



Hossein Salami The New Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Dr. Raz Zimmt

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Executive Summary

On April 21, 2019, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, appointed **Hossein Salami to the position of the new Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC); Salami is the eighth commander of the force.** Salami, who served as the Deputy Commander of the IRGC over the past decade, replaced Mohammad-Ali Jafari, who served at the IRGC Commander since September 2007. Upon retirement from his position, Jafari was appointed to head the cultural-social command, Baqiatollah al-A'zam, which is charged with “soft power warfare” led by the IRGC, intended to counter perceived Western efforts to promote “cultural penetration” of Iran.



**The Supreme Leader awarding the rank of lieutenant general to Salami
(Tasnim, April 22, 2019)**

► Mohammad-Ali Jafari was set to retire from his position in the summer of 2020, after his term in office was extended by three years in 2017. It is possible that the leadership change was moved up by a year **due to growing tensions between Iran and the United States**, following the April 2019 announcement by the United States on designating the IRGC as a terrorist organization, as part of the “maximum pressure” strategy applied by the U.S. administration against Iran. In addition, on April 22, 2019, the White House announced the end of sanction waivers given to eight countries importing oil from Iran. Following the listing of the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department, Iran designated

the U.S. administration as a state-sponsor of terrorism and CENTCOM, the command of U.S. armed forces responsible for the Middle East region, as a terrorist organization.

► Upon his appointment to the position of IRGC commander, Salami was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general, the highest military rank in Iran. Other individuals in Iran who hold this rank are: the outgoing IRGC commander; the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, Mohammed Bagheri; and the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Qasem Soleimani.



Hossein Salami
(the website of the Supreme Leader, April 22, 2019)

Milestones in Salami's Military Career

► Hossein Salami was born in 1960 in the village of Vaneshan in the Golpayegan county of Isfahan Province in central Iran. He joined the IRGC upon the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War (September 1980), interrupting his studies of mechanical engineering at the Iran University of Science and Technology in Tehran, which he started shortly before the war erupted. In the early stages of the war, Salami was stationed in the Kurdistan Province in western Iran and later dispatched to the front in Khuzestan in southwestern Iran. During the war, Salami served as a commander in the 25th Division Karbala of the IRGC, the 14th Division Imam Hussein and in the Noah Headquarters of the IRGC's fleet.

► Following the war, Salami completed his education at the Iran University for Science and Technology, and later graduated with a master's degree in defense management from the Islamic Azad University. Between 1992 and 1997 he served as the commander of the IRGC's Command and Staff College. Between 1997 and 2005, he served as the deputy commander of operations at the IRGC's general staff. In 2005, he was appointed at the commander of the air force of the IRGC, and in 2009 at the deputy commander of the IRGC. In parallel, Salami

served on the faculty of the Supreme National Security University in Tehran, which operates under the general staff of Iran's armed forces.



**The incoming IRGC commander Salami and the outgoing commander Jafari
(Tasnim, April 24, 2019)**

Hossein Salami's Positions

- ▶ Over the past decade, Salami has emerged as one of the IRGC's prominent commanders, mainly due to his **hardline statements reflecting adherence to the principles of the Islamic Revolution and the strategic goals of the Islamic Republic on issues related to internal and foreign policies**. He gained attention for his extreme rhetoric and defiant statements targeting the United States and Israel, and consistent rejection of any possibility for compromise or concessions on the part of Iran in light of Western demands and growing pressure on Tehran.
- ▶ In his statements concerning Iran's regional policies, Salami expresses support for maintaining efforts, led by the IRGC, to increase Iran's clout influence by cultivating local influential proxies through which Iran can further its interests in the Arab world. Salami rejects the existence of the State of Israel and threatened to annihilate it if Israel acts against Iran. Salami believes that Iran's regional expansion can not be stymied, since it is based not solely on vital national interests, but also on religious grounds. He rejects U.S. presence in the region and believes that U.S. power in the region is waning and that the regional balance of power today is clearly favorable to Iran and the "Resistance Front."



