

The sources of Iran's security policy defy simple explanation. Religion, nationalism, ethnicity, economics, and geopolitics all are important factors explaining Iran's goals and tactics in its relationship with the outside world. So too are the agendas of key security institutions and the ambitions of their leaders. The picture is even more confusing because Iran's politics and even its basic structure of government are in flux. The 1997 election of Mohammed Khatami as the country's president triggered a struggle among Iran's political elite that has changed the political debate in Iran. Therefore, it is often difficult to understand, much less predict, Iranian decision-making.

FUNDAMENTAL SOURCES OF SECURITY POLICY

Iran's security policy is often described as a blend of Islamic and nationalist objectives. Both these factors, however, have carried less weight in recent years than have more standard political considerations. Geopolitics has reasserted its importance, and economics has grown from a foreign policy irrelevance to a leading factor. Ethnicity and other communal divisions also drive Iran's security policy, particularly with regard to the countries on Iran's borders. Preserving regional stability and improving Iran's economy have forced the clerical regime to cultivate neighboring governments, even at the expense of revolutionary principles. As a result of this shift, the Islamic Republic often favors far more cautious policies than its Islamic and nationalist ethos might otherwise dictate.

SECURITY POLICY ACTORS AND DECISIONMAKING

Myriad individuals, institutions, and organizations play important political and military roles in Iran. For issues of security policy, several organizations are particularly important. These include the intelligence services, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the regular armed forces, or *Artesh*. The *Artesh* has become an increasingly important player in recent years, often at the expense of the IRGC.

In general, the various institutions emphasize different issues, to their mutual satisfaction, though in practice they overlap considerably in their duties and beliefs. The intelligence services and the IRGC are far more focused on the defense of the revolution from its internal enemies than is the *Artesh*. In contrast, the *Artesh* focuses its efforts on more traditional threats, such as an Iraqi attack.

Iran's formal security structure is not reflected in actual decisionmaking. Formally, the Supreme Leader oversees Iran's security policy, while the President is responsible for much of the day-to-day decisionmaking. Informally, however, the Supreme Leader exercises considerable control over the daily implementation of policy. Many institutions often share the responsibility for formulating and implementing particular policies, leading to duplication and rivalry. In addition, most institutions in Iran are weak, while the personal networks of leaders are strong. Power thus shifts according to the fortunes of individual leaders rather than to the purviews of institutions.

Iran's decisionmaking is characterized by two competing trends—seemingly chaotic complexity and consensus. The large number of institutional and noninstitutional actors, family ties, personal relationships, overlapping institutional authority, and the mixture of religion and politics all contrive to make it difficult to identify who has a say on what issue. While there is a formal system for decisionmaking, it is often ignored or bypassed in favor of an informal, parallel system. Individuals are constantly tempted to ignore the system, particularly if it is easier to gain a consensus that way. This complexity is balanced, however, by a cultural and procedural emphasis on consensus. Informally, there are often rules—known to the par-

ticipants if not to outsiders—that govern behavior among elites. What appears as chaos to outsiders is often a highly stylized and ritualized mode of interaction. A willingness to horse trade and otherwise swap support on an ad hoc basis also preserves some solidarity. To preserve the consensus, few actors dare conduct important operations without at least the tacit approval of the senior leadership.

The result is often a constant back-and-forth process. Individuals can withhold their support, preventing significant change even if it has majority support. Different institutions that are not equally enthusiastic about change may implement policies inconsistently or unevenly, leading to mixed signals in Iran's foreign policy. In addition, policy slippage regularly occurs due to the constant renegotiation of controversial issues.

THE MILITARY AND IRANIAN POLITICS UNDER KHATAMI

The social and political reform process unleashed by President Khatami is now a bone of contention within the defense establishment, raising the prospect of military intervention in Iranian politics. Military officers' attitudes toward popular unrest have been decidedly mixed, and their overall response has been inconsistent. While the regular forces try to make a virtue of being apolitical, there are those among the IRGC who have threatened intervention if the Islamic system is threatened by reformers. The traditional leadership's dependence on coercion is likely to increase as political tensions, infighting, and prolonged economic difficulties increase the regime's reliance on its coercive machinery. Many IRGC officers, and the vast majority of the rank and file, however, support President Khatami and his reform agenda.

There is little chance that the IRGC would rebel against its political masters and decide to find its own solution to Iran's security or political problems. The traditional elements of the regime, however, are increasingly uncertain of the IRGC's loyalty, particularly its willingness to respond rapidly and decisively during a confrontation with reformers. In response, they have created several special units designed to quell domestic unrest.

KEY OBSERVATIONS ABOUT SECURITY POLICY

Iraq is widely recognized as the leading threat to the Islamic regime: It is the only state considered a danger to Iran's territorial integrity, because of its revisionist ambitions toward Arab parts of Iran and the Shatt al-Arab. Afghanistan is also emerging as a leading threat, given the Taliban's support for Sunni Islamic radicalism and avowed hostility toward Iran.

In general, Iran's friendships are at best lukewarm. Iran has close relations with Syria and strong working ties to Pakistan and Russia. Yet these bonds are not deep, and relations with Pakistan in particular have been fraying.

Iran's policies toward its neighbors are increasingly prudent, with the Islamic Republic trying to calm regional tension and end its isolation. Particularly near Iran's own borders, the Islamic regime has supported the status quo with regard to territorial integrity, has avoided major military provocations, and has shown a preference for working with governments over substate movements—a classic post-revolutionary era shift. Tehran has made a particular point of wooing the Gulf states and encouraging stability in Central Asia, even if this requires slighting local Islamist movements. Although Iran still supports Shi'a radicals and other Islamists throughout the world—and champions the anti-Israel front—its motives and its priorities are increasingly dictated by cold national interest concerns.

Iran's policies toward Israel and the United States are often an exception to its overall shift toward prudence. Restrictions on relations with both countries remain one of the strongest parts of the revolutionary legacy.

In general, Iran's domestic, foreign, and security policies cannot be neatly separated. All of Iran's major policy decisions involve a complex calculus of Iran's overall vulnerability, the regime's need to stay in power, and Iran's commitment to revolutionary ideals. For much of the revolutionary leadership, defending the revolutionary order often is a priority in Tehran's relationship with its neighbors and the United States.

Iran's security forces, particularly the regular military, are often voices of restraint. Iran's security forces prefer shows of force over

active confrontations. When tensions with several neighbors have escalated, Iran's military forces have conducted maneuvers and buildups near the respective areas of conflict but have deliberately sought to avoid open confrontations. The military forces fear that almost any broad conflict would be costly and deeply unpopular.

Differences between Iran's regular armed forces and its revolutionary armed forces are decreasing. As their commitment to professionalism has grown, and their Islamist ardor waned, the revolutionary forces have increasingly conducted business in a manner similar to that of the regular forces.

In general, Iran's security forces respect and follow the wishes of Iran's civilian leadership, even though they vigorously champion their own agendas whenever possible. Conducting "rogue operations," or otherwise acting without civilian approval, is rare to nonexistent.