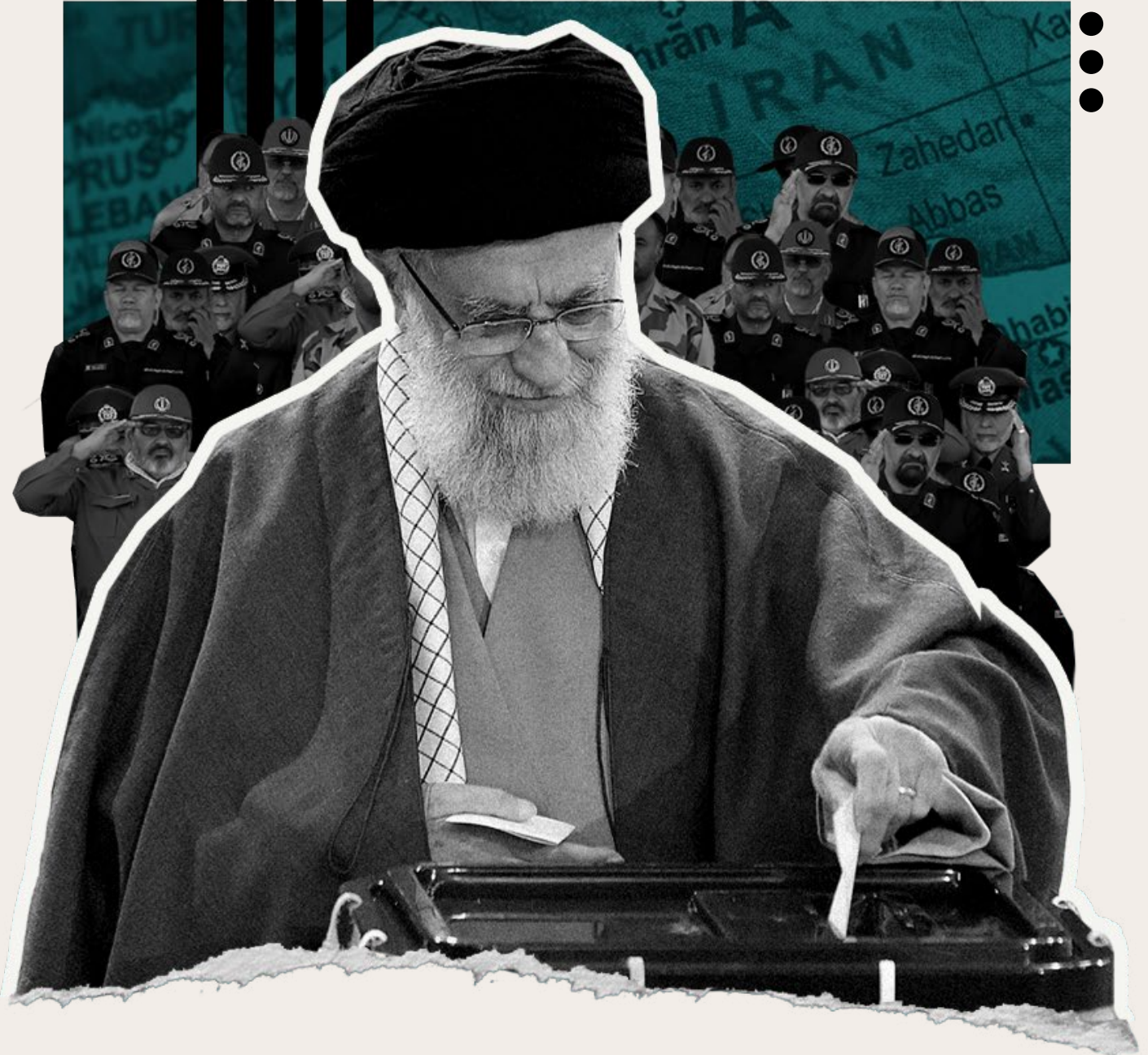


UNITED
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IRAN



ENGINEERING MINDS AND VOTES

The IRGC's Baqiatallah Headquarters and Its
Invisible Hand in Iran's Political Landscape

REPORT BY: KASRA AARABI & SAEID GOLKAR

ABOUT UANI

United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI) is a nonprofit and non-partisan policy organization formed to combat the threats posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

OUR MISSION

UANI educates the public, policymakers, and businesses about the danger posed by the Iranian regime and designs programs to ensure the regime's economic and diplomatic isolation until it abandons its pursuit of nuclear weapons, support for terrorism, regional destabilization, and human rights violations.

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CONTACT
@UANI
info@uani.org

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Supreme Leader
Ayatollah Ali
Khamenei next to
IRGC Baqiatallah
Headquarters
commander,
Mohammad Ali
Jafari at IRGC
parade

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Republic of Iran's "election circus" – as it is known in Farsi – is well and truly underway ahead of the presidential vote on June 28.

If past is prologue, the outcome will be highly manufactured and manipulated by the regime. Election engineering in the Islamic Republic is certainly nothing new.

“

(...) the method of electoral manipulation has not been clearly exposed until now.

Until now, however, the Guardian Council – which is controlled by Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and vets all prospective election candidates – has been viewed as the main mechanism for voter rigging in the clerical regime. This time around, the Guardian Council, made up of 12 hardline Islamists directly or indirectly appointed by the supreme leader, only approved six candidates out of the 84 names passed onto it by the Ministry of Interior.

These six include Saeed Jalili, Khamenei’s representative in the Supreme National Security Council and a former hardline nuclear negotiator; Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, an IRGC commander and current speaker of the Iranian parliament; Alireza Zakani, the IRGC-affiliated mayor of Tehran; Amirhossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, the head of the Martyrs and Veterans Affairs Foundation; Mostafa Pourmohammadi, former minister of interior; and Masoud Pezeshkian, a so-called “reformist” parliamentarian.

While almost all attention has been on the Guardian Council’s role in election engineering, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) invisible hand has been critical in manipulating electoral outcomes for the Office of Supreme Leader.

Of course, the IRGC’s involvement in “election” manufacturing has been long-standing in the authoritarian regime that is the Islamic Republic. But its role in vote rigging has historically been messy, clumsy, and sloppy in its implementation. As a result, the election circus was full of drama, disputes, and elite fallouts – the most serious of which occurred in 2009 and triggered mass nationwide anti-regime protests.

In the past five years, however, while election engineering in Iran has reached unparalleled levels, it has occurred with greater precision, coordination, and structure.

This is anything but a coincidence, as this paper exposes.

