

# Major General Hossein Salami: Commander-in-Chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

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## Major General Hossein Salami

Major General Hossein Salami has risen through the ranks of the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) since its inception after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. He served on the battlefield during the Iran-Iraq War, spent part of his career in the IRGC's academic establishment, commanded its Air Force, served as its second-in-command, and finally was promoted to the top position as commander-in-chief in 2019. Salami, in addition to being an IRGC insider, is known for his speeches, which are full of fire and fury. It's this bellicosity coupled with his devotion to Iran's supreme leader that has fueled his rise.

### Salami's Early Years and the Iran-Iraq War

Hossein Salami was born in 1960 in Golpayegan, which is in Iran's Isfahan Province. His education spanned both conventional educational institutions—like the Iran University of Science and Technology—as well as those attached to Iran's Armed Forces, specifically the Iranian Army Command and General Staff College. Little is known about Salami's family. But he has a brother, Mostafa (also known as Mohammed), who has [worked](#) on the General Staff of Iran's Armed Forces.

In 1980, Hossein Salami joined the IRGC's division in Isfahan, and rose through the ranks during the Iran-Iraq War. There isn't an extensive public record of his service during the war, as some observers have [noted](#). This stands in contrast to the extensive paper trail and cult of personality surrounding Iranian wartime figures like [Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf](#), [Ali Shamkhani](#), and [Qassem Soleimani](#), all of whom, like Salami, rose to positions within the IRGC's top brass.

However, evidence suggests Salami [fought](#) in Iranian Kurdistan, which was a hotbed of separatist activity. For example, Iraq's President Saddam Hussein tried to [weaponize](#) the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and Kurdish grievances against Iran's regime. Salami also [commanded](#) the 25<sup>th</sup> Karbala and 14<sup>th</sup> Imam Hossein Divisions. These were important divisions in the war effort. Prominent [figures](#) within the IRGC previously served in the 25<sup>th</sup> Karbala Division, including Morteza Ghorbani, who later went on to become chief advisor to Salami, and Komeil Kohansal, who served in the same position under Salami's predecessor as commander-in-chief of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari. The 25<sup>th</sup> Karbala Division also [played](#) an important role in Operation Dawn 8, where Iran [captured](#) the al-Faw [peninsula](#).

The 14<sup>th</sup> Imam Hossein Division was in a [frontline](#) position during Operation Karbala-5 in 1987, one of the Iran-Iraq War's [biggest](#), bloodiest, and most important battles. As the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency [noted](#) in a declassified report, “[s]urprise and the skillful, but ruthless use of troops helped Iran develop the Karbala operation from a relatively small scale attack to an important battle that threatens some Iraqi lifelines...Throughout the battle, Tehran has been willing to accept high casualties to seize and hold areas.” Even though Salami didn't appear to be the commander of the 14<sup>th</sup> Imam Hossein Division at that juncture—[Hossein Kharrazi](#) was its leader—at least by association, such experiences may have provided him with the wartime credentials and prestige to further his career.

Salami also had the opportunity to diversify his military tours during the war. The 14<sup>th</sup> Imam Hossein Division has been [part](#) of the IRGC's Ground Force. The 25<sup>th</sup> Karbala Division, likewise part of the IRGC's Ground Force, was also reportedly involved in intelligence gathering during the Iran-Iraq War. Salami also rounded out his experience as [commander](#) of Nuh Naval Base operations. Thus by the end of the war, Salami had a diversity of experiences—serving in restive Iranian provinces, as part of ground force operations, potential involvement in intelligence gathering, and lastly, commanded naval base operations. Such an expansive pedigree may have served as a springboard for more senior positions.

