

Major General Mohammad Bagheri: Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces

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Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri

Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri is the chief of staff of Iran's Armed Forces. The chief of staff is [considered](#) the highest ranking military officer in the Islamic Republic and is responsible for the coordination and supervision of Iran's regular army (Artesh) and [the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#). Bagheri ascended to this post through a storied family military history and quiet competence. His arrival at the helm of the Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) also bolstered the IRGC's role in Iran's national command structure.

Early Life and the Iran-Iraq War

There are conflicting reports as to the year of Bagheri's birth. Some sources, including the U.S. Treasury Department, say he was [born](#) in 1960 in Tehran. Others [list](#) the year as 1958. In addition to his military training, Bagheri received a conventional education as an [engineering](#) student and later [earned](#) a doctoral degree in political geography from Tarbiyat-e Modares University.

Bagheri's revolutionary activities date back to the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979. He was one of the students who [attacked](#) and seized the U.S. embassy, and Iranian media indicates that he deployed to the battlefield one month after the Iran-Iraq War began. There isn't an extensive record of his service in these early years. Bagheri has [claimed](#) that he played a role in all major operations of the war, with the exception of Operation Samen al-Aeme, which aimed to thwart the siege of Abadan.

But Hassan Bagheri, Mohammad's older brother, occupied a loftier role during this timeframe. He rose to become deputy commander of the IRGC's Ground Forces and was known as a leading Iranian strategist, once [stressing](#), "[i]f we lose 1,000 soldiers to identify the enemy's plans, strategies, and resources, it's completely acceptable. But we cannot afford to lose a single soldier for the lack of information on the enemy." Former Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC Mohammad Ali Jafari credited him with [establishing](#) "the IRGC corps of Khuzestan and founded the operations unit of the force," and other guardsmen [indicated](#) he founded the IRGC's Operations Intelligence and Artillery Units, as well as multiple "corps and battalions of the Ground Force." But Hassan Bagheri's meteoric rise in the IRGC was cut short when he was killed in 1983. After his death, [Qassem Soleimani reportedly](#) said, "Hassan Bagheri was to war what Ayatollah Beheshti was to politics. No one would ever replace him." This mythmaking in the IRGC was important, as Hassan Bagheri became a symbol of the IRGC, and in the process, elevated the status of his family.

Mohammad Bagheri spent the rest of his professional career living in the shadow of his elder brother's martyrdom during the war, which also helped propel his career. Soon after Hassan's demise, Bagheri was [named](#) as head of intelligence for the IRGC's Ground Forces and the first deputy for intelligence and operations for the IRGC. In these positions, Bagheri can be seen as modeling himself after his brother's wartime experience, especially the focus on intelligence, as Hassan stressed the need for "information on the enemy." Indeed, Bagheri later [admitted](#) this dynamic: "I don't see myself as a significant person in order to be seen. It is natural that martyr Hassan Bagheri and other martyrs like him had this greatness, with their shadow cast over me and

people like me.”

According to a study by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), there is [evidence](#) that Bagheri participated in senior Iran-Iraq War planning meetings. These were important as they offered Bagheri exposure to rising military and regime officials—including Qassem Soleimani, who would later become commander of the IRGC’s Quds Force, [Ali Shamkhani](#), who would become commander of the IRGC’s Navy and secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), as well as [Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf](#), who would later become speaker of parliament. Bagheri would also develop his own network of loyal officers during the war, [holding](#) “regular meetings” with Gholamreza Mehrabi, whom Bagheri would elevate as his deputy at the AFGS, per AEI.

Reorganization, Positioning, and Firouzabadi’s Shadow

Towards the end of the war, Iran started a reorganization of its armed forces, which reduced the autonomy of the IRGC. It [established](#) the AFGS in 1988 to spearhead coordination between the Artesh and the IRGC. A year later, in 1989, the regime [eliminated](#) the IRGC’s Ministry and folded it into the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL). With these changes, the IRGC no longer had its own ministry in the cabinet. Additionally, the commander-in-chief of the IRGC would now find himself [reporting](#) to the chief of staff of the AFGS. Although in practice, the IRGC has still managed to maintain a direct line of communication to the Office of the Supreme Leader.