Following Iran’s March 2024 parliamentary vote, a leaked audio file of former Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was revealed where he outed Mohammad Ali Jafari, the former commander-in-chief of the IRGC, as being responsible for election engineering in Iran. According to Zarif, Jafari and the former head of the IRGC’s Intelligence Organization Hossein Taeb were “behind everything” in the March 2024 parliamentary elections, including preparing “the entire candidates list”.

Zarif’s reference to Jafari was particularly significant. Jafari not only has a track record in vote rigging that dates back to 2009 but, in the past five years, he has been commanding a shadowy IRGC headquarters – the Baqiatallah Cultural and Social Headquarters – which has created a full apparatus and strategy to engineer political and cultural outcomes in Iran.

Although Zarif mentioned Jafari’s direct hand in rigging the parliamentary vote, the method of electoral manipulation has not been clearly exposed until now. But with the presidential election around the corner, this question is perhaps more important than ever before.

Using primary Farsi sources – including official IRGC material obtained from inside Iran – this paper, for the first time, reveals the shadowy Baqiatallah Headquarters, its political and cultural missions, including involvement in election engineering and its creation of an Islamic society.

01

THE EMERGENCE OF THE BAQIATALLAH HEADQUARTERS

Virtually unknown to the outside world—or even in Iran, for that matter—the Baqiatallah Headquarters has, for the past five years, played the most important role in Iran’s cultural and political space, strategizing and implementing the supreme leader’s efforts to manufacture an ideal “Islamic society” and an “Islamic government” as part of his five-stages of the Islamic Revolution doctrine.

In the 1990s, Khamenei—who rules as the Hidden Shia Imam’s deputy (*nayeb-e imam*) according to Iran’s 1979 constitution—outlined five necessary stages to “complete” the Islamic Revolution and facilitate the return of the messianic Hidden Imam. These **include an Islamic revolution, establishing an Islamic regime, creating an Islamic government, and creating an Islamic society and civilization**. Iran has only achieved the first two stages, according to Khamenei, a point he overtly reiterated in 2017, **declaring**, “We still do not have an Islamic society, nor do we even have an Islamic government.” The de facto appointment of hardline Islamist cleric and Khamenei protégé Ebrahim Raisi in the June 2021 presidential elections was **designed** to complete the latter so the regime could move towards an Islamic society, as **underlined** by the supreme leader’s representative to the IRGC.

To help build an Islamic society and assist the formation of Khamenei’s “ideal” Islamic government, the Baqiatallah Headquarters has emerged as the IRGC’s leading institution for producing and implementing cultural and political policies across Iranian society.

A **recording** from an IRGC Baqiatallah session obtained by UANI reveals the current Deputy of Baqiatallah Headquarters, Sassan Zare – an individual with deep ties to Mojtaba Khamenei– stating the Baqiatallah Headquarters has the same status as the IRGC Quds Force, whereby it is officially part of the IRGC and under its commandership, but directly reports to the supreme leader and his office (*bayt-e rahbari*). This means while the IRGC logistically supports Baqiatallah, it is directly under the control of the supreme leader regarding policy and strategy.

Beyond this, the very fact that Khamenei appointed Mohammad Ali Jafari, the former commander-in-chief of the IRGC, as head of the Baqiatallah Headquarters on April 21, 2019, underscores both the importance of cultural and political engineering in the supreme leader’s list of priorities and the critical standing of the headquarters in the regime. Jafari is a skilled IRGC strategist who designed and oversaw the decentralization of the Guard after 2007. As the IRGC’s commander-in-chief from 2007 to 2019, Jafari was the strategist behind the decentralization of the IRGC and the **creation** of the IRGC provincial guards to prepare the regime to defend itself against any hard (war) or semi-hard (civil war) threats. He significantly expanded the IRGC’s security and military capabilities, consolidating the IRGC’s asymmetric warfare capabilities to deter the likelihood of US military strikes and brutally suppressing anti-regime protests in 2009 and 2017-18, which strongly challenged the Islamic Republic.

While the IRGC believes it has been able to neutralize the hard and semi-hard threats to the regime, it has been unable to control the “soft threats” to the Islamic Republic—namely Western and secular cultural penetration—due to the fundamental changes in Iranian society, not least the mass secularization of the population since the 1990s.

To fix this problem, the Baqiatallah Headquarters was established to operate as an umbrella entity to coordinate all the pro-regime soft-war and cultural initiatives, including those of the IRGC and Basij. Practically speaking, this has meant all the IRGC and the Basij’s cultural, social, and propaganda institutions have been brought under Jafari’s control as part of the Baqiatallah Headquarters’ soft-war arsenal. According to Jafari, this decision was taken to help the regime achieve Khamenei’s doctrine to Islamize society as a prerequisite for creating a new Islamic civilization.

02

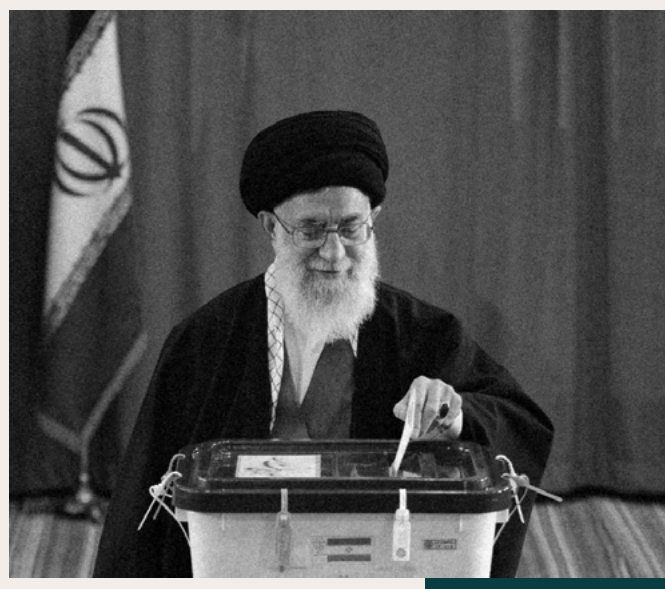
BAQIATALLAH “MIDDLE RING” STRATEGY: ORGANIZING AND MOBILIZING “FIRE AT WILL” IRGC-BACKED VIGILANTES

The IRGC's Baqiatallah Headquarters is the newest and now one of the most crucial entities in the regime for cultural and political engineering in Iran. It operates as the IRGC's main organ to devise and construct new means to achieve Khamenei's ideal Islamic government and society in Iran in line with Khamenei's "Second Phase" manifesto. It does so via a range of initiatives: from devising new ways to impose Islamic morality codes – such as the compulsory wearing of the hijab on women – to eradicating secular and Western influences in Iranian society and political and electoral manipulation.

