
**MAJOR SECURITY INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR
COMPOSITION**

Myriad individuals, institutions, and organizations play important foreign policy roles in Iran. For issues of security policy—the focus of this report—several organizations are particularly important, including the intelligence services, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the paramilitary militia known as the *Basij*, and the regular armed forces, or *Artesh*.

Recognizing the role of the Iranian armed forces and security services is critical to understanding Iran’s security policy. These institutions will respond to the challenges of the 21st century, be it the return of Iraq as a major regional power, a powerful Turkish-Israeli axis, possible domestic turmoil in the southern Gulf states, a meltdown in Afghanistan, or other core concerns. Moreover, they must do so with a relatively limited budget (of at most \$5 billion a year), inferior military equipment (relative to that of other regional powers), and a divided political elite whose only priority and goal might be survival. These organizations, their relative power, and their institutional biases are discussed below.

THE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES

Iran’s intelligence services play an active role in its foreign policy, particularly with regard to efforts to suppress Iranian dissidents and to support coreligionists abroad. Open information on Iran’s leading intelligence organization, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security

(MOIS), is extremely limited—this report offers at best a limited description of the MOIS's goals and actions.

Many MOIS functions are tied to defending the regime and ensuring the strength of the government, and to protecting Iran's interests abroad. Under the constitution, the MOIS gathers and assesses information and, more important, acts against conspiracies endangering the Islamic Republic. The MOIS, controlled by Khatami's allies, has steadily purged hard-liners since Khatami's election in 1997.¹

IRAN'S TWO MILITARIES

Iran's military forces are the heart of Iran's security institutions. The Islamic Republic began its life with two, often competing, military forces, which maintain their separate existences to this day.

Iran's regular military, the *Artesh*, stood aside during the revolutionary turmoil that overwhelmed the Shah.² The officer corps soon was decimated through desertion, forced retirement, and execution at the hands of the overzealous revolutionary courts.³ Before long, Iran's new political masters set about changing many of the organizational structures of the regular armed forces. The regime implemented a massive campaign of Islamization of the armed forces, conducted through the newly established Ideological-political Directorate. Although this did not instill revolutionary ardor into the *Artesh*, it did stamp out any potential counterrevolutionary sentiment and ensured that the armed forces remained responsible to the political leadership. Despite having cowed the *Artesh*, the clerical regime felt the need to create its own armed forces to ensure internal stability and, over time, act as a major force in the war with

¹Gasiorowski, "The Power Struggle in Iran."

²While the Imperial armed forces of the Shah were highly trained and enjoyed the benefits of a motivated, professional, and loyal officer corps, the bulk of the army consisted of a conscripted force that had little interest in defending the Pahlavi regime against internal enemies. So, when the crunch came and the revolution gathered pace, the soldiers were on the street, but their commanders were always in doubt about their loyalty. For a fascinating account, see General Robert E. Huyser, *Mission to Tehran* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1986).

³Buchta estimates that 45 percent of Iran's officer corps was purged between 1980 and 1986. Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* p. 68.

Iraq. The result was two militaries, the regular military and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), or *Sepah-e Pasdaran*.

The Emergence of an Islamized Military

From the start, the link between internal security and the armed forces was tight. The *Artesh* did not pose a serious challenge to the new order (relegating such events as the Nowjeh air force coup attempt of July 1980 to a historical footnote). The challenge, when it did come, was from leftist groups and ethnic uprisings, particularly the Kurds but also the Turkomans, the Baluchi, and some Azeris.⁴

This challenge spawned the IRGC, which is today one of the main security pillars of the Islamic Republic. The IRGC began as a modest force of about 10,000 men dedicated to returning order to the country, dampening counterrevolutionary trends among the regular armed forces, and countering the growing influence of largely leftist revolutionary armed groups such as the *Fedayeen*, *Mujahedin-e Khalq* Organization (MKO), *Peykar*, *Komleh*, *Kurdish Peshmerga*, and so on. Although it is almost impossible to be precise, the *Fedayeen* and the MKO may have had as many as 10,000 fully armed volunteers each. So, the IRGC at its inception was not a dominant military force. Indeed, many of its initial activities had more to do with guarding key personnel of the new regime and with keeping public order than with fighting to defend the new order. Its size, power, and influence steadily expanded as the regime tried to consolidate its power.⁵

The Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 forced Iran's political and military leadership to face up to the command and structural problems of having two very different armed forces existing in parallel. The war, more than any other event, placed the structuring of the Iranian armed forces and the state's coercive machinery on the national agenda.

⁴Dilip Hiro, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1995).

⁵Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1985).

One direct impact of the war was to force the regime to reorganize the IRGC into proper military units, which was accomplished by late 1981.⁶ Another direct by-product of the war was the rapid expansion of the IRGC from 10,000 troops in 1980 to around 50,000 by the beginning of 1982.⁷ The force as a whole experienced dramatic expansion throughout the war years, from 150,000 in 1983, to 250,000 in 1985, and to 450,000 in 1987.

A third, structural change introduced in the early 1980s was the creation of an Operational Area Command (in 1982) and a joint Command Council, which brought the commanders of the IRGC in direct and regular contact with their counterparts in the regular armed forces. By now, the IRGC also enjoyed representation and an influential voice in the highest military decisionmaking body, the Supreme Defense Council.