These reforms coincided with Ali Khamenei’s ascendancy to the supreme leadership in 1989. Upon taking office, Khamenei quickly [appointed](#) Hassan Firouzabadi as chief of staff of Iran’s Armed Forces that September. Firouzabadi [replaced](#) Mir-Hossein Mousavi, a Khamenei rival, who had also served as prime minister. His appointment was significant in three respects: his closeness with the supreme leader, his lack of formal military experience, and his junior status. Firouzabadi had [known](#) Khamenei from Mashhad before the Islamic Revolution. A [veterinarian](#) by training, he lacked a formal military pedigree, having neither served in the Artesh nor the IRGC. However, he did have links to the IRGC, with Khamenei [calling](#) him a “brother Basiji” upon his appointment. Firouzabadi held different [posts](#) prior to his ascension to the position of chief of staff—president of the Iranian Red Crescent Society, deputy commander of Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, a defense deputy for the prime minister, and finally as deputy chief of the AFGS. But these qualifications, coupled with Firouzabadi’s age of 38, paled in comparison to his predecessor Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who served as prime minister and was a rival of Khamenei when he served as president. This personnel move was indicative of Khamenei’s desire to solidify his control over the AFGS early into his tenure as supreme leader.

It was during this period of transition that Bagheri transitioned from the IRGC to the AFGS. In 1988 he became acting deputy chairman of intelligence and later permanent head of its Intelligence and Operations Directorate for many years. Such a move was noteworthy as it came just after the IRGC lost a ministry and the formation of the AFGS. In essence, Bagheri was gravitating towards a new power center—one which would eventually be overseen by one of Khamenei’s closest confidantes. This positioned him well as a senior military appointee at the dawn of Khamenei’s supreme leadership.

Structurally, Artesh and the IRGC have roles in the AFGS. Additionally, the AFGS has directorates such as operations, intelligence, manpower, training, plans and programs, logistics, and coordination, among others. Bagheri, at the helm of the Intelligence and Operations Directorate, was thus part of Firouzabadi's inner circle.

While serving at the AFGS, Bagheri carefully tended to his IRGC roots, and in the process, maintained his credibility with the guardsmen's top brass. After the election of reformist Mohammad Khatami to the presidency in 1997, Iran's supreme leader faced a standoff between Khatami and the then Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC Mohsen Rezaei. Khatami perceived that Rezaei had backed his conservative rival in the election, Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri. There were [reports](#) he even refused to meet with Rezaei. Khamenei eventually replaced Rezaei with Yahya Rahim Safavi. Such a reshuffling was controversial given Rezaei's longstanding tenure at the helm of the IRGC. Bagheri demonstrated his loyalty to Rezaei at the time, [signing](#) on to a letter in 1997 expressing support for his commandership, writing, "[y]our excellency's name has been intertwined with the names of the martyr's and sacrificers." This move was risky for those who occupied senior positions within the IRGC, given the sudden change in command and the perception that it challenged Khamenei's wishes. But Bagheri was more insulated as a result of his perch in the AFGS, not reporting directly to Yahya Rahim Safavi. Thus, this relatively cost-free move enabled Bagheri to maintain his standing among the guardsmen. He joined other important [figures](#) such as future Commander-in-Chief Mohammad Ali Jafari and Air Force Commander Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf in adding his name to the letter.

Bagheri once again entered the political fray in 1999 as student demonstrations rocked Tehran. Then, [Bagheri](#) was one of 24 IRGC commanders who penned an extraordinary public letter to Khatami, all but threatening a coup if he could not control the situation. They [wrote](#), "[o]ur patience is at an end. We do not feel it is our duty to show any more tolerance...Mr. President, if you don't take a revolutionary decision today and (you) fail to abide by your Islamic and nationalistic duty, tomorrow will be too late and the damage done will be irreparable and beyond imagination." This was once again another move with minimal risk for Bagheri in terms of military politics. As president, Khatami had no formal authority over the AFGS because it reported to the supreme leader. At the same time, he was able to reaffirm his opposition to the new administration's reformism and maintain his bonafide as a member of the IRGC's old guard.

