

---

**SECURITY DECISIONMAKING IN IRAN**

---

The decisionmaking process in Iran can be, and often is, bewildering in its complexity. The large number of institutions, the important roles of nongovernment actors, overlapping institutional structures, the importance of personal ties, and lack of a clear division of labor among security ministries often lead to conflicting policies and uncertain implementation.

Although planning for Iran's national security is the constitutional task of the *Artesh* and the mandate of Iran's other security organizations, Iran does not have a single national security approach, or program of action. Policy outcomes are usually products of compromises reached by the security community itself and its political masters.

This chapter provides an overview of decisionmaking in Iran, focusing on the role—and limits—played by Iran's security institutions. It discusses the style of decisionmaking, the formal and informal mechanisms, and the means the military uses to influence policy.

**DECISIONMAKING STYLE: CONSENSUS WITHIN COMPLEXITY**

Any attempt to capture a nation's decisionmaking process is bound to simplify. That said, Iran's decisionmaking is characterized by two competing trends. The complexity and apparent chaos of the Iranian system is marked, particularly to the outsider. The large number of institutional and noninstitutional actors, family ties, personal relationships, overlapping institutional authority, and mixture of religion

and politics all contrive to make it difficult to identify who has a say on what issue. Often many voices are heard, and similar issues often involve different actors within the system.<sup>1</sup>

This complexity is balanced, however, by a cultural and procedural emphasis on consensus. Although debates in Iran are often fierce, major decisions seldom go forward without at least a tacit consensus among the elite. At the highest levels, regime figures may constantly scheme against one another, but they seldom directly challenge each other, preferring instead to horse trade and compromise and thus, ironically, to work together. Moreover, elites seem to be governed by a set of informal rules known to the players, if not to outsiders. Elites, for example, can monitor meetings, Friday prayer sessions, and internal pronouncements to judge who is involved with which decisions.

Indeed, the system requires compromise in order to avoid paralysis. With so many input points into decisionmaking, and so many overlapping or parallel institutions, cooperation is necessary to accomplish even the most basic functions of government.<sup>2</sup>

The apparent chaos that characterizes Iran's institutions often gives the impression that important players act without oversight. This impression is usually false. To preserve the consensus, few actors dare conduct important operations without at least tacit approval of the senior leadership. Particularly at lower levels, individuals hesitate to make decisions without authorization from above. Because of the emphasis on consensus, "rogue operations" by security officials are generally not likely.

Iran's institutional structure reinforces oversight, or at least knowledge, of security operations. Since the introduction of constitutional reforms in 1989, the command and control of the *Faqih*, or Supreme Leader, have been exercised in an elaborate interlocking pattern in which no single organ or individual could hold the upper hand or act independently of the political leadership. For almost all operations,

---

<sup>1</sup>Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* p. xi.

<sup>2</sup>Wilfried Buchta makes this point about the need for cooperation between the Supreme Leader and the President, but it applies to Iranian politics more broadly. Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* p. 4.

the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and the covert elements of the IRGC report to at least a subset of the Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS), including the President, the Supreme Religious Leader, and the Minister of Intelligence.<sup>3</sup> Informal networks provide even more information. Leaders are likely to be at least aware of important decisions and operations through their personal networks.

This mix of complexity and consensus makes predicting decision-making difficult. While there is a formal system for decisionmaking, it is often ignored or bypassed. Individuals are constantly tempted to ignore the system, particularly if it is easier to gain a consensus that way. Prediction is made even more difficult because there are many access points into Iranian decisionmaking. Major decisions are influenced by leading merchants, religious figures (both affiliated with and opposed to the regime), political loyalists of all stripes, and others, who use their economic, social, and ideological power to influence political decisions.

Iranian decisionmaking often is characterized by broad agreement that is tempered by constant renegotiation and haphazard execution. As a result, Iran's security policy often follows different, if usually complementary, lines. Major policies, such as confrontation with the United States or support for radicals abroad, require consensus among the regime's leadership, but implementation of these agreed-on policies may vary widely.

The result is often a constant back-and-forth process. Different institutions that are not equally enthusiastic about a 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.

### **Formal Decisionmaking Structures**

On paper, Iran has a coherent structure for security decisionmaking. The President exercises considerable day-to-day authority, and he controls budget planning, which is essential for incorporating mili-

---

<sup>3</sup>Cordesman, *Iran's Military Forces in Transition*, p. 34.

tary priorities into overall grand strategy. The Supreme Leader (*Faqih*), however, is the most important official. Under article 110 of the 1979 constitution, the Supreme Leader retains the constitutional right to declare war and call for general troop mobilization. He is also the supreme commander of both the IRGC and the *Artesh*.<sup>4</sup>

Although the *Faqih* is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, he disposes of his responsibilities toward the defense establishment not through any direct chain of command. According to the formal system, the *Faqih* works through other bodies in exercising his control.