Of course, other pre-existing state entities – such as the Ministry for Culture and Islamic Guidance or Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution – are mandated with similar tasks. But what sets the IRGC’s Baqiatallah Headquarters apart from these other agencies is: first, due to its headquarter status, it has the authority to demand the full use of all other agencies capacities and resources; second, it has devised a new and unique overarching strategy to achieve its objectives.

This strategy is based on establishing so-called “Middle Rings” at the local level in society (*halgeh-hayeh miyani*) and connecting them directly to the upper-echelons of government. This paper, for the first time, reveals the IRGC Baqiatallah Headquarters “Middle Ring” strategy.

All the information below is based on the original material inside the IRGC’s Baqiatallah Headquarters. This content is drawn from internal IRGC Baqiatallah Headquarters lectures, textbooks, written presentations, and speeches.



Supreme Leader
Ayatollah Ali
Khamenei

03

THE BAQIATALLAH HEADQUARTERS' FIVE-YEAR “MIDDLE RING” PLAN

The IRGC's Baqiatallah Headquarters overarching objectives are based on Khamenei's "Second Phase" manifesto to establish an "Islamic government" and an "Islamic Society" as a means to create a "New Islamic Civilization." To achieve this – according to the Baqiatallah Headquarters – its main "focus, planning, and solution" is rooted in what it calls the "Middle Ring trend."

The headquarters outlines that the supreme leader has underlined the “necessity of the presence of 8 million active youths on the domestic battleground” – approximately 10 percent of Iran’s total population.

Based on this call, the Baqiatallah Headquarters has targeted manufacturing and mobilizing at least four million youths across all cultural and societal fields.

The internal documents state that the Baqiatallah Headquarters has a “five-year goal to organize at least four million people into 800,000 small groups (approximately five-member groups) across all cultural and societal fields.” In other words – as the Baqiatallah Headquarters underlines – in a “neighborhood with a population of 10,000, if five percent of the population are on the domestic battlefield, this is akin to 500 people in the shape of 100 small groups.” The individuals who

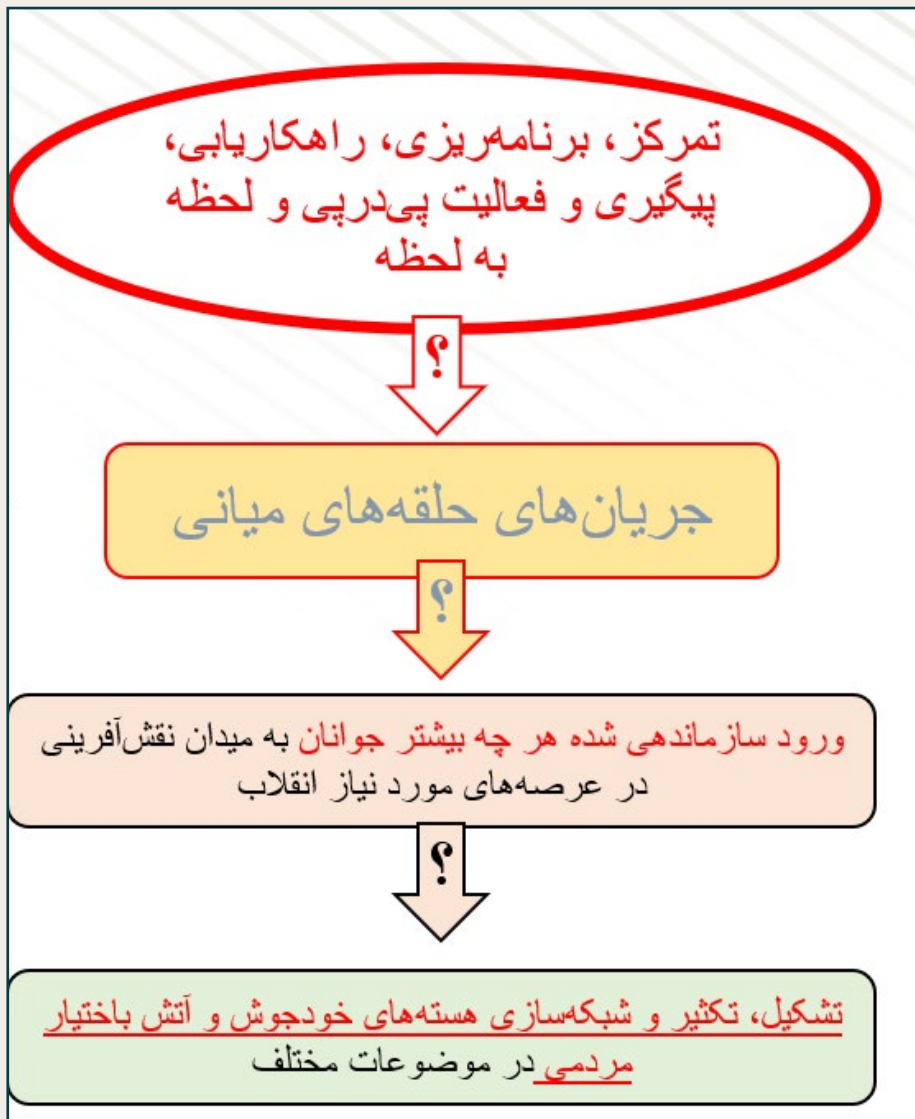
make up these four million people will collectively act as the regime’s so-called “Middle Ring,” which will operate as the Islamic Republic’s own “insider civil society.”

The Baqiatallah Headquarters is tasked with identifying the individuals and entities that fit the requirements to join the “Middle Ring” movement. Having done so, it is then mandated to organize, train, and mobilize these groups at the local level and empower them to carry out “fire at will” cultural and political operations. These “fire at will” operations can range from Islamic and ideological policing to propaganda operations and manipulating political outcomes.

Through the IRGC’s Baqiatallah Headquarters, these so-called “Middle Ring” groups are also directly connected to the upper echelons of power—such as the Office of Supreme Leader, government, ministries, or IRGC. This model is designed to bypass bureaucratic or local barriers



“The Model for Manufacturing and Organizing ‘Middle Ring’ Groups”



to implementing the regime's ideological, political, and cultural policies at the local and neighborhood levels.