### Salami's Path to Power

During the war, Salami occupied a series of posts, which coincided with Mohsen Rezaei's time as commander-in-chief of the IRGC. Rezaei continued in his post after the war, and Salami was accordingly promoted, becoming the [commander](#) of the IRGC's University of Command and Staff from 1992-97. During this period, he was instrumental in [formulating](#) its warfare curriculum. The university provides much of the academic grounding to the IRGC's theory of warfare, being [associated](#) with leading think tanks like the Center for Defensive National Security Studies (CDNSS). Other leading IRGC commanders also taught during the time Salami was the university's commander. Most significantly, Mohammad Ali Jafari, under whom Salami would later serve as deputy commander-in-chief, [taught](#) at the war university from 1992-93. Thus a stint in IRGC academia was a common qualification in two consecutive commanders-in-chief.

Salami found a way to return the favor to Rezaei. In 1997, after the election of Mohammad Khatami as president, Khatami allegedly [pressured](#) the supreme leader to remove Rezaei as commander-in-chief of the IRGC, following his support for Khatami's rival, Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri, in the 1997 election. There were reports Khatami refused to even [meet](#) with Rezaei. Khamenei eventually replaced Rezaei with Yahya Rahim Safavi. But Salami demonstrated his loyalty to Rezaei—[signing](#) on to a 1997 letter expressing support for his commandership in glowing terms, writing “[y]our excellency's name has been intertwined with the names of martyrs and sacrificers.”

Such a move was risky, as it could have been considered an implicit rebuke of the supreme leader's decision making, not to mention an attempt to undermine the incoming commander-in-chief of the IRGC. But Salami was in good company in signing on to the letter—the then commanders of the IRGC's Ground Forces, Khatam al-Anbia Construction Headquarters, and Navy, among many others, were [signatories](#).

He doesn't appear to have suffered any professional damage from his decision to add his name to the letter. Salami was [elevated](#) in 1997 as the operations deputy of the IRGC's Joint Staff, and lasted in that role until 2006. However, politically, he treaded carefully after his boldness in 1997. There was another opportunity for Salami to add his name to a public letter amid the student demonstrations in Tehran in July 1999. This time, 24 IRGC commanders [penned](#) one threatening then President Khatami, questioning his ability to lead and essentially threatening a coup, if he didn't act swiftly to thwart the demonstrations. But Hossein Salami didn't sign on to this letter. If

he decided to do so, he would have been in comfortable company as the relatively new Commander of the IRGC's Quds Force Qassemi Soleimani signed his name. In fact, Morteza Ghorbani, who served with Salami in the 25<sup>th</sup> Karbala Division, also added his [signature](#). Ghorbani, as previously mentioned, would go on to become Salami's advisor when he became commander-in-chief. This indicates Salami's risk aversion and political balancing—he expressed support for Rezaei when he was persona non grata with Khatami but wasn't publicly associated with an IRGC intervention at one of Khatami's most vulnerable moments as president. In effect, Salami was able to stay in the good graces of the IRGC's top brass while flying below the radar through inaction in 1999.

During his tenure as operations deputy of the IRGC's Joint Staff, Salami raised his public profile. According to a report in the reformist newspaper, *Shargh*, he spoke at a conference aimed to enlist Iranian volunteers for martyrdom operations, sponsored by the World Islamic Organization's Headquarters for Remembering the Shahids. He [proclaimed](#), "By means of tactical events, it is possible to arrive at strategic results. Your eyes see that by cutting down two towers in the U.S., the history of the world has been divided in two—before this event and after it. By means of this small event, the policy of the U.S. and of the other world and regional powers has changed. This greatly affects the U.S., such that 3% annual growth in the American economy drops to 1%, and unemployment increases to 5.6% for the first time." This marked some of the earliest fiery commentary that Salami has been known for as he ascended to the senior ranks of the IRGC.

One additional aspect of Salami's tenure as the operations deputy is that it coincided with Hossein Alaei's chairmanship of the IRGC's Joint Staff. Alaei had previously served as commander of the IRGC's Navy and only [lasted](#) in the position at the helm of the Joint Staff for around three years. It was the [last](#) senior level position within the IRGC's command that he held. Alaei later fell out of favor with the supreme leader and the old guard of the IRGC, implicitly [likening](#) his regime to the last days of the former Shah of Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. It [resulted](#) in current and former guardsmen penning an open letter to Alaei, criticizing his stance. But Salami was unscathed.