Today, the SCNS, chaired by the President, is the key national defense and security assessment body. Representatives of the *Artesh*, the IRGC, other security agencies, and the *Faqih* sit on the council. This forum discusses, calculates, and formulates responses to threats to national security. During the Afghan crisis in 1998, for instance, the SCNS evaluated the threat and plotted a response.<sup>5</sup> The response may not have been to the liking of some conservative elements in the IRGC and the broader political establishment (who would have liked a military confrontation with the Taliban in Afghanistan), but the predominant line—escalation without risk of war—championed by the *Artesh* and several IRGC commanders prevailed. In the end, and not for the first time, the Supreme Leader endorsed the recommendations of the SCNS on the handling of the Afghan crisis and did not order a general troop mobilization.

The *Faqih*, however, exercises tremendous indirect control. The office of the *Faqih* enjoys residual prestige from its association with the Imam. The *Faqih* relies on an elaborate system of interconnected directorships, whereby his representatives sit on decisionmaking bodies in various elements of the defense establishment. The *Faqih* does not often play a role in the day-to-day concerns but guides overall direction through his representatives. An estimated 2,000 Islamic “commissars” work under the Supreme Leader’s direction.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>He receives advice on national security and defense matters from two military officers in his office, and he receives reports on foreign affairs from a foreign affairs advisor, currently the former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati.

<sup>5</sup>Private conversations with political figures.

<sup>6</sup>Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* pp. 3 and 48.

Islamization is perhaps the most singularly important dimension that the Islamists have added to the former Imperial structures, including the armed services. An Ideological-political Directorate is present at all levels of the services. Its members, usually middle-ranking clerics, sit in on many meetings, eat with officers, encourage them to pray together, and hold discussion meetings. The Ideological-political Directorate is therefore influential in setting the atmosphere in military corridors and in barracks. The directorate is also influential in decisions about promotions, special assignments, and so on. Few senior officers are promoted on the basis of military merit alone. Rather, they must have revolutionary credentials and political connections.<sup>7</sup>

### Key Informal Mechanisms

Family, kinship, educational affiliations, and support from various clerical personalities and factions play a central role in military politics in general, for both the IRGC and the *Artesh*. Personal networks are almost always stronger than institutional power.<sup>8</sup> Important individuals have relatives, friends, and protégés in related ministries. Many also share a revolutionary background, having worked together against the Shah in the Islamic underground or sharing time in the Shah's jails. Many come from the same Islamic school or seminar. For example, many of the top cadre in the MOIS come from the Madrased-e Haqqani, a leading theological school in Qom.<sup>9</sup> As Wilfried Buchta argues, "The Iranian government's successful function is often at the mercy of these informal networks."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>For example, Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani came from the ranks of the IRGC, drew closer to then-President Hashemi Rafsanjani's camp in the early 1990s, and is now one of the most important players in the military field as a prominent member of Khatami's cabinet. Also, Air Force Commander Brigadier Habib Baqai comes with impeccable politico-religious credentials.

<sup>8</sup>Examples of the importance of personal relationships are too numerous to count in recent Iranian history. Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi's nephew is his deputy; Brigadier General Hejazi, the commander of the *Basij*, has a son who helps run the office of Ayatollah Khamene'i; Ayatollah Kadivar, a cleric recently released from jail, is the brother-in-law of Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Ataollah Mohajerani, whose wife is a member of parliament.

<sup>9</sup>Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* p. 166.

<sup>10</sup>Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* p. 7.

The idiosyncratic structure of Iran's national security apparatus contributes to the informal power of selected officials. Ties to political factions enable military officials to express their views outside the chain of command. Military commanders often exchange views when the *Faqih* invites them to meet him or his representatives.

Both family ties and shared experience are important to advancement in the IRGC. Many IRGC commanders come from religious families and have married into other religious families. These networks, which operate on weekends, before and after Friday prayers, and through family gatherings and events (births, marriages, deaths, funerals, and so on), provide informal but effective means of communication among commanders and among individuals of the political class as well. The IRGC high command still consists of many of the officers who served in the war or who were around from the early days of the revolution. In the regular forces—where much of the recruitment is still done through conscription and where officer material goes through the military academy and its training wing—such ties seem less important.

An obvious implication of these informal networks is that institutions in Iran are weak. Understanding decisionmaking power in Iran thus requires understanding not just an individual's place on an organization chart, but also his ties to other leaders. These cross-cutting relations, in turn, hinder coherent organizational identities and agendas.

### **THE IMPLICATIONS OF MULTIPLE INSTITUTIONS**

Iran's institutions overlap tremendously, both on paper and in reality. The IRGC and the *Artesh* have duplicate services, further confused by overlap with Iran's intelligence and cultural bodies. Moreover, their missions overlap in practice; for example, separating the defense of the revolution (the IRGC's *raison d'être*) from the defense of Iran's borders is often impossible.