Indeed, Bagheri's conservative positioning complemented his boss Firouzabadi's hardline political inclinations at the time. Commenting on parliamentary elections in 2008, he [said](#) that reformists "must not be allowed to find their way into the Majlis again and to repeat their past performance. These factions and individuals, who are supported by Bush, do nothing but fulfill U.S. interests, and Bush sees them as guarantors of U.S. interests. Has the Iranian nation not already tasted this bitter same once?" Firouzabadi also publicly [supported](#) Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in his bid for reelection as president in 2009, and on one occasion [claimed](#) that he was a phenomenon who had "revived Imam (Khomeini's) discourse and differed from traditional politicians." Such a courting of Ahmadinejad had coincided with the supreme leader's perceived support for Ahmadinejad during his first term as president.

But both Firouzabadi's and Bagheri's flirtations with political currents had their limits. They closely adhered to Khamenei's political positioning. After Ahmadinejad fell out of favor with the supreme leader during his second term, Firouzabadi started criticizing the very man he held in such high esteem. He [chastized](#) Ahmadinejad after he threatened to reveal the high-level corruption of his critics, saying, "Mr. Ahmadinejad should stop talking like this, as it contradicts with the vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran." Following the 2009 unrest, in 2012, after the former Commander of the IRGC's Navy and Chairman of its Joint Staff Hossein Alaei [penned](#) an op-ed for *Ettelaat* likening the reign of Iran's supreme leader to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Bagheri curiously did not sign on to a letter criticizing his piece and defending Khamenei. The guardsmen wrote, "What has happened that you write a black line on the white pages of our jihad? While all the Muslim and freedom seekers of the region look at the Islamic Revolution, and their wish is to kiss the arm of the leader, you are busy with scratching this sophisticated face and creating doubts in the divine path...The enemy has taken you captive." As *The IRGC Command Network* [notes](#), soon after Alaei clarified his comments, the same commanders wrote another letter claiming that he did so out of "devotion and love" for the *velayat-e faqih*.

It remains unclear why Bagheri didn't choose to add his name to an effort to defend Iran's supreme leader. It was a risk as it could be perceived as being disloyal. But Bagheri was in good company as other IRGC luminaries like Qassem Soleimani did not sign on to the letter. Such a move could be explained by Bagheri's attempt at factional balancing—Soleimani himself was [heralded](#) by reformists at times. Mohammad-Ali Abtahi, a reformist vice president, once described him as "bipartisan and positioned himself as a national figure." Thus with Ahmadinejad's presidency in its last years, Bagheri might have had his eye on the 2013 election, when the pragmatic Hassan Rouhani would assume the presidency. He was already associated publicly with the IRGC's old guard, having signed on to the 1997 and 1999 letters. Firouzabadi was also perceived as meddling in politics under Ahmadinejad. Thus allowing some daylight could be beneficial not only for Bagheri but also for the AFGS institutionally. AFGS was already [covered](#) in the 2012 letters as Gholamreza Jafari, Firouzabadi's advisor added his name.

In a demonstration of Bagheri's value to Iran's supreme leader, he was [promoted](#) to major general in 2008. As other observers have [noted](#), for Bagheri to have ascended to major general while he was still a deputy at the AFGS was no small feat. Traditionally, majors generals have been the chief commanders of the Iranian militaries—the IRGC and Artesh—and the chief of staff of the AFGS. Most of these men received their promotions upon assumption of the top jobs. For example, before the Commander-in-Chief of Artesh Abdolrahim Mousavi [ascended](#) to his position, he served as deputy chief of staff of AFGS at the brigadier general level. He only became a major general when he was named head of the Artesh. The supreme leader has granted such promotions in the past for more junior officers, but they are usually reserved for more singular figures in the Islamic Republic like Qassem Soleimani, who received his major general status in 2011. Thus Bagheri was part of an exclusive club in Iran's armed state.