### **Commander of the IRGC's Air Force and Deputy Commander-in-Chief**

Despite Salami's association with Alaei as one of his deputies, he doesn't appear to have suffered any professional consequences, continuing his swift ascent through the ranks. Indeed, in 2006, he was [promoted](#) as commander of the IRGC's Air Force. Iran's supreme leader approved of the recommendation by Yahya Rahim Safavi—another elevation of Salami under Safavi's tenure as commander-in-chief. This was a major opportunity for Salami as it was the first time he was tapped to lead a major organ of the IRGC itself.

Salami was tapped to manage the Air Force at a time of change. His predecessor, Mohammad Reza Zahedi, was only in the position for less than a year. He was soon named as commander of the IRGC's Ground Force after the [death](#) of Ahmad Kazemi in a [mysterious](#) plane crash. Kazemi

had previously commanded the Air Force, which may explain the Air Force to Ground Force career trajectory for Zahedi, which enabled Salami's promotion.

The position of commander of the IRGC's Air Force had a history of being filled by important regime figures, including Mohammad Hossein Jalali who served as defense minister before he became commander of the Air Force. The legacy of Kazemi and his death also likely increased the symbolic importance of the Air Force commandership. Thus, Salami was clinching a career-making position.

Beyond his predecessors, the IRGC's Air Force controlled sensitive asymmetric warfare programs within the Islamic Republic's broader military establishment. It [operates](#) the Al-Ghadir Missile Command, which is its ballistic missile force. This has been used to compensate for its aging conventional air force. Additionally, [according](#) to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, it has been the "primary operator of Iran's growing fleet of UAVs." Iran's drone manufacturing program is one of the crown jewels of Iran's defense industrial base.

In his appointment announcement, Iran's supreme leader [highlighted](#) Salami's "bright record of military service" as well as charged him with raising "the level of combat readiness" of the IRGC's Air Force. Early in his tenure in 2006, Salami [revealed](#) that Iran had successfully tested the Fajr-3 missile that could avoid radar detection and carry multiple warheads. He called it a "remarkable achievement." Between 2006 and 2007, Salami was sanctioned by the [United Nations](#), the [United States](#), and the [European Union](#) for his involvement in proliferation activities, specifically the [ballistic missile program](#).

During his time at the Air Force, Salami presided over tests of Iran's growing arsenal and continued to offer hair-raising commentary on Iranian military capabilities, which generated global headlines. In July 2008, he [showcased](#) the testing of nine medium- and long-range missiles some of which were capable of reaching Israel and U.S. bases in the Middle East. These missiles included the Shahab-3, Zelzal, and Fateh. Salami [bragged](#), "[t]he aim of holding this maneuver is to show (Iran's) will and authority to the enemies that have threatened Iran with harsh language in recent weeks. We...launch these missiles in honor of Iran, to show that this is only a small part of Iran's capability and defensive power." He went on to [threaten](#), "[o]ur hands are always on the trigger and our missiles are ready for launch" and on another occasion [proclaimed](#), "Iran can affect the flow of half of the world energy as soon as it wishes."

Indeed, when Salami was at the IRGC's Air Force, Iran also test-fired the solid-fueled Sejil-2 missile, which the Obama administration [described](#) as "significant" because of the missile's mobility. Salami also [oversaw](#) additional testing of upgraded Shahab-3 and Sejil missiles, capable of reaching Israel and U.S. bases in the region in September 2009.

In October 2009, at the end of Salami's tenure, the IRGC's Air Force was [renamed](#) the Aerospace Force to reflect a more expansive mission. In keeping with the new Aerospace Force's increasing importance, that same month, Iran's supreme leader promoted Salami as deputy commander-in-chief of the IRGC. This appointment was noteworthy because Salami would become the first

former Aerospace Force commander to occupy the second highest-ranking post in the IRGC. His predecessor, [Mohammad Hejazi](#), held the post for over one year. The reshuffling likely reflected the regime's increased paranoia after the Green Movement protests that summer, which accompanied the disputed reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president. It was a sign of Khamenei's confidence in Salami's ability to perform in this role after the advances of the IRGC's Aerospace Force under his watch. In addition to a new deputy commander-in-chief, Khamenei [installed](#) a new head of the Basij as well as transformed the IRGC's Intelligence Division into an [Intelligence Organization](#), a status indicative of the increasing priority Tehran was placing in its work after the summer's unrest.