Iran's security organizations are numerous, often overlap, and have an uncertain command and control structure. On paper, the President would seem to exercise tremendous oversight. The Supreme Leader has influence in both the formal governmental security or-

ganizations (the regular army and the intelligence and interior ministries) and in the revolutionary organizations, such as the IRGC and the paramilitary militia known as the *Basij*. The President, on the other hand, exercises only indirect influence over the revolutionary organizations through the Ministry of Defense.

The organization chart, however, is misleading. It is confusing on paper, but the reality is far more complex. The many informal mechanisms, and the importance of individual ties, make it difficult to square ostensible responsibilities with real ones.

Overlapping duties, however, are deliberate, despite their inefficiency. Infighting among regime members has led to competing multiple centers of power in general; the military's multiple centers are thus merely a reflection of the power structure in general. The overlapping nature of the security institutions has several benefits for regime stability, but it often makes a coherent security policy far more difficult. When multiple institutions have a security role, a successful military takeover of power becomes far more difficult.<sup>11</sup> Thus, potential coup plotters must be sure of the loyalty, or at least the passivity, of the IRGC, the *Artesh*, the intelligence services, and even the *Basij* if they are to succeed. Similarly, it is highly likely that the conservative forces in the regime would be able to call on at least some elements of Iran's security establishment to aid their cause; reformers can at best hope for passivity.

### How Influence Is Expressed

The influence of Iran's security institutions is felt in a defused way and tends to be quite issue specific. They exercise their muscle in such forums as the SNSC, at advisory meetings with the Supreme Leader and the presidential office, and through their discussions with the Majles' foreign and security committees. All the security institutions also use their informal access, through family and religious ties and so on, to influence decisionmaking.

---

<sup>11</sup>James Quinlivan, "Coup Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 2, Fall 1999, pp. 131-165.

The security institutions also exploit their control over information to influence debate, particularly among elites. This ability to influence agendas is strong when it comes to threats from insurgent groups, such as the *Mujahedin-e Khalq* Organization (MKO), and more technical military issues, such as the capabilities of the forces of neighboring states. However, on broader security issues, such as the disposition of the Taliban or the threat posed by Iraq, their control over information is limited.

The *Artesh's* main forum is the SCNS, which is charged with overseeing all national security matters. However, by virtue of having a seat at the cabinet table, the *Artesh* also expresses its opinions in cabinet discussions of foreign affairs, the national budget, procurement, allocation of resources, and so on. The *Artesh* also has informal access to the Supreme Leader's office, but it does not seem to regard this as being a decisive arena of influence.

The IRGC, on the other hand, routinely exploits its access to the Supreme Leader's office, volunteers advice on national and foreign policy matters to the Leader and his key staff, and actively aims to influence policy and debate on security issues. The IRGC also exercises its influence through contact with conservative-leaning clergy in Qom, who have considerable influence in the judiciary, the Interior Ministry, the Expediency Council, and the Council of Guardians. It further exercises its influence through its organizational links to and leadership of the *Basij*. Commonly, IRGC leaders address Friday prayers, at which they discuss a wide range of policy matters. Increasingly, the IRGC, or leadership groups within it, issues statements and also warnings to the President and his allies on national security issues. By contrast, the *Artesh* simply does not conduct itself in this fashion.

## TRENDS IN OVERALL INFLUENCE

The *Artesh's* star has been rising in recent years even though the IRGC enjoys better access to regime elites, particularly the Supreme Leader. In part this rise is due to the concurrent rise of the Khatami agenda: As the more pragmatic agenda initiated by Rafsanjani and expanded by Khatami has come to dominate Iran's foreign policy, so too has the influence enjoyed by the more pragmatic *Artesh*. The increase in focus on economics and stability squares with the *Artesh's*

more defensive agenda. The IRGC, in contrast, is increasingly viewed as an overtly ideological institution that cannot be trusted for impartial advice on national security matters.

The IRGC's influence, however, remains considerable when domestic affairs and national security mix. This is particularly true for efforts to safeguard the revolution against the MKO or other internal opponents, even though assassinations or other covert actions abroad often have considerable negative consequences.

The question of how much influence the military has, and how it exercises this influence, is bound up in the nature of the Iranian state itself. Iran is unusual in the Middle East for the limited role that the military plays in national political life and in the conduct of the country's foreign policy. The *Artesh* and the IRGC offer expertise at the discussion level of strategic issues and assessment of potential tensions for the political leadership. Far more than do Western militaries, they also try to influence the national debate. However, they do not call the shots and are often overruled by civilian officials. Civilian control, while hardly complete, remains dominant and prevents the military from behaving as a rogue actor.