

Early years of Islamic Revolution:

Journey of Brigadier General Hossein Khalili, a pioneer pilot

'A robust air force, key to leading military power in region'



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INTERVIEW

The courageous personnel of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Army have played a significant role in shaping the Islamic Revolution and safeguarding the achievements of the Islamic Republic since the victory of the revolution until the onset of the eight-year Iraqi imposed war (1980s). Among them, the role of the Air Force stands out in particular; the well-known image of the airmen and pilots of the Air Force pledging allegiance to Imam Khomeini (PBUH) on February 8, 1979, and their joining the Islamic Revolution is something that nearly everyone has seen. This allegiance had an unparalleled impact on the success of the Islamic Revolution and transformed the last hopes of the Pahlavi regime for maintaining its monarchy into despair.

On the other hand, the Air Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran consistently made a substantial contribution to the country's military success against the aggressions of the Ba'athist regime of Iraq during the Sacred Defense era. Particularly in the early days of the invasion against Iran, when the military capability of the country lacked the necessary cohesion to confront the advancing enemy forces, the valiant airmen acted swiftly, preventing the rapid advance and infiltration of the enemy into the country's territory. Brigadier General Hossein Khalili, a fighter pilot of the F-5 and F-14 during this war, is a comrade of the martyrs Abbas Babaei and Mustafa Ardestani [notable figures in the Iranian Air Force] is one of the veteran retired airmen from the Air Force who has many memories of the Revolution and the war due to his active participation in the military and various operations. Since 2017, he has served as a university professor, senior advisor to the commander of the Air Force, and senior researcher at the Air Force Studies Center. He was also one of the youngest members of the Air Force operational team during the Sacred Defense. With over 2,000 hours of incident-free flight over the skies of Iraq and the Persian Gulf, Pilot Khalili is regarded as one of the most successful pilots in the history of aerial warfare. The official information portal of the Air Force has also referred to him as the youngest front-seat pilot of the F-14 Tomcat during the war and the luckiest fighter pilot. However, he attributes his flying successes primarily to divine grace and secondarily to his experience and situational awareness while flying.

The following is a detailed conversation between Iran Daily and Brigadier General Pilot Hossein Khalili:



IRAN DAILY: Please start with a brief biography of yourself and how you entered the Army, the Air Force, and the field of piloting.

KHALILI: I was born on November 24, 1956 in Varamin and joined the Air Force in 1975 to study piloting. After completing basic training, I was sent to the United States in March, 1976 for advanced flight training. I successfully completed various training courses there and returned to my country in 1977 after earning my pilot's license. In 1979, during the Revolution, I began my service at the Tabriz Air Base."

You mentioned the Revolution; please elaborate on the victory of the Revolution, the role of the Air Force, and the events of February 8 in this context.

I was among the dissatisfied individuals prior to the Revolution and protested against the Pahlavi regime. At that time, there was a plan for my arrest along with one or two other officers, and eventually, I was sent from Tabriz to Shiraz for guidance aboard an F-5 aircraft. As I mentioned, I was fulfilling my duties in Tabriz during the events

of February 8 and the pledge of allegiance by the airmen and pilots of the Air Force to Imam Khomeini. After the news broke the following evening, a clash erupted between supporters and opponents at the Air Force Training Center. People took to the streets, chanting "Death to the Shah," and the clashes intensified throughout the city, prompting the Imperial Guard to intervene against the populace. Ultimately, the public protests escalated to such an extent that the discussion about martial law intensified, and Imam Khomeini ordered that the martial law in Tehran be broken. In fact, the military's joining with the people dealt the final blow to the Pahlavi regime.

When the people of Tabriz realized that the imposition of martial law in Tehran had failed and that the Air Force personnel rushed to aid the people and the Revolution, I distinctly remember that on the morning of February 10—just one day before the victory of the Revolution—an assembly of hundreds of thousands, led by the late Ayatollah Qazi Tabatabai, one of the opposing clerics to the Shah regime and the first Friday Prayer

Imam of Tabriz after the Islamic Revolution, gathered in front of the Tabriz Air Base, chanting slogans of solidarity in support of the Air Force personnel.

At that time, General Asghar Imanian, the commander of the Tabriz base, faced a choice: to disperse the crowd using water cannons or anti-aircraft fire, or by force. However, he did not opt for either option. He addressed the people through a loudspeaker, expressing his immense gratitude for their solidarity and support for the Air Force personnel and asked Ayatollah Qazi Tabatabai to urge the public to refrain from gathering at that location, as valuable assets of the Air Force were stored there and would certainly be needed by the Revolution one day. Consequently, the people left peacefully, and the following day, the Islamic Revolution triumphed.

You are referred to as the youngest pilot of the Sacred Defense era (1980s). How were you able to achieve such a high level of skill at a young age, and how did you gain the trust as a young pilot? I joined the Air Force in 1975, at

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In the second year of the war (1981), under the command of Martyr [Abbas] Babaei, I completed the F-14 flight training at Isfahan Air Base and subsequently undertook missions with that aircraft. This was the first F-14 training course conducted in Iran after the Revolution and without the presence of Americans.

around the age of 18-19. During that same year, while I was undergoing flight training, I was also working diligently to improve my language skills. As a result, I completed my English language courses in an accelerated manner, passing all of them with high scores. Therefore, I managed to finish my training courses about ten months to a year earlier than expected and left for the United States in March 1976 to earn my pilot's wings. In the US, I again took some accelerated classes and ultimately received my pilot's license in March 1977. After that, I completed a jet training course in the US. Initially, in Iran, I underwent about seven months of training on the F-5 aircraft and was transferred to Tabriz Air Base in July 1978.

At Tabriz Air Base, I was one of the last pilots to complete all combat training courses. Following that, as the Islamic Revolution was on the verge of occurring, the scope of this event spread everywhere, leading to a halt in all Air Force training programs. It wasn't until the war started that the training for fighter and transport aircraft resumed, as several pilots had been martyred