Salami was also taking office against the backdrop of additional structural changes ushered in by the IRGC's relatively new commander-in-chief, Mohammad Ali Jafari, who was appointed in 2007. Jafari's plans [entailed](#) the merging of the Basij into the IRGC as well as the implementation of the Mosaic Doctrine. The Mosaic Doctrine entailed a decentralization of the IRGC's structure, creating 31 individual provincial commands. Consequently, Salami found himself breaking new ground on two fronts: serving under a relatively new IRGC commander-in-chief with grand plans and taking up his new post after protests which rocked Iran's regime.

Through his time as deputy commander-in-chief, Salami continued his fiery brand of rhetorical warfare against the United States and its allies. In 2010, he [accused](#) the United States and Britain of complicity in a suicide bombing at a mosque in Zahedan, saying worshippers "were martyred by hands of mercenaries of the U.S. and U.K." He also [presided](#) over military exercises like Great Prophet 5, which showcased the IRGC's air, land, and sea capabilities, providing Salami with another opportunity to diversify his brand, helping to oversee the totality of the IRGC's command. Salami played a starring [role](#) in a series of missile tests over ten days in 2011, revealing underground missile silos. He [told](#) Iranian [media](#) at the time, "[o]ur missiles have tactically offensive and strategically deterrent and defensive features...[o]ur fingers are still on the triggers. Only the number of triggers has increased...We have the power to execute preventive and swift, retaliatory mass missions on all enemy targets." Salami even [floated](#) the possibility of increasing the range of Iran's missiles to beyond 2,000 kilometers, putting Europe in its crosshairs. He [said](#), "[w]e tell the European countries that if we have confined the range of our missiles to 2,000 kilometers until today and have not increased it any further, it is not because of a lack of technology, because we have no limitations for the range of our missiles in technological terms." As observers have argued, that put him at [odds](#), at least publicly, with his boss, the IRGC's commander-in-chief. Mohammad Ali Jafari had [said](#) the 2,000 kilometers limit was already sufficient to target "most of American interests and forces" and therefore no extension was necessary. This was evidence of a difference of opinion concerning Iran's missile program in the highest ranks of the IRGC.

In addition to the menacing rhetoric, Salami exhibited a strategic mindset. In 2012, he [claimed](#) "[i]n our strategic planning, we have set out a radius we call the preventive/deterrent radius that covers all the strategic interests of the enemy in the region, and we will therefore be able to control the arena of conflict at any level."

Salami's time as deputy commander-in-chief was not without difficulties. He eulogized Hassan Tehrani Moghaddam, who headed the IRGC's Arms and Self Sufficiency Program and served as a deputy Aerospace Force commander, after a mysterious blast [killed](#) him and other guardsmen at the Al Ghadir Missile Base at Bidganeh. Salami [said](#), "Martyr Moghaddam was the main architect of the Revolutionary Guards' cannon and missile power and the founder of the deterrent power of our country." The loss was personal for Salami, as not only was Tehrani Moghaddam a deputy in the IRGC Aerospace Force during the time when Salami served as commander, but there was also evidence Tehrani Moghaddam was being groomed to succeed him. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, Salami's successor as commander of the IRGC's Aerospace Force, [revealed](#) that when Mohammad Ali Jafari assumed command of the IRGC, he wanted to appoint Tehrani Moghaddam as the chief commander of the Aerospace Force. But he allegedly turned down the post.