The Baqiatallah Headquarters' plan to establish this "Middle Ring" at the local level is based on the view that there is a disconnect between the higher levels of government and local administrators, with the latter failing to enforce the former's Islamist political and cultural laws due to their lack of ideological commitment.

In essence, this entire strategy seeks to organize, mobilize, and empower the small but radical support base of the regime across Iran to control the masses. Having lost ordinary civil society in Iran, this strategy effectively seeks to manufacture an "insider" regime-affiliated civil society and connect them directly to the government and IRGC. This enables the IRGC and regime more broadly to engineer outcomes in the public sphere without interference from the bureaucratic machine, which the hardline clergy have always viewed as a barrier to achieving an Islamic state.

Official documentation from the IRGC's Baqiatallah Headquarters clearly outlines its responsibilities in organizing, training, and mobilizing the "Middle Ring" groups:

1. Identifying existing active groups and communicating with them
2. Identifying potential group builders and holding meetings to establish a concerted narrative and aspirations.
3. Forming new groups made of volunteers.
4. Holding empowering meetings for all groups (both existing and newly formed) and overseeing spontaneous and "fire at will" operations by them.
5. Connecting and establishing networks between these groups (based on specific or broad issues).

سوال پنجم: وظایف اصلی و عمده حلقه‌های میانی (عام و خاص) شهرستان چیست؟

1. ظرفیت یابی: شناسایی گروه های فعال موجود و ارتباط گیری با آن ها

2. ظرفیت سازی:

2.1 شناسایی مستعدین گروه ساز و برگزاری نشست های گفتمان ساز و انگیزه بخش برای آنان
2.2 پیگیری تشکیل گروه از افراد داوطلب

3. برگزاری نشست های توانمندساز برای کلیه گروه ها (اعم از موجود و تازه تشکیل شده) و پیگیری انجام عملیات های خودجوش و آتش به اختیار توسط آن ها

4. شبکه سازی گروه های مردمی (موضوعی و فراموضوعی)



توضیحات: با توجه به گستره فعالیت، حلقه های میانی عام شهرستان ها، می توانند از طریق شناسایی و توجه حلقه های میانی عام سطح محلات و پیگیری فرآیند توسط آنان، فرآیند فوق را پیگیری نمایند.

سوال اول: تصویر مطلوب از جبهه‌سازی (از نظر کمی) در سطوح مختلف چیست؟

علی رغم پیش‌فرض قراردادن بیان مقام معظم رهبری مبنی بر ضرورت حضور 8 میلیون جوان فعال در میدان افاده (10 درصد جمعیت کل)، با توجه به برآورد میدانی قرارگاه، هدفگذاری کمی 5 ساله در تمامی عرصه‌های فرهنگی و اجتماعی، حداقل 4 میلیون نفر (معادل 5% جمعیت کل)

در قالب 800 هزار گروه کوچک (حدوداً 5 نفره) باید سازماندهی شده باشند؛

به عبارت دیگر، در یک محدوده 10 هزار نفری (مانند یک محله)، اگر 5% مردم در میدان افاده، باشند،

می‌شود 500 نفر (در قالب 100 گروه کوچک)



03

INTERNAL STRUCTURE

Due to its headquarters status, the internal structure of the Baqiatallah Headquarters is no different from that of other IRGC organs. It has its commander, Mohammad Ali Jafari, and it houses its own supreme leader's representative and a counter-intelligence deputy who is directly responsible for the Supreme Leader's Military Office.

Under Jafari's command, the most crucial role in the Baqiatallah Headquarters' internal structure is that of its deputy for coordination. Since its inception, this role has been occupied by Sassan Zare – a shadowy IRGC member close to Mojtaba Khamenei, the supreme leader's power-hungry son.

The Baqiatallah Headquarters includes all generic IRGC deputy roles, such as its deputy for culture and arts (*moavanat-e farhangi va honari*) and social deputy (*moavanat-e ejtemaee*).

Beyond these generic positions, the Baqiatallah Headquarters has three specific unique deputy roles: deputy for popular organizations, deputy for social youth movements, and deputy for widespread intelligence coordination.

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DEPUTY FOR POPULAR ORGANIZATION, SEYED AHMAD ABOUDATIAN

The deputy for popular organization (*Moavan-e Mardomisazi*) is one of the essential new secretariat offices that underpins the entire Baqiatallah Headquarters strategy: establishing the so-called “Middle Ring” at the local level in society and connecting them directly to the upper-echelons of government – including the Office of Supreme Leader, government, ministries and IRGC. As previously highlighted, this plan is designed to remedy the disconnect between higher government and the bureaucracy or local administrators in implementing the regime's ideological, cultural, and societal policies. The deputy for popular organization is mandated to oversee the implementation of this overarching strategy: identifying, organizing, and mobilizing “Middle Ring” groups for the regime and for such groups to carry out “fire at will” cultural and social operations at the local and neighborhood level. Under the presidency of the late Ebrahim Raisi, the Baqiatallah Headquarters acquired a significant boost in political power and influence, not least concerning implementing its “Middle Ring” strategy. Consequently, it has established its deputy for popular organization role as a new position within the Office of the President, across all 31 provincial governments and 540 governorship (*farmandari*) postings in Iran. The incumbent deputy for popular organization is Seyed Ahmad Aboudatian, who has long-standing ties to the Baqiatallah Headquarters.



Mohammad Ali Jafari, IRGC Baqiatallah Headquarters Commander



Sasan Zare, IRGC Baqiatallah Headquarters Deputy



Seyed Ahmad Aboudatian

DEPUTY FOR SOCIAL YOUTH MOVEMENTS, HOJATALOLESLAM HOSSEIN YAHYAHIAN

The deputy for social youth movements (*moavan-e nehzat-hayeh ejtemaee*) leads the Baqiatallah Headquarters' efforts to manufacture a new hardline civil society and social constituency for the regime at the grassroots level and connect them to the upper echelons of power. To achieve this, the deputy is effectively mandated to de-bureaucratize authority over neighborhoods or districts to subsume authority from local government – including city councils – to re-design communities in the regime's favor. The secretariat office [uses](#) incentives and punishments to consolidate and expand the hardline constituency of the regime at the grassroots level. In the case of the former, this involves deploying its forces to local neighborhoods to de facto “buy” and co-opt the loyalty of residents through the provision of free services to Islamist and pro-regime constituents. At the same time, the secretariat has a mandate to forcefully impose punishments on critics of the regime and those who are not compliant with the Islamic Republic's Islamist ideals – what they regard as “spreading corruption.”

