
THE MILITARY AND IRANIAN SOCIETY

Iran's military plays an important role in Iranian society. In 1925, leaders from Iran's military deposed the Qajar dynasty, establishing the regime of Reza Shah. Military leaders also played an instrumental role in the 1953 coup against Mosaddeq. (However, the Islamic Republic deliberately tries to guard against this degree of military influence.) Religious leaders (like the Shah before them) try to employ the military to strengthen their positions and ensure their control over Iranian society. Thus, the military's role in security cannot be separated from its overall role in Iran's domestic politics.

This chapter focuses on two issues. It first describes the military's role in Iranian politics today. It then explores the question of whether the armed forces would be loyal to the regime if political strife were to increase.

THE MILITARY AND THE KHATAMI TRANSFORMATION

The military establishment, both in the IRGC and the *Artesh*, has been re-engaging with Iranian civil society since the 1990s. The *Artesh* is doing this through several channels: providing manpower and technical expertise for civilian projects; playing a leading part in the reconstruction of war-damaged regions of the country; providing more open access to its assets (through military parades, open days, and so on); playing up its diligence to defend Iran against its external enemies (here, Arab and Western anti-Iranian rhetoric has come in handy); and turning its inability to engage in national politics into an advantage by giving the impression of deliberately staying above

the factional politics of the regime, presumably for the sake of the nation.

Many among the IRGC and the *Basij* interpret President Khatami's reforms and the ideas of his adherents as challenges to the interests of those who have been loyal supporters of the Islamic Republic and defenders of the *Faqih*. From their perspective, the so-called liberals gathering around Khatami are trying to dismantle their system of privileges and access to power. Conservative political forces often encourage these gloomy perceptions and have encouraged groups such as *Ansar-e Hezbollah* and the *Basij* to enter the fray.¹

In short, the reform process unleashed by President Khatami is now a bone of contention within the defense establishment and its constituent parts in the *Entezamat* (the law and security enforcement agencies) that, without speedy action by the political establishment, could threaten the fabric of the painstakingly created multifaceted defense structure.

Military officers' attitudes toward popular unrest have been decidedly mixed and their overall response inconsistent. There are those among the IRGC who believe that the organization should no longer offer a blind defense of the ruling politico-clerical establishment against domestic pressures or criticism. During the Qazvin riots of 1994, elements within the IRGC refused to carry out orders to enter the city and reestablish order at all costs (including the use of force). In publicized statements and letters after the Qazvin riots, senior serving officers (including those from the IRGC) felt compelled to express their concern to the nation and the regime about the "chaotic economic, cultural, and political situation in the country"—interpreted as direct criticism of the role that clerics have played in national affairs.

However, when these same issues resurfaced in the aftermath of the July 1999 Tehran students riots, the IRGC commanders were concerned with the destabilizing impact of the Khatami administration's political and cultural reforms. Several commanders of the IRGC made public criticism of President Khatami and of his reforms, claiming that the reforms were endangering the *nezam* (revolution-

¹Menashri, "Whither Iranian Politics?" pp. 13-51.

ary order) and that the IRGC could not stand by and see the fruits of the revolution destroyed; it may have no option but to intervene in the interest of the whole Islamic regime.²

What followed in this saga suggests the limits of the IRGC's influence.³ First, the *Artesh* proclaimed that the defense establishment should not have a view on political matters. Next came the outcry from the President's supporters and the population at large that, under the Islamic Republic, the military has never determined, and would never determine, the fate of the country or issued ultimata against its political leaders. The authors of the ill-fated letter to the President warning of the dire consequences of his actions and their readiness to act were forced to retract their comments, pledge their commitment to the President, and promise not to express such views again—at least not in public.

These problems are likely to worsen as time goes on, as the more ideologically committed IRGC leaders become distanced from Iranian society.⁴ Today's Iranian youth are proving difficult to sway or control, despite years of Islamization. Iranian leaders readily admit that today's youth, irrespective of background and upbringing, are not only highly cosmopolitan and culturally diverse, but also open to new ideas and receptive to alien habits. Indeed, several of Iran's more forward-looking leaders, including President Khatami, have already recognized that the country's limited outlets for social activity and entertainment are driving the youth away from the regime and into the arms of what they call "satanic cultures." Even

²See *Iran News'* daily coverage of the July 1999 riots for further details.

³Saeed Barzin, "Iran: Reining in the Right," *Middle East International*, July 30, 1999, pp. 17-18.

