

[Leaked Iranian Foreign Minister Interview Criticizes the Revolutionary Guards' Influence on the Country's Diplomacy](#)

A leaked audio recording of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif discussing the internal dynamics of Iran's power structure has highlighted the uneasy working relationship between Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and the country's top civilian leaders. The original recording comes from an interview that Zarif gave to state-sponsored media in Iran, but it was released by Farsi language media backed by Saudi Arabia. Iran has alleged that the recording was leaked for political purposes and urged people to listen to the entire 7-hour interview given by Zarif in order to understand the context. Among other subjects, Zarif discussed the IRGC undermining his foreign ministry in a variety of areas, which also highlights the extent to which the IRGC control Iran's policy. The Iranian role in Syria, the downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet, and nuclear negotiations were all discussed by Zarif, in rarely candid fashion.

Over the course of the interview, Zarif remarked that Iranian diplomacy frequently took a back seat to the plans of the country's Revolutionary Guards. The IRGC receive direction from Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and have no oversight from Iran's civilian leaders. To this end, Zarif alleged that he was often left out of the IRGC's plans, and found out about operations after they occurred. Zarif also said that he would be taken aside by now-deceased IRGC commander Qassem Soleimani before high-level international meetings, in which Soleimani dictated what he wanted to happen. The leaked audio from Zarif's interview comes at a time when the IRGC are under heavy scrutiny from within Iran over intelligence failures that have led to multiple successful Israeli intelligence operations inside Iran itself.

Insofar as specific examples of the disconnect between the IRGC and Iran's foreign ministry, a principal case is in Iran's interference in the Syrian conflict. The current understanding of Iran's role there comes from the belief that Iran had pressured Russia into backing the Assad government, which Iran is sympathetic toward. However, Zarif alleged that the truth was in fact the opposite, and Russian President Vladimir Putin had pressured Qassem Soleimani into increasing Iran's presence on the ground in Syria during a meeting in 2015. After this meeting, Iran deployed ground forces to Syria for the first time. Military equipment sent to Syria also increased six-fold, something that Zarif only found out about after he was told by then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

Another example of the IRGC withholding information from Zarif and the foreign ministry was during the crisis caused by the unintentional destruction of a Ukrainian passenger jet over Tehran. According to Zarif, the leaders of the IRGC immediately knew they had accidentally shot down the aircraft in the confusion and tension following the American assassination of Qassem Soleimani. However, Zarif was told by IRGC commanders to deny all responsibility during a high-level security meeting in the aftermath of the incident. After an investigation, the IRGC belatedly took responsibility for the episode, but not before attempting to shift the blame elsewhere.

Keen observers of politics in Iran have analyzed that Zarif could be seeking to run for the Iranian presidency during elections scheduled for June 18th. Zarif has denied that this is his intention, but his name has been circulated by moderates as a potential candidate who could win votes from people frustrated with Iran's stagnating economy and lack of personal freedom. The leaked audio could see Zarif portrayed as an anti-IRGC candidate, which could appeal to a subset of the Iranian electorate.