DEPUTY FOR POPULAR INTELLIGENCE COORDINATION, AMIR-REZA GHOLAMI

The deputy for popular intelligence coordination (*moaven-e elelaat-e mardomi*) heads a new secretariat office responsible for gathering intelligence and identifying and penalizing individuals and entities not implementing the regime's ideological social and cultural policies locally. The formation of this new secretariat office in the IRGC's Baqiatallah Headquarters was based on the view that there was a disconnect between the higher levels of government and local administrators, with the latter failing to enforce the former's Islamist social and cultural laws due to their own lack of ideological commitment. For example, while new laws were passed barring banks from serving female customers with “improper” hijab in 2022, local branches continue to ignore such ideological regulations. The new secretariat is specifically mandated to remedy these issues for the regime.

To do this, the deputy for popular intelligence coordination has, since November [2021](#), established an organized network across all [31 Iranian provinces](#) – known as the “Assembly of Popular Demanders.” This network [seeks](#) to recruit, connect, and organize small and scattered pro-regime constituencies and mobilize them to gather intelligence and identify and punish individuals and entities failing to implement the regime's hardline Islamist social and cultural policies at the local level.



Hojatalolesslam
Hossein Yahyahan



Amir-Reza Gholami

As Amir-Reza Gholami, deputy for popular intelligence coordination at the Baqiatallah Headquarters, has outlined, the purpose of the “Assembly of Popular Demanders” is to seek “[Islamic] justice and fight [social and cultural] corruption.” In doing so, the Baqiatallah Headquarters effectively connects and empowers ideological hardline supporters of the regime at the local level and connects them directly to the higher-echelons of the regime to bypass the lower-level bureaucrats and administrators failing to implement ideological policies. In other words, the “Assembly of Popular Demanders” network, which now has [branches](#) in all 500 townships in Iran with a leadership of 800 nationwide, operates as IRGC-backed ideological and Islamic morality enforcers across Iranian cities, towns, and neighborhoods. Its creation has bolstered the regime's morality and ideological policing and enforcement efforts, which had previously been the sole responsibility of the “Morality Police” branch.

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*Its creation has
bolstered the
regime's morality
and ideological
policing*

EXTERNAL STRUCTURE

Beyond its internal structures and deputy roles, the Baqiatallah Headquarters now supervises and controls the IRGC and Basij's key soft-war and cultural organizations, which have been developed over the past decade. These include Owj Arts and Media Organization, Seraj Cyberspace Organization, Khatam al-Owsieh Cultural Headquarters, Tavana, Mabna, Hadaf Foundation, and Asr Organization.

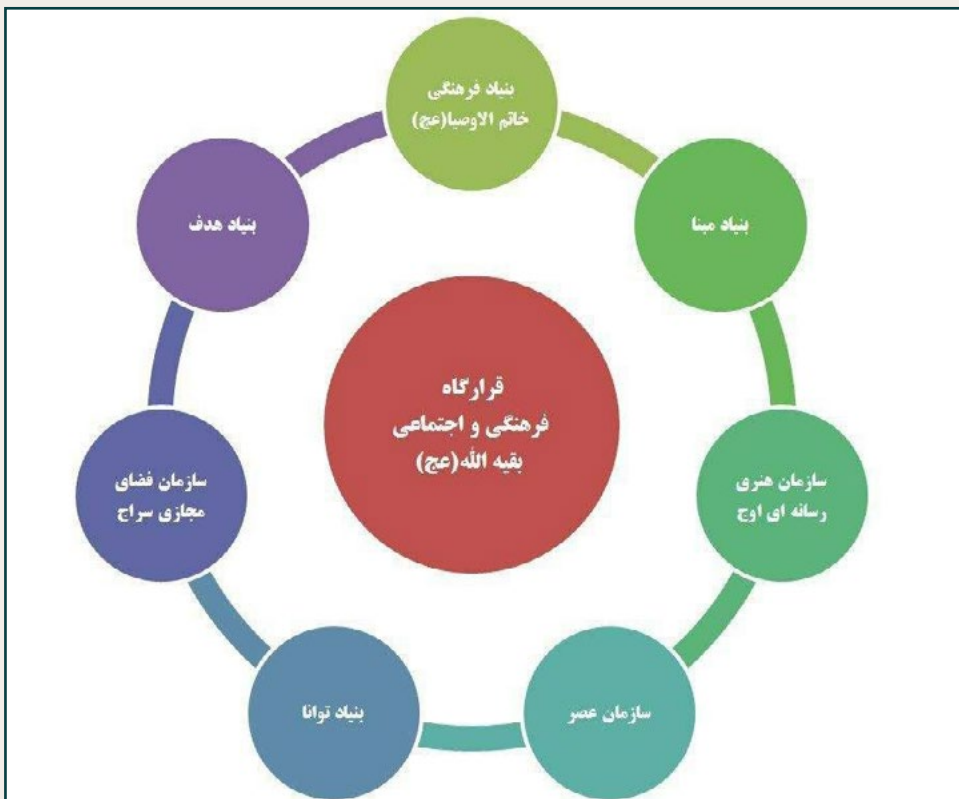


Figure Showing the Baqiatallah Headquarters and its Apparatus



OWJ ARTS AND MEDIA ORGANIZATION

Owj Arts and Media Organization was established in 2013 and is now part of the Baqiatallah Headquarters. Owj has become the media conglomerate of the IRGC, creating films, TV series, animations, exhibitions, plays, and mobile cinemas. Its goal is to provide a platform for identifying, training, and directing potential revolutionary forces in various art and media fields. By establishing the Owj Organization and creating its own propaganda films, the IRGC has cultivated a new generation of IRGC-affiliated and “insider” propaganda filmmakers and [hindered](#) the careers of independent Iranian filmmakers.

In addition, it produces and distributes products that align with the Islamic Revolution. Owj is actively involved in launching campaigns, film production, and distribution. The organization’s works have propagated Islamist extremist and antisemitic productions and is actively engaged in Holocaust denial. Owj has strategically established connections with broadcaster IRIB and security and cultural authorities. It has transformed into a giant media network that has produced thousands of pieces of art, including movies, music, posters, and cultural productions. Some of their notable works include billboard campaigns, short animations, and thought-provoking visual content.

Operating as an umbrella organization, the activities of Owj are organized into several sub-organizations for specific production categories referred to as “houses.” These include “the Islamic Revolution Documentary, Designers House,” the “Islamic Revolution Animation Designers House,” the “Islamic Revolution Fiction Film Designers House,” the “Islamic Revolution Screenwriters Design House,” the “Islamic Revolution Design and Graphic Designers House,” the “Islamic Revolution Propaganda Designers House,” as well as IRIB’s Ofogh Network, whereby Owj would provide most of the network’s content.