Bagheri maintained a low profile in the media during this timeframe. Occasionally, he was [mentioned](#) alongside Firouzabadi welcoming Chinese military delegations and announcing the [commencement](#) of joint IRGC and Artesh military drills. But it was Firouzabadi who was constantly

in the spotlight. Critically, as [Hassan Rouhani](#) took office as president in 2013, Firouzabadi began to defend his administration. During his campaign, there were [reports](#) of a clip featuring Firouzabadi praising Rouhani in a promotional video. In the lead-up to Rouhani’s first speech to the U.N. General Assembly as president, he generated controversy in Tehran by condemning the Holocaust—in stark contrast to his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Yet Firouzabadi provided crucial backing to Rouhani, [defending](#) his New York tour. Firouzabadi also offered public support for Rouhani after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. He [spoke](#) of 16 advantages the deal provides to Iran that critics in Tehran ignored. He [said](#), “[t]he tone of the U.N. Security Council resolution has changed compared to the previous ones. Regarding Iran’s missile activities, it doesn’t order but only asks for Iran’s compliance.” Thus, while Firouzabadi and Bagheri had been associated with hardline positions through the years, the more pragmatic positioning, which started with the absence of Bagheri’s name from the 2012 letter condemning Hossein Alaei for criticizing Iran’s supreme leader, coincided with Rouhani’s rise as president and the supreme leader’s approval of the JCPOA.

As Firouzabadi continued to play the most prominent role within the AFGS, Bagheri advanced within his inner circle. He went from head of the Intelligence and Operations Directorate to chief of Armed Forces Services and Joint Affairs. Firouzabadi also [faced](#) problems in managing both AFGS and Khatam al-Anbia Central Headquarters, which is in the chain of command and [responsible](#) for operational command and control of Iran’s two militaries. As a result, he deputized Bagheri to manage them accordingly. This occurred during a time when Firouzabadi served atop both the AFGS and Khatam al-Anbia Central Headquarters. It was a signal of Firouzabadi’s trust in Bagheri.

Promotion as Chief of Staff of Iran’s Armed Forces

After decades with the chief of staff of Iran’s Armed Forces remaining unchanged, Iran’s supreme leader ordered a rather unexpected shake-up in June 2016. As the *New York Times* [noted](#), “[t]here were no advance hints of the shake-up, and a terse announcement carried by state media gave no reason for it.” Health concerns were likely a factor, as Firouzabadi was obese and [reportedly](#) had an operation because of this condition. There was additional [speculation](#) that he was removed as a result of his defense of Hassan Rouhani. His long tenure at AFGS was the exception rather than the rule among Iran’s Armed Forces. Since 1989, Khamenei repeatedly changed commanders-in-chief of the IRGC and Artesh, with Firouzabadi outlasting multiple service chiefs.

Khamenei promoted Bagheri as Firouzabadi’s replacement, in a decree [saying](#) “[w]ith consideration of our valuable experience during the Sacred Defense and your responsibilities at the armed forces and Khatam al-Anbia, I appoint you as the chief of staff of the armed forces.” Hinting at a desire for an overhaul and professionalization of the AFGS, Iranian media also [reported](#) that the supreme leader “called for efforts to upgrade the defense capabilities of the Iranian armed forces and the Basij forces, and prepare the situation for timely and effectual response with revolutionary deeds to threats—of any type and at any level—against the Islamic Republic of Iran.” Bagheri’s selection was important not only for the position he was inheriting but also because of his IRGC pedigree. As previously mentioned, Firouzabadi had no formal

military experience. Consequently, naming a guardsman to the top military post in the country enhanced, at least symbolically, the IRGC's status vis-à-vis Artesh. In contrast to Firouzabadi's association with Rouhani in later years, Bagheri's lack of an extensive public paper trail was also likely an important balancing factor. To ensure Artesh representation, Khamenei greenlighted the [appointment](#) of Abdolrahim Mousavi, a former Artesh deputy commander, and professor at the Supreme National Defense University, as deputy chief of staff.

However, Bagheri did not assume the totality of Firouzabadi's portfolio. For years, Firouzabadi served [simultaneously](#) as the chief of staff of Iran's Armed Forces and as commander of the Khatam al-Anbia Central Headquarters. In 2016, Khamenei restructured and segregated the command, appointing Bagheri to lead AFGS and Gholam Ali Rashid, another IRGC commander, as the head of the Khatam al-Anbia Central Headquarters. Given Bagheri's experience with the headquarters under Firouzabadi, such a decision could be construed as a snub, especially because it, and not the AFGS, is [responsible](#) for operational command and control under this new architecture during wartime.