Salami and the Commander of the Qods Force, Qasemi
(Tasnim, April 24, 2019)

► With regards to Iran’s foreign policy, Salami presents hardline uncompromising positions, completely ruling out any Iranian concession in the face of Western demands. He insists on Iran’s right to continue developing long-range missiles and expanding their range, if Western countries continue pressuring Iran to forego its ballistic capabilities. With regards to Iran’s nuclear program, Salami previously voiced vehement opposition to visits of inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in military installations in Iran and threatened to restart nuclear activities, which were frozen following the signing of the nuclear accord (the JCPOA, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), if the U.S. violates its obligations under the JCPOA.

► Salami’s positions on internal affairs reflect a religious-conservative worldview and complete loyalty to the regime and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Salami voiced support for the crushing of the 2009 protests, organized by the Reformist opposition following the presidential elections, claiming the protests were an American plot and arguing that they posed a more severe threat to Iran than the Iran-Iraq War ever did.



Hossein Salami
(Defa Press, March 29, 2019)

The Significance of Salami's Appointment

► **Salami's appointment comes against escalating tensions between the United States and Iran and increasing challenges facing the Iranian regime at home and abroad.**

Internally, Iran is facing a severe economic crisis, which may further inflame public discontent and protests. In the regional arena, Iran operates in a sphere contested by multiple regional and international actors, chief among them the United States, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel, which place limits on Iran's freedom to operate and ability to shape Syria and Iraq and parts of its sphere of influence.

► **It is possible that Salami's appointment at the Commander of the IRGC was intended to convey a defiant and deterrent message on the part of Iran's leadership, in the face of growing external pressures on it, and maybe even signal its willingness, if necessary, to head for a confrontation.** Although it appears that at this stage, Iran is not interested in such a confrontation, it is preparing for the possibility that it will need to take additional steps, including a limited escalation vis-à-vis the United States, in light of the growing tensions between the two countries.

► **Iran's leadership continues to adhere to its decision to remain committed to the nuclear accord and is adopting a wait-and-see approach, probably based on the hope that the international environment will change in its favor if President Trump is not reelected in the upcoming November 2020 elections.** Iran is aware, however, of the possibility of escalating conflict between it and the United States **and may try to identify ways to respond to the growing pressures against it, for example by granting a "green light" to its proxies in the Middle East to act against American forces in the region, or instigate provocations against American vessels in the Persian Gulf.** In recent months, Iran has already threatened to shut down the Straits of Hormuz if its oil exports are curtailed. A possible confrontation would require prior preparations by the IRGC, which is not only the most powerful military-security body in Iran, but also the main pillar of power of the regime in dealing with internal threats that may jeopardize its stability.

► It should be emphasized, however, that **the overall responsibility concerning strategic decisions is in the hands of the Supreme Leader.** Therefore, Salami's appointment does not necessarily signal a shift in Iran's overall policy or the IRGC's policies, **as long as Khamenei does not make a decision on the matter.**

Appendix: Hossein Salami's Most Noticeable Statements in Recent Years

On Iran's Regional Policies

► “We had two alternatives: remain within our geographic borders and allow the United States to succeed in its regional policy; this would have allowed the enemies to establish a foreign presence beyond our borders. Instead, we developed a plan and a strategy to foil their plans. The ground was laid for this strategy in other territories [beyond Iran's borders]. Today, in Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Syria, we are standing by forces who belong to those countries but share the worldview of the Islamic Revolution... The essence of Iran's influence in the region is such that it can not be rolled back. This type of influence is not based on a presence similar to the American one. Our ties are based on faith... and regional influence and the missile program are two central components of our power.” (Iranian Television, February 2, 2019).

Policies toward the United States, the West and Iran's Missile Program

► “The United States needs to know that if it does not adhere to its commitments under the nuclear agreement, we will send the nuclear agreement to the museum [of history]... They need to remember that if they do not fulfill all their obligations, we will return to the starting position and reactivate the centrifuges that are inactive, and they need to know that we will not limit our nuclear activities to their level before the nuclear agreement, but advance it further” (Fars, September 1, 2016).