Owj has also established multiple front companies to promote its products internationally. One notable company was “[Ayat Media](#),” which was portrayed as an independent international production and distribution company specializing in high-quality documentaries, features, and animations.



Ehsan Mohammad-Hasani (center), the Head of Owj, Among IRGC Commanders



SERAJ CYBERSPACE ORGANIZATION

In 2013, the IRGC established the “Seraj Cyberspace Organization” (SCO), which intends to control cyberspace. The SCO serves as a central organization that recruits and mobilizes online users to conduct cyber operations for the IRGC and the regime. This includes trolling social media campaigns, spreading misinformation online, trending pro-regime hashtags, and creating divisions among opposition groups.

Seraj operates as a headquarters umbrella organization whose main activity is to recruit and mobilize pro-regime online internet users to conduct cyber operations for the IRGC and the regime more broadly. Seraj agents are

involved in production of pro-regime content, including spreading disinformation online, targeted campaigns that troll Iranian activists on social media, dividing the opposition and manipulating the trending pro-regime hashtags. For example, Seraj’s online cyber army tried to undermine the global hashtag #MahsaAmini to disrupt awareness of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests in 2022 by trending similar hashtags but with minor incorrect spellings. As well as these activities, Seraj focuses on producing ideological and cultural material online for pro-regime groups in multiple, including: applications, software, computer games, among other things.



Mansour Amini, director of Seraj’s Cyberspace organization, is pictured in the centre, shaking hands with Mohammad Ali Jafari, head of the Baqiatallah Headquarters.



بناد فرهنگه كخامة الاوصياء

KHATAM AL-OWSIEH CULTURAL FOUNDATION

Founded initially by Hossein Yektah, a senior commander of the IRGC’s Plain Clothes Unit and IRGC recruiter, the Khatam al-Owsieh Cultural Foundation has become one of the principal arms of the IRGC’s Psychological Warfare doctrine. It was established initially after the 2009 Green Movement with the support of the IRGC. While initially, it presented itself as an independent organization, the “Khatam al-Owsieh Cultural Foundation” is controlled by the IRGC in terms of cultural policies, logistics, financing,

and planning. The purpose of this foundation, which set up offices across all Iranian provinces, was to mobilize scattered pro-regime individuals active in the field of culture and arts to organize them into a centralized force. Khatam al-Owsieh Cultural Foundation has created several organizations under its control, which cover different aspects of culture to recruit, radicalize, organize, and mobilize pro-regime individuals in the fight against the West’s soft war with the Islamic Republic.



ASR ORGANIZATION

The Asr Organization is responsible for supervising IRIB Ofogh, which is a Persian-language television channel owned and operated by the IRGC. While it is operated under IRIB, it is supervised by the IRGC. It was launched on June 3, 2014, as a test airing only in Tehran and began broadcasting nationally on December 24, 2014. The media platform known as Ofogh has been used to spread the ideology of the IRGC and Iranian

regime hardliners, as well as a platform for senior IRGC commanders and the heads of various Iran-backed proxy and militia organizations, including Hamas and Hezbollah. They often broadcast programs promoting armed jihad martyrdom, as well as anti-American, anti-Zionist, and anti-Semitic sentiments.



MABNA THINK TANK (FOUNDATION)

The [Mabna Research Center](#), which operates as a think tank within the Baqiatallah Headquarters, aims to defend the values and foundations of the Islamic Revolution and the concept of Islamic governance. It analyzes the fundamental components of the Islamic system and provides solutions to its problems. The center operates with two research groups: the Religious Culture Group and the Religious Institutions Group. Its mission is to bridge the gap between research and implementation

across religious and cultural issues by producing strategic problem-oriented products. Mabna's research focuses on issues including cultural and religious pathology of society; theoretical foundations of Islamic government and the discourse of the Islamic Revolution; hawza and clerical institution issues; analysis of the situation of religion and religiosity in society; and cultural threats to system.



TAVANA JOURNALIST CLUB

The Tavana Journalist Club was [created](#) by the Fars News Agency, which is affiliated with the IRGC and Basij. The club's primary goal is to strengthen Iran's Islamic system through media operations by recruiting, training, and mobilizing *hezbollahi* youth interested in journalism. The first training course of the club aimed to train over 320 carefully selected youths in journalism, providing them with intensive theoretical and practical instruction, as well as ideological indoctrination. According to IRGC officials, the Tavana Journalist Club serves the

dual purpose of countering perceived cultural threats against the Islamic Republic and promoting the Islamic Revolution's message domestically and internationally through skilled media propagandists. The Tavana Journalist Club consists of seven newsgroups including political, cultural, social, international, economic, photography, and sports. This Tavana Journalist Club initiative [reflects](#) the IRGC's focus on the media's increasingly pivotal role in shaping narratives and influencing public opinion.



THE BAQIATALLAH HEADQUARTERS CULTURAL AND POLITICAL OPERATIONS

The Baqiatallah Headquarters and the institutions which sit under its auspices have been created for two primary objectives: Islamizing culture to create an Islamic society; and assisting the regime to create Khamenei's ideal Islamic government, as per the supreme leader's five stages doctrine. To achieve both these goals, the strategy of social and political "engineering" (mohandesi) has been theorized by Khamenei and is now being implemented by Baqiatallah Headquarters.



Supreme Leader
Ayatollah Ali
Khamenei



THE BAQIATALLAH HQ AND CULTURAL ENGINEERING: THE CREATION AN ISLAMIC SOCIETY

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which saw the Islamists overthrow the Pahlavi monarchy, the Islamization of Iranian society has always been a main objective of the Shia Islamist regime. By Islamization, the clerical establishment mainly meant removing any strain of pre-Islamic, Western, modern elements amongst Iranian society and implementation of Islamic sharia law as an all-encompassing ideology over every aspect of Iranian society.



Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the IRGC Baqiatallah Headquarters saluting supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

The Islamization of Iranian society in the past four decades has been forcefully implemented via a top-down approach through the creation of various state institutions mandated to create the ideal Islamic citizen according to Islam. The Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution (SCCR) created in the early 1980s is the most important policymaking body related to the cultural affairs: from education to public spaces. For example, the SCCR has led several waves of the so-called “cultural revolution” across Iranian universities, which has been implemented through the purges of secular Iranian academics and students, purifying higher education textbooks and curriculum and facilitating the hiring of Islamist professors and students.

The presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad led to a new wave of Islamization of society, which was disrupted after a significant gap emerged between the supreme leader and the president in his second-term. This disruption continued during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani, who had a different agenda that focused more on the economy than culture.

In 2019, Khamenei took the decision to mandate the IRGC with the objective of Islamization of society, instead of relying on the government administration as the main driver of his agenda. Khamenei and his office have mandated the IRGC to devise, oversee, and implement the “cultural engineering” of Iranian society.

The de facto appointment of the late Ebrahim Raisi as president in June 2021 aimed to [advance](#) the supreme leader’s doctrine on creating an Islamic society, not doubling-down on Islamic morality policing. This would ultimately be the spark that ignited the “Woman, Life,

Freedom” anti-regime protests, which would be triggered following the murder of Mahsa Amini, the 22-year-old girl who was killed by the so-called “Morality Police” for “improper hijab.”

Despite [inaccurate reports](#) suggesting the Islamic Republic had dismantled the “Morality Police” and was easing pressure on the Iranian population, a new wave of violent Islamization has started in Iran only two years after the murder of Mahsa Amini. Videos and images have emerged of “Morality Police” once again patrolling the Iranian streets, forcefully imposing the compulsory hijab on Iranian women. On December 6, 2022—during the peak of the 2022 anti-regime protests in Iran—Khamenei [delivered](#) a key speech underlining the necessity of “Revolutionary reconstruction in the cultural structure” and the pressing need for “cultural engineering” due to society’s “infatuation with the West”. Amid nationwide unrest, this was the ayatollah’s green light to double down on the Islamization of Iranian society rather than alleviate pressure on the population. For Khamenei, the most important institution for “revolutionary reconstruction in the cultural structure” is the Baqiatallah Headquarters.

Under Jafari, the Baqiatallah Headquarters has been designing various plans and policies for this “revolutionary reconstruction in the cultural structure,” while its internal and external apparatus, including its various subordinate institutions, are implementing these plans and policies.

For example, in May 2024, it was [reported](#) that one of the networks of the “Assembly of Popular Demanders” in Tehran raided business offices and forcefully removed male urinals as a means to confront Western culture.

Likewise, in terms of consolidating and expanding a new Islamist civil society at neighborhood level, Hossein Yahyahan, the deputy for social youth movements, has [revealed](#) that, as part of this project, the Baqiatallah Headquarters forces are deployed to neighborhoods to identify problems Islamist constituents have – including both personal and public – and seek to resolve them. As Yahyahan [underlines](#): “We collected 120 doctors and set up a charitable medical center and told the doctors to offer a free allocation to each of our neighborhoods – one was a heart specialist, another neurologist specialist, others were specialists for men, women, and children. They told us they would provide free medical services every month to five people introduced by us [Baqiatallah Headquarters], with all expenses paid.” The deputy for social youth movements underlines that they expanded this model for all services across neighborhoods. It is through the provision of such free private and public services to Islamist and pro-regime bases that the Baqiatallah Headquarters seeks to consolidate and expand the Islamic Republic’s support base and manufacture a new “insider” civil society.

Beyond this, in relation to producing cultural outputs – such as films and music – Owj Organization has created more than 11,000 productions, aimed at promoting Islamic and revolutionary culture as well as countering Western narratives. For example, Owj’s “Why Syria” documentary [promoted](#) conspiracy theories about the Syrian Revolution being a Western and “Zionist” plot.” Likewise, according to Owj’s CEO Ehsan Mohammad Hosseini, “Damascus Time,” a film on the IRGC’s intervention in Syria, was produced by Owj at the direct [request](#) of the late Qassem Soleimani, former IRGC Quds Force commander.

In addition to all of these initiatives and efforts, the Baqiatallah Headquarters and its agents have been assisting other institutions, including the police, in their mission of fighting Western culture and imposing an Islamic order. For example, the Baqiatallah Headquarters is deeply [involved and supportive](#) of a new “Morality Policing” plan called “the Noor Plan,” which is being coordinated by the national police and Tehran Municipality. Jafari has been on record strongly supporting the head of the police, Ahmad-Reza Radan, and his plan to enforce the compulsory hijab on Iranian women. The Baqiatallah Headquarters’ networks and manufactured “Fire at Will” groups have also been [used](#) as “hijab patrols” (*hijab baans*) in Tehran Municipality and intimidating Iranian civilians.

While all global focus is on the “Morality Police,” the reality is that the Baqiatallah Headquarters is the invisible hand that is orchestrating the Islamization of society since 2019. Yet, the Baqiatallah Headquarters’ role and its entire apparatus has completely been overlooked West, underscored the scored by the fact that it has yet to be sanctioned.



IRGC member saluting supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at IRGC parade

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THE BAQIATALLAH HQ AND ELECTION ENGINEERING: CREATING AN ISLAMIC GOVERNMENT

Alongside its social and cultural activities, the Baqiatallah Headquarters and its apparatus have been used for political purposes, including election engineering. In recent years, election engineering in Iran has reached unparalleled levels and has been more tightly controlled with greater precision, coordination, and structure. This is precisely because Jafari and the IRGC have, in the past few years, been able to operationalize the Baqiatallah Headquarters' "Middle Ring" strategy and apparatus for election engineering. The utilization of the Baqiatallah Headquarters' "Middle Rings" to manufacture voter rigging was particularly coordinated in the 2024 parliamentary elections.

In June 2023, nine months prior to the March vote, Abdullah Moradi, the director general of the Political Affairs Office of the Ministry of Interior – responsible for managing elections – [revealed](#) the interior ministry’s intent to operationalize the Baqiatallah Headquarters’ “Middle Rings” in the upcoming elections. “We will try to use the capacity of the Middle Rings all over the country based on the specific requirements of each province and city,” [declared](#) Moradi in June 2023.

The involvement of Baqiatallah Headquarters – not least its “Middle Rings – in manipulating the Islamic Republic’s elections occurs in several ways.

In the pre-election phase, the IRGC’s Baqiatallah Headquarters – and its “Middle Ring” network – undertake a multifaceted role, from manipulating political campaigning to helping vet prospective candidates. The former encompasses targeted propaganda, political campaigning, and psychological operations that either promote, co-opt, or intimidate prospective candidates online and in person. The latter involves various Baqiatallah Headquarters structures – including its “Middle Ring” and Assembly of Popular Demanders networks – either directly or indirectly involved in the vetting of candidates.