Early in his tenure, Bagheri faced criticisms from an unusual source—the [Houthis](#) in [Yemen](#). In November 2016, Bagher told *Shargh* newspaper, “[w]e need distant bases, and it may become possible one day to have bases on the shores of Yemen or Syria, or bases on islands or floating (bases).” A Houthi official, Mehdi Mashat, [recoiled](#) at the suggestion, “[t]his creature should read the history of Yemen before he talks, because I am sure that if he knew that Yemen throughout history has been a cemetery for invaders, he would not have said a word.” Even after this episode, Bagheri has focused on the Houthis. During a visit to China in 2019, he [disclosed](#), “[w]e are giving [the Houthis] advisory and intellectual assistance and the IRGC is in charge of this.”

Despite the early stumble on Yemen, Bagheri quickly distinguished himself from his predecessor. He [championed](#) defense diplomacy, traveling to Turkey in August 2017 for what Turkish media said was the first visit of the chief of staff of Iran's Armed Forces since 1979. He also visited China, Russia, Pakistan, and Syria. Iranian [media](#) have highlighted this aspect of Bagheri's tenure, discussing joint cooperation over border security, fighting drug trafficking, and terrorism. In a trip to Syria in July 2020, Bagheri signed an agreement to deploy at least two types of Iran's air defense systems to Syria—specifically systems like the Bavar-373 and Khordad-3. [According](#) to *Raialyoum* newspaper, “the two countries decided to change the rules of engagement in Syrian airspace and to respond to the repeated Israeli raids on Syrian soil.”

Following the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, Bagheri [signaled](#) his opposition to the agreement and regretted that it was ever signed, saying that the “JCPOA was not a favorable choice for our nation, and was not something we should have accepted, but the nation accepted it as an ultimatum for the world.” Such a statement stood in contrast to the approach of his predecessor Hassan Firouzabadi, who defended and supported the Rouhani administration's efforts to ink the agreement with the P5+1. Bagheri's position on the accord is important, given his seat as the chief of staff of Iran's Armed Forces on the SNSC. With Firouzabadi gone, Bagheri's

apparent opposition to these agreements is an important data point as the Iranian government decides how to approach a new opening for engagement with the Biden administration.

The conflict between the Rouhani administration and Bagheri also extended to the disaster response and coronavirus. After floods ravaged Lorestan Province in April 2019, the Commander of the IRGC's Ground Forces, Mohammad Pakpour, was caught on tape [speaking](#) with Bagheri by phone, where Pakpour complained “[p]eople are so enraged that none of the government officials dares to visit the area. People are dissatisfied with the situation to the extent that they are on the verge of rioting.” In March 2020, after the supreme leader issued an [order](#) placing Bagheri in charge of creating a medical base to fight the coronavirus pandemic, Rouhani reportedly feuded with Bagheri over control of the response. According to the *New York Times*, Bagheri [refused](#) to report to Rouhani, arguing that Khamenei authorized him to act independently.

Conclusion

Bagheri rose through the ranks by virtue of his family history and quiet allegiance. He differs stylistically from the more bombastic commanders of Iran's militaries, like [Hossein Salami](#), which indicates that his value to Iran's supreme leader is not in showmanship but in strategy. Bagheri is also different from his predecessor Hassan Firouzabadi, prioritizing defense diplomacy in addition to being less forgiving of pragmatists in Iran's establishment. With Qassem Soleimani's death, Bagheri's role is arguably more important as his successor, [Esmail Ghaani](#), holds the rank of brigadier general, not major general. Thus, Bagheri outranks Ghaani, a dynamic that stands in contrast with Soleimani, who was also a major general. This internal dynamic could make Bagheri a more indispensable figure to Khamenei. The United States [sanctioned](#) him in 2019 as part of Khamenei's inner circle.

Ahead of the 2021 presidential election, Iranian media even [speculated](#) about Bagheri's ambitions and the skill set he would bring to the office. But with multiple military men considering running for the presidency, Bagheri is unlikely to do so. His four years at the helm of AFGS also pales in comparison to Firouzabadi's decades-long tenure. Bagheri is arguably safer, politically, at the helm of AFGS than anywhere else. In any event, as Iran chooses a new president, Bagheri will remain a constant on the SNSC.