► “Our ballistic capability is part of our defensive power and we will never negotiate over it... The Europeans need to know that the nuclear agreement has nothing to do with the development of our ballistic capabilities. Our determination to develop our independent defensive capabilities is stronger than that of any other country” (IRNA, February 10, 2018).

► “Inside the country, there is an approach that favors compromise and an approach that favors resistance. Experience proves to us that resistance against the United State is the way to save Iran. The more sanctions the U.S. places on us, the better and more significant will our progress be (Farda News, November 3, 2018).

► “Developing Iran's ballistic capability as its main deterrent and defensive force is a strategy that can not be stopped... Today we do not face any technological problem is developing our

ballistic force... We have reached complete independence when it comes to the knowledge and technology pertaining to missiles. Our technological ability and the abilities of our missiles are growing day by day, both in terms of quality and quantity. We develop these capabilities in accordance with strategic plans. For example, if we limit the range of the missiles, it is based on our defensive strategy and strategic calculation.; this has nothing to do with our technological capability. Our defensive strategy is not static and is altered in accordance to changes in conditions and changes in the behavior of the actors. If the Europeans or others want to act in accordance with their conspiracy and disarm the Islamic Republic of its missiles, this will force us to make a strategic leap... We are not willing to agree to any negotiations, advice or demands with regards to Iran's ballistic force" (Iranian Television, February 2, 2019).

Israel

- ▶ "The support of the United States to the Zionist regime indicates that this regime is not an ally [of the U.S.] but one of the states of the United States... These days, the ground has been prepared, more than ever before, for the collapse of Israel and more than 100,000 missiles from Lebanon are ready to be fired and hit the heart of Israel if it repeats its mistakes... Every point in occupied Palestine, from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip, from northern Israel and Haifa to Tel Aviv, is within the striking range of tens of thousands of long-range missiles stationed in the most remote points of the Muslim world, waiting for the order to remove Israel from the political geography of the globe" (Fars, July 1, 2016).
- ▶ "It has been 70 years since the British and American policy planted an accursed and criminal tree [Israel] in the Muslim world... The Zionist regime poses a threat not merely to the existence of Palestine but to the entire Muslim world. All the problems of the Muslim world stem from the existence of this artificial, fabricated regime, named Israel, which lacks roots in history and lacks identity. The Islamic Republic built an amazing capability by the name of Hezbollah, which has, in accordance with the admission of the Zionist regime, over 100,000 missiles ready to launch. Today, Hezbollah had an extraordinary ground capability, which along can break the Zionist regime in ground combat. The Zionist regime does not have defensive strategic depth... These days in Syria, an international Islamic army has been assembled, waiting for the order to erase this evil regime. The survival of the Zionist regime has never been under greater threat than it is today (Tasnim, June 8, 2018).

- ▶ “I hereby inform the prime minister of the Zionist regime [Benjamin Netanyahu] that he needs to practice swimming in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, since soon enough he will not have any way to escape but through the sea” (Fars, October 5, 2018).
- ▶ “The Israelis are trying to violate the balance [in the region] and compensate for their psychological fear by resorting to desperate tactical operations and attacks on some weapons depots. We warn them that if a new war erupts, it will end in erasing the Zionist regime. In this situation, even before the United States responds to their cries for help, they will be destroyed and they will not have enough graves to bury their corpses. They must be careful and know that a limited attack will not result in a limited war” (ISNA, January 31, 2019).

The 2009 Protests in Iran

- ▶ “The 2009 riots were the epitome of the plot hatched by the enemies against Iran... The enemy thought it could drive a wedge between the people and its achievements and its Leader. The riots were more dangerous than the “imposed war” [the Iran-Iran War] since the enemy marked [as a target] the identity, the awareness and the liberty of the Iranian people.” (Kayhan, December 30, 2018)