⁴These developments must be seen in the context of a much broader ongoing struggle for the soul of the revolution. The issue that attracted debate was that of "moral corruption," which the conservatives had identified as a major social concern and which they had used to great effect as a means of undermining the public policies of the Rafsanjani administration. The issue of moral corruption, however, was not just a political football. With around 63 percent of the population under the age of 25, the clerical elite has been genuinely concerned that as a majority of Iranians are now net consumers, not just of goods and services but also of ideas and habits, they could develop a dependence on Western culture, a dependence that the regime has tried hard to eradicate. For a discussion of these issues, see Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Iran on the Eve of the New Millennium: Domestic and Regional Perspectives," *FAU Seminar 1997* (Copenhagen, Foreningen Af Udviklingsforskere I Danmark, 1997), pp. 31-47.

worse, the youth seem to readily accept and identify with the “MTV culture,” received illegally by many of Iran’s average-income urban dwellers. They also seem to have developed a degree of fondness about the past, fed by the older generation who nostalgically reminisce about how good life was before the revolution. These trends in turn reinforce the country’s secularizing tendency, which the post-1979 security forces abhor.

Yet even as the gap between Iranian society and the politicized elements of the security forces grows, the regime’s reliance on coercion may well increase. Political tensions, infighting, and prolonged economic difficulties have increased the regime’s reliance on its coercive machinery. Social issues may be the most polarizing. To traditionalist and rightist forces, moreover, the social and cultural realm is the most important dimension that distinguishes Iran from other developing, even Muslim, countries. In general, however, Iranian elites prefer to avoid direct confrontation and will try other measures to placate opposition.

ARE THE ARMED FORCES LOYAL?

In general, the armed forces—particularly the IRGC—are a prop for the conservative elements of the regime rather than a threat to them. Nevertheless, the armed forces’ support is lukewarm, particularly when it comes to ensuring the stability of the regime against reformers in Iran itself.⁵

The *Artesh* of today is not likely to become politically active against the Islamic Republic. The commander of the Armed Forces Joint Staffs, Brigadier General Hassan Firouzabadi, issued a statement in May 1998 criticizing Commander of the IRGC Yahya Rahim Safavi for adopting an overtly political line on domestic issues and for allowing the IRGC to become embroiled in politics. The Islamic regime, like previous Iranian regimes, has deliberately excluded the military from day-to-day politics. There would need to be near-total collapse of the government or complete chaos before the *Artesh* would feel bold

⁵The military is not likely to play a divisive role if ethnic tension in Iran increases. Although the Iranian military does not trust all ethnicities equally (Kurds, for example, are rare among senior officers), in general the military is open to groups other than Persians.

enough to take matters into its own hands. Also, the *Artesh* in Iran has always relied on a political master, which it lacks through deliberate design by the revolutionary regime.

There is little chance, also, that the IRGC would rebel against its political masters and decide to find its own solution to Iran's security or political problems. The IRGC leadership is closely intertwined with the political establishment, and few IRGC officers, if any, would dare to undertake such a risky and dangerous operation without authorization from the Supreme Leader. Increasingly, however, IRGC leaders see themselves as the vanguard of the revolutionary regime and compare themselves to their counterparts in Turkey and Pakistan, who regularly intervene to ensure that their agendas are respected by politicians.

Most IRGC commanders are on the conservative side of the Iranian political spectrum. With regard to the defense of the revolutionary system, there is no dispute among the IRGC's leaders. The dispute, if we can call it that, is over how best to revitalize the system and guarantee its long-term survival—a dispute that currently dominates Iranian politics in general. Some believe that this can be done only through reform and openness, while others believe that such reforms pose a mortal threat to the character and nature of the Islamic Republic.

The IRGC rank and file, however, appear to reflect the preferences of most Iranians. A poll conducted by moderate parliament members indicated that 80 percent of IRGC members favored Khatami, while only 9 percent supported more rightist candidates.⁶ Reportedly, 73 percent of the IRGC and 70 percent of the *Basij* voted for Khatami.⁷ This is not surprising, as many leading supporters of Khatami are former revolutionaries, having been involved in such defining events as the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran.⁸ Moreover, many of

⁶*Gulf States Newsletter*, vol. 24, no. 625, November 24, 1999, p. 6.

⁷Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* p. 125.

⁸Examples include Ibrahim Asgharzeadeh, Abbas Abdi, and Mohammad Musavi Khoeniha, all of whom are leading reformers. Many of Khatami's supporters also have distinguished war records. Others were supporters of former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, such as Ataollah Mohajerani and Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi. See Christo-

the protesters, such as the students who demonstrated in Tehran in July 1999, are the children of IRGC families and other pillars of the revolution.⁹

For the revolutionary leadership, a greater concern is possible IRGC inaction or slow response during a crisis. As noted above, the IRGC leadership reflects the same confusions and complexities that have befallen much of Iran's political elite. If the elite split (particularly if the current supporters of the Supreme Leader are divided), the IRGC's response is not clear. The rank and file are less ideological than their leaders and more sympathetic to calls for reform. While they too would defend the system, they seem interested in the political discourse and more in tune with the people's needs and demands. Again, this does not make them liberals but, rather, more distant from the grand picture. They will, however, obey orders that have to do with defending Iran's borders, defeating the armed opposition, or attacking bandits, gangsters, smugglers, or drug traffickers.