In the intervening years, Salami also weighed-in on Iran's broader Axis of Resistance. Salami [proclaimed](#) that the Houthis were a "similar copy" of Hezbollah. He [said](#) in July 2016 that "[t]oday, more than ever, there is fertile ground—with the grace of God—for the annihilation, the wiping out, and the collapse of the Zionist regime." Salami [bragged](#) that 100,000 missiles were aimed at Israel from Lebanon and that they "are just waiting for the command, so that when the trigger is pulled, the accursed black dot will be wiped off the geopolitical map of the world, once and for all." He taunted Israel's prime minister, [saying](#), "Netanyahu should know that there is no way for him except fleeing the region and so he needs to learn how to swim in the Mediterranean Sea." Salami mocked U.S. soldiers that the IRGC captured in 2016, [saying](#) they were crying at the time.

He also [remarked](#) in December 2016 that Hezbollah's experience with urban combat in Aleppo would be useful in Israeli cities. He further [called](#) on Shiites in Bahrain to rebel against the monarchy, saying the "victory in Aleppo will pave the way for liberating Bahrain...the people of Bahrain will achieve their wishes, the Yemeni people will be delighted and the residents of Mosul will taste victory, these are all divine promises."

However, there is little public evidence of Salami having an intimate involvement in IRGC Quds Force operations. His tenure overlapped with the rise of [Qassem Soleimani](#), the commander of the IRGC's Quds Force. While Salami was technically the second-in-command of the IRGC, Soleimani was arguably a more powerful figure—in both actual and symbolic terms. As the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency once [noted](#), the IRGC commander-in-chief has traditionally overseen "all IRGC activities, but has less control of the [Quds Force], whose commander has a separate line of communication to Khamenei." If Jafari as commander-in-chief had limited control over Soleimani, Salami, as deputy commander-in-chief, had even less authority. In fact, Salami was still a brigadier general in the IRGC while Soleimani was promoted to the higher rank of major general in 2011.

Salami maintained a distance from the Rouhani administration, [expressing](#) his support lukewarmly in 2014, once curtly saying, "because this is the administration of the Islamic Republic of Iran." At the time, Rouhani was [attempting](#) to curb the IRGC's influence in Tehran, cautioning them to avoid "interfering in political affairs." But Salami entered the political fray, issuing thinly veiled criticisms of the Rouhani presidency. He once [said](#), "[s]ome friends look us in the eye to



congratulate us, but they are in fact echoing the voice of our enemy. The IRGC does not fear those threats. It is not appropriate for friends to treat each other like enemies.” Salami also found time to opine on domestic political matters, [railing](#) against foreign satellite channels, saying “[o]ur society is a religious society. If our Islamic values are shaken, it will collapse.”

In the lead-up to the inking of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), he signaled defiance as Iran started backchannel negotiations with the West, saying in March 2013 that the “P5+1 formula is no longer able to prevent the Iranian nation from taking steps in nuclear technology. We are at the apex of our power today and taking the last steps toward victory, and this is the final obstacle.” He also [warned](#) the Rouhani administration against foreign inspections “[n]ot only will we not grant foreigners the permission to inspect our military sites, we will not even give them permission to think about such a subject.” Even after the JCPOA came into being, Salami was dismissive, [saying](#), “[w]e don’t pore over resolutions; it is our duty to expand our power and nobody can give us orders.”

### Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC

By 2017, Mohammad Ali Jafari had already served as commander-in-chief of the IRGC for a decade. He had outlasted his predecessor Yahya Rahim Safavi, who had served for over nine years. But in July of 2017, Jafari had [indicated](#) he expected to serve in the job for at least another three years. Thus, it came as a surprise in April 2019 when Iran’s supreme leader promoted Hossein Salami as commander-in-chief, weeks after the United States designated the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization. Salami’s ascension to the IRGC’s top command position mirrored the career trajectory of Yahya Rahim Safavi, who had steadily risen through the ranks—first as commander of an IRGC branch, then as deputy commander-in-chief, and finally as commander-in-chief. That stood in contrast to Jafari’s path to power—rising from commander of the IRGC’s Ground Force to the head of the IRGC. What also made Salami’s ascension notable was the previous two commanders-in-chief led the IRGC’s Ground Forces during their career. Salami had no such experience, instead commanding what was formerly the IRGC Air Force. His elevation thus perhaps signaled Khamenei’s recognition of the increasing importance of the IRGC’s Aerospace Force in the regime’s arsenal.