In the neighborhood, local, and city council elections, it has a direct role in the vetting process as [IRGC affiliates](#) – including members of the Baqiatallah Headquarters and its various structures – are prioritized in forming the Interior Ministry Executive Councils (*heyat-e ejraee*), responsible for vetting local elections.¹ This status quo enables the Baqiatallah Headquarters to have a hand in manufacturing local and city council elections, disqualifying candidates. This was witnessed in the June 2021 [regional elections](#), when, before the vote, all existing council members in Isfahan and 81 percent in the capital Tehran were rejected by the Executive Council.

For parliamentary and presidential elections, where the Khamenei-appointed Guardian Council is mandated to vet all candidates, the IRGC’s Baqiatallah Headquarters’ “Middle Ring,” as well as the Assembly of Popular Demanders, plays an indirect role in vetting candidates. This indirect role occurs by acting as informants for the IRGC Intelligence Organization, providing key intelligence on the profiles and backgrounds of candidates. Such information informs the IRGC Intelligence Organization’s official reports to the Guardian Council, which bases its

1. The Interior Ministry Executive Councils take place at various levels, including: across cities, townships, provinces, and a central national executive council.

decision, along with other intelligence organizations on whether to qualify or disqualify prospective candidates on such intelligence.

The next phase in election engineering takes place on election day and combines a series of strategies, including intimidation and co-optation of voters; coordinated mobilization of networks; in-person ballot manipulation, and voter rigging. An assessment of such activities across smaller cities – whereby electoral engineering is more visible – reveals their modus operandi on election day. Ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections, the Governor of Sanandaj [underscored](#) the “necessity of using the ‘Middle Rings’ of the society to encourage people to participate in the elections and also to help choose the correct candidate.”

In practice, the “Middle Rings” and other Baqiatallah Headquarters networks implement this strategy on election day through a combination of “buying off” the electorates and intimidating voters with violence at

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polling booths. In the 2024 parliamentary elections, there were multiple [reports](#) of “organized buying of votes” particularly across impoverished areas – through financial payouts or material incentives, such as “food and aid packages”. These activities were reported in Ravar, Khuzestan, and Fars provinces. In addition to this, eyewitness accounts reveal “threats and intimidation from those who claim to be Islamic Revolutionaries” at polling centers.

Beyond co-optation and intimidation, Baqiatallah Headquarters members and affiliates – not least the “Middle Ring” – form the bulk of election monitoring and volunteering roles across Iranian provinces, which enables them to manipulate and tamper with voter registration and ballots. This includes obtaining positions as part of the Guardian Council approved “Election Observer Councils” (*heyat-e nezarat*), which conducts election monitoring, and volunteer positions carrying administrative functions across polling stations.

Most electoral fraud activities take place through these official capacities. The methods include manipulation of voter registration or [identification](#) (such as [fraudulent impersonations](#), forging signatures, completing absentee ballots); invalidating and spoiling ballots; [forging votes](#); turning people away at polling stations; as well

as in-person polling booth peer-pressure. Recorded eyewitness [accounts](#) in the 2024 parliamentary elections highlight “widespread electoral violations by a number of volunteers” in the Kerman and Ravar constituencies. Likewise, there have been [accounts](#) of election volunteers producing an “engineered and infected atmosphere” inside polling booths, “processing lists containing the national ID codes of thousands of absent people,” and the [mass](#) forging of votes. Finally, members of “Middle Rings” have also been used as individuals who count votes and report to the authorities. It is here where they can rig the count and manipulate voter numbers. In March 2024 parliamentary elections this was precisely the case in certain provinces, not least in smaller rural areas.

Given the increasing role of the Baqiatallah Headquarters’ invisible hand in election engineering throughout the Islamic Republic’s elections in the past five years – not least during the March 2024 vote – it is expected to play a key role in electoral rigging of the upcoming June 28 vote.



Mohammad
Ali Jafari, IRGC
Baqiatallah
Headquarters
commander

CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Since its creation in 1979, the IRGC has consistently expanded its mandate and territory in almost all aspects of Iranian life, including economy, culture, security and politics. In relation to cultural and political manipulation, the Baqiatallah Headquarters is one of the newest institutions created under the control of the IRGC. In the past few years, Khamenei has been using the IRGC – and specifically the Baqiatallah Headquarters – to engineer all aspects of politics and culture to advance his five stages doctrine and enable him to further personalize power.

Today, the Baqiatallah Headquarters forms part of the IRGC's cultural and political suppressive machinery – yet it has been completely overlooked outside of Iran. This is underscored by the fact that the Baqiatallah Headquarters has not been sanctioned by the US and allies.

To counter Khamenei and the IRGC's plan and to protect against human rights violations in Iran, the US and its allies should immediately sanction the Baqiatallah Headquarters, its leadership, affiliates and apparatus, which are all named in this paper. The specific sanction authorities that can be applied against the Baqiatallah Headquarters fall under human rights violations category. The US and its allies – including the United Kingdom and European Union – should use their respective human rights abuse sanction authorities against this entity.

AUTHOR BIOS

KASRA AARABI,
DIRECTOR OF IRGC RESEARCH,
UNITED AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

Kasra Aarabi is the director for IRGC Research at United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), specializing in Iranian military and security affairs and Shi'a extremism. Previously, he was the Iran Program lead at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, and a Non-Resident Scholar at the Middle East Institute. Kasra is regularly sought after for counsel by governments, policymakers, and non-governmental organizations. He has testified on Iran before multiple parliaments and is a frequent contributor to international media. Kasra is a native Persian (Farsi) speaker and holds an MA (Hons) in international relations and a BA in international politics, both from King's College London. He is also undertaking a PhD at the University of St Andrews, where his research focuses on the IRGC. Follow him @KasraAarabi.



SAEID GOLKAR,
SENIOR ADVISOR AT UNITED
AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

Saeid Golkar is a senior advisor at United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI) and UC Foundation associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He previously served as a senior fellow at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. Golkar received his PhD in political science from Tehran University in 2008 before moving to the U.S. in 2010. He has taught and conducted research at Stanford University and Northwestern University. His research focuses on international and comparative politics of authoritarian regimes, with an emphasis on the Middle East and North Africa. Golkar is an authority on the Basij militia and the IRGC, and his first book, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Post-revolutionary Iran* (Columbia University Press, 2015), was awarded the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Silver Medal Prize.



تنه فقط ماک، و طعمه، اجتماعی و ملی بلکه ماک، و طعمه



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