The greatest uncertainty is whether the IRGC would crack down on a widespread, popular reform movement that had the support of many Iranians who claimed to support an Islamic system, albeit a much-reformed one. The IRGC has played a role in suppressing unrest. In July 1995, the IRGC ended an automobile workers' strike in Islamabad.¹⁰ Clearly, many IRGC leaders would be prepared to take action: In response to demonstrations in Tehran in the summer of 1999, 24 IRGC commanders sent a letter to Khatami, which was subsequently leaked to hard-line newspapers, that they would take the law into their own hands unless the President cracked down on the demonstrators.¹¹ On April 16, 2000, IRGC leaders stated that enemies of the revolution would feel "the reverberating impact of the hammer of the Islamic revolution on their skulls."¹² However,

pher de Bellaigue, "The Struggle for Iran," *New York Review of Books*, December 16, 1999, p. 54.

⁹Azar Nifisi, "Student Demonstrations in Iran: What's Next?" *Policywatch*, no. 400, July 21, 1999.

¹⁰"Protests Near Tehran and in Southwest," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Iran Report*, vol. 3, no. 2, January 10, 1999 (electronic version).

¹¹A.W. Samii, "The Contemporary Iranian News Media, 1998-1999," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 4, December 1999 (electronic version).

¹²Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Iran Report*, vol. 3, no. 17, May 1, 2000.

problems could arise, à la Qazvin in 1994 or Tehran in July 1999, in which the IRGC might be required to quell unrest due to political, economic, and social reasons. Whether they would withdraw their support in another mass urban-based riot or demonstration is hard to predict. Much would depend on the nature of the violence and the position of the political leadership. If the political leadership is divided, so too will be the IRGC's leaders.

To guard against this problem, Iran's leadership appears to have formed special units—so-called *Ashura*, *Zahra*, and *Sayid-ul Shohoda* battalions—to handle the problem of popular unrest. Units of the IRGC and *Basij* have been created to ensure that the regime has trained and available troops that it can call on during a domestic crisis.¹³ Interviews suggest that these units number between 10,000 and 12,000, though many are used to guard regime officials or otherwise occupy singular tasks.

POTENTIAL RED LINES

In Chapters Three and Four, we argue that there is a degree of consensus in Iran that is often obscured by the smoke of everyday politics. Consensus has its limits, however, and greater military intervention in Iran's politics cannot be ruled out.

Potential “red lines” for conflict include the following:

- A threat to the rule of the *Faqih*. The current leadership will tolerate limited reforms, if necessary, as long as the existing order remains secure.
- Open disrespect of Khomeini or for his legacy. All of Iran's elites, both conservatives and reformers, claim to act in the Imam's name. His speeches and acts are used to justify their points of view, even when his legacy is being changed. An open rejection of Khomeini, particularly if it involved open contempt for his legacy, would enrage many stalwarts and might destroy consensus.

¹³Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Iran Report*, vol. 2, no. 36, September 13, 1999, and Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* pp. 66 and 125.

- Social reforms that threaten the existing view or equilibrium of society. Marginal changes to improve the status of women or religious minorities can be tolerated, but dramatic reforms may provoke a traditionalist backlash.
- Jeopardizing the unity or sanctity of the state. Iranian elites of all political stripes share a basic Islamo-Persian nationalism that rejects territorial claims by neighboring states or calls for greater autonomy by ethnic minorities. Measures that might threaten existing borders or sovereignty would be resisted.
- Moving too close to Israel or the United States. One particular stream of the Imam's legacy is rejection of ties to Israel or Washington. Openly flouting this would anger important segments of the security establishment.

In general, consensus is easier to achieve in the area of security policy than in the area of economic and social policies, where far more interests are involved and the issues touch cornerstones of the revolution more directly.

Despite the existence of these red lines, the military institutions are likely to be forces for stability. If politics remain stable and avoid widespread strife, the IRGC leadership would prefer to devote its attention to improving its military standards and competing more effectively with the *Artesh*. Intervention is more likely if internal divisions deepen at the elite level, ideological fault lines widen, and factionalism turns violent. If the current factionalist politics were to escalate to the point of widespread violence, not only might elements from the IRGC become embroiled, but serious challenges might be posed for the national security forces, whose job it is to keep order. If armed gangs were to be deployed by various power centers, the *Artesh* would find it almost impossible to escape involvement, particularly if the (largely externally based) opposition groups were to capitalize on the regime's infighting to wage a protracted campaign of terror against its leading elements. However, this alarmist scenario must be tempered by the IRGC's own recognition of its internal divisions. The IRGC would risk a further marginalization of its position if it aggressively and directly opposed further moderation in Iran's domestic politics.