Beyond the differences in his resume, Salami’s appointment also signaled the ascendancy of a more hardline stance within the IRGC’s top brass, especially after the United States designated the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization. As mentioned in the previous section, Salami, at least publicly, appeared to disagree with Jafari over the expansion of the regime’s missile range. While such a decision would ultimately be up to the supreme leader, Salami’s position would nevertheless be important as he would now hold a seat on the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) as a part of his new role. Indeed, there is [evidence](#) this hardline view is becoming increasingly ascendant in the top ranks of the IRGC, with Salami’s deputy commander-in-chief hinting that Iran is prepared to increase the missile ranges beyond 2,000 kilometers if the supreme leader so ordered.

In his first comments as commander-in-chief, Salami urged the IRGC to think globally. He [said](#), “The Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards has crossed mountains and plains to end America’s dominance in the eastern Mediterranean, and reached the Red Sea, and turned the Islamic land to land of jihad. We have to expand our capabilities from the region to the world, so the enemy has no safe point around the world.” But despite this sweeping vision, Salami acted more locally in the initial months after his appointment.

The top brass of the IRGC in the first months of his commandership remained relatively unchanged. The commanders of the Aerospace, Ground, Navy, and Quds Forces all remained the same. Ali Fadavi, who formerly headed the IRGC’s Navy and served as coordinating deputy afterward, [succeeded](#) Salami as deputy commander-in-chief. Mohammad Reza Naqdi [replaced](#) Fadavi as coordinating deputy.

In these appointments, Salami appeared to reshuffle the ranks with an eye towards internal security. For example, before ascending to the coordinating deputy position, Naqdi had previously served as head of the Basij. But his predecessor, Ali Fadavi, was commander of the IRGC’s Navy. Indeed, Salami’s focus on the IRGC’s internal security operations was confirmed when in July 2019, Khamenei accepted his recommendation, and [named](#) Gholamreza Soleimani as the new head of the Basij. Soleimani replaced Gholamhossein Gheybparvar, who notably didn’t receive a new assignment until months later when he was [named](#) as Salami’s deputy at the IRGC’s Central Security Headquarters. Such moves also came after unconfirmed [reports](#) that several IRGC commanders had either fled the country or were arrested. Thus, such changes are evidence of Salami’s focus on overhauling senior personnel tasked with domestic security functions.

Salami’s tenure thus far has featured a mixture of setbacks and successes. He faced one of the greatest tests of his career after Qassem Soleimani was [killed](#) in a U.S. airstrike in Iraq in January 2020. For years there was a difference in rank between Salami and Soleimani. Salami was a brigadier general for the entirety of his time as deputy commander-in-chief, while Soleimani was promoted to major general. Only in April 2019 did Salami [receive](#) his promotion to major general upon assumption of command of the IRGC. This, coupled with Soleimani’s direct reporting line to the supreme leader, made his death all the more jarring for the IRGC. [Esmail Ghaani](#), Soleimani’s longtime deputy, was promoted to replace him. But Ghaani lacked Soleimani’s rank. He was a brigadier general, while Salami held the higher rank of major general. That, coupled with Ghaani’s lesser stature, potentially changed the internal dynamics within the IRGC’s top ranks, providing Salami an opportunity to assert more control over the Quds Force than his predecessors.

After Soleimani’s demise, Salami reverted to his usual role of threatening the United States, [warning](#) “[t]he IRGC will definitely take harsh revenge on the United States; a revenge the time and scale of which is covert...Assassination of General Soleimani is a turning point that will end the presence of the U.S. in the region; write these words down, everybody will see this happening in the future.” He [told](#) crowds in Kerman during Soleimani’s funeral, “[t]he martyr Qassem Soleimani is more powerful...now that he is dead.” In September 2020, he [warned](#) Washington that Iran would “hit those who had direct and indirect roles [in the death of Soleimani]. You

should know that everybody who had a role in the event will be hit, and this is a serious message.”

In addition to the setback after Soleimani was killed, the IRGC continued to face difficulties under Salami’s leadership. It downed a Ukrainian passenger airliner as it launched a retaliatory attack on U.S. forces in Iraq after Soleimani’s death. After the incident, Salami [told](#) parliament, “[n]ever in my life have I felt so ashamed. We had made a mistake, and some of our compatriots were martyred due to our mistake, but it was unintentional. We apologize and are ashamed, but we will compensate.” But after the incident, the supreme leader did not reshuffle the ranks, preferring instead to retain the IRGC’s longtime Aerospace Force Commander Amir Ali Hajizadeh and other senior commanders.

Only months after, satellite imagery [showed](#) that an explosion happened at a missile facility near Parchin, only to be followed by another explosion, which rocked the Natanz nuclear enrichment facility. A Middle Eastern intelligence official [told](#) the *New York Times* that a powerful bomb was used, an assessment a member of the IRGC shared. Once again, there didn’t appear to have been an immediate shakeup in senior-level positions.

During the coronavirus pandemic, Salami has attempted to portray the IRGC as a problem solver, in contrast to the government, whose halting response has been ridiculed. But that didn’t stop Salami from engaging in wild conspiracy theories, [claiming](#) without evidence that the coronavirus may be a U.S. biological attack on Iran. He was also [ridiculed](#) by the Rouhani administration and many Iranians after unveiling a handheld coronavirus detection device developed by the IRGC’s Basij forces. The health ministry [claimed](#) the device wasn’t licensed by Iran’s Food and Drug Administration.

In the aftermath of the assassination of the former head of Iran’s Organization for Defensive Innovation and Research Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in November 2020, the IRGC came under fire after [reports](#) that the Intelligence Ministry had warned the IRGC’s Close Protection Unit of a threat to Fakhrizadeh’s life. This triggered the IRGC to craft a narrative in order to save face, [arguing](#) that a lone satellite-controlled automatic machine gun with artificial intelligence had assassinated Fakhrizadeh. This stood in contrast to initial reports of live assassins being involved in Fakhrizadeh’s death. It represented another challenge for Salami in dealing with the IRGC’s Close Protection Unit, as it has experienced leadership [turnover](#) in recent years.

But despite these blemishes during his tenure IRGC commander-in-chief, Salami presided over a milestone for guardsmen. In April 2020, the IRGC [launched](#) its first military satellite into orbit. Salami proudly proclaimed that “[b]y God’s grace, the corps turned into a space force today.” It also [used](#) a Ghased satellite carrier to launch the system, using both liquid and solid fuel. Beyond the military achievement for the IRGC, the launch enhanced the status of the IRGC after a series of missteps. It also made for a compelling split screen—the IRGC steadily advancing its military satellite program with the Rouhani administration presiding over the [failure](#) to put its communications satellite, the Zafar 1, into orbit in February.

## Conclusion

Hossein Salami has steadily risen through the ranks through a combination of both bombast and staying power. He has occupied a position at virtually every level of the IRGC—commander, deputy commander-in-chief, and commander-in-chief. He would not have received these promotions without the trust of Iran’s supreme leader. Understanding his career is important as Salami, as an appointee of Iran’s supreme leader, derives his authority from Tehran’s deep state, rather than an elected state. Based on the experience of his predecessors, who served for at least a decade at the helm of the IRGC, he will likely outlast current and future presidents. His seat on the SNSC, as well as the IRGC’s increasing inroads into Iran’s elected state—the current speaker of parliament is one of Salami’s predecessors as commander of the IRGC’s Aerospace Force—makes the organization all the more pivotal to Iran’s future. With the presidential elections of 2021 approaching and an increasing number of current and former IRGC officials expressing interest in running, how Salami navigates the guardsmen in Tehran will be important to watch.