While the regular armed forces had suffered numerous purges and forced retirements in the 1980s, the IRGC flourished under a group of commanders who not only had very close links with the clerical establishment but were also closely allied with one another. The relationships among these key individuals—Mohsen Rafiqdoust, Mohsen Rezai, Yahya Rahim Safavi, Ali Shamkhani, and Alireza Afshar—were reinforced by a low circulation of senior personnel in the IRGC in the 1980s, ensuring that the IRGC could pursue its interests coherently and systematically.⁸ These individuals have continued their relationships as they have gone on to other important economic and political positions in the Islamic Republic. Such continuity in leadership also allowed the IRGC's main strategists to be permanently present at the highest levels in both governmental and clerical circles, giving the IRGC the capacity to carve a niche for itself as not just the defender of the revolutionary order but also a guardian of the Islamic state's borders and territory. In contrast, regular army officials remained stigmatized by their association with the Shah and their lack of revolutionary credentials.

⁶Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War—Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990).

⁷International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance* (various years); Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, *The Middle East Military Balance* (various years).

⁸Sepehr Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War* (London: Routledge, 1988).

In the early 1980s, elements from the new leadership of the *Artesh* pushed for the professionalization of the IRGC and for closer command structures with this force. Senior officers, such as then-colonels Ali Shirazi (who later became Ayatollah Khomeini's representative on the Supreme Defense Council) and Qasemali Zahirnejad (later to become Chief of Staff), were among those arguing in favor of the mechanization of the IRGC and closer integration of logistical and support systems of the two forces.⁹

The moves to rationalize the military structures and command systems continued throughout the 1980s, partly as a response to the growing importance of the IRGC in the war and partly due to the regular armed forces' desire to transform the IRGC into a more professional fighting machine. In the early days of the fighting, the *Artesh* assumed the lion's share of the burden for the war. Over time, the IRGC's role in the new order became so significant that it was given a whole new administrative machinery, its own ministry, in 1982, with Mohsen Rafiqdoust as its first minister. This IRGC Ministry mirrored the Defense Ministry, and the IRGC, by virtue of having a ministry, acquired a powerful voice at the cabinet table and in other central governmental agencies. The evolution of the IRGC into a full fighting machine was completed fewer than three years later, in 1985, when, on a direct order from Ayatollah Khomeini, the IRGC was given the task of setting up its own army, navy, and air force units. It was also given control over Iran's surface-to-surface missile (SSM) force and right of first refusal on Iran's increasingly scarce military hardware, which includes Iraqi armor now being acquired at the front.¹⁰ The IRGC also forged its own military-to-military ties to a number of Iran's allies, including Syria, Pakistan, and the Sudan.¹¹

The Legacy of the Iran-Iraq War

The war with Iraq left a strong imprint on Iranian defense thinking, even among the clerical elite. The war cost between 350,000 and 400,000 Iranian lives, and the two countries have still not signed a

⁹Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War*.

¹⁰Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988).

¹¹Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* p. 68.

peace treaty ending the conflict. The failure of Iran to translate its ideological fervor into military success undermined the idea that military power counted for little, that professional military forces were unnecessary, that revolutionary ardor mattered more than professionalism, and that military hardware was unimportant. The war underscored the importance of access to technology, professional competence, regular exercises, and deterrence.

The war also made self-reliance in defense a cardinal goal. The war saw the end of the supply of arms from the United States and the need to shift from Western to Eastern suppliers for the air force. Iran also built up its domestic defense industries. In addition, the lack of spares for U.S.-supplied aircraft, together with the initiation of missile attacks by Iraq from 1983, culminating in the 1988 "war of the cities," saw a shift to missiles *instead* of aircraft.

IRAN'S MILITARY FORCES AFTER THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

After the end of the war, and particularly after the election victory of President Rafsanjani in 1989, a major overhaul of the Iranian security establishment began. Rafsanjani took steps to rationalize the regular armed forces.¹² At the same time, the process of professionalization and institutionalization of the IRGC began. Thus, between August 1988 and September 1988, the IRGC's ground forces were reorganized into 21 infantry divisions, 15 independent infantry brigades, 21 air defense brigades, three engineering divisions, and 42 armored, artillery, and chemical defense brigades. The IRGC was given new uniforms, and, in September 1991, 21 new military ranks (divided along four categories of soldiers, fighters, officers, and commanders) were created, from private to general.

¹²The first steps of the reforms, however, were being taken even before the implementation of the UN-brokered cease-fire in July 1988, as the creation in June 1988 of a joint Armed Forces General Staff illustrates. It was then that Ayatollah Khomeini took the unusual step of placing Rafsanjani as the acting commander in chief. A month later, Iran had accepted Security Council Resolution 598. Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London: Routledge, 1995).

Another step in the reform process was the establishment in 1989 of an overhauled defense-related structure, to be known as the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL). This new ministry, headed by Akbar Torkan, a civilian and a former head of the defense industries establishment, effectively curtailed the institutional autonomy of the IRGC and brought it under the overall defense umbrella. With this act, the IRGC Ministry was scrapped, and its command structures were brought within the new MODAFL. Insofar as the new structure placed restrictions on the operational autonomy of the IRGC, it was a victory for not only the pragmatists over the revolutionaries, but also the *Artesh*. The next big step was the expansion of the joint staff office, which was hastily created in 1988, into a more enduring structure. The new single office of the joint chiefs of staff, the General Command of the Armed Forces Joint Staffs, was set up in early 1992, headed by Hassan Firouzabadi, a prominent IRGC figure.¹³ These structural reforms, accompanied by major new arms procurements for the *Artesh*, also signaled the post-Khomeini leadership's interest in allowing the power pendulum to swing back toward the regular armed forces.

The *Artesh*'s power further grew in 1998 in response to the crisis in Afghanistan. Khamene'i created the position of Supreme Commander for the regular military, a position that the IRGC had but the *Artesh* did not—its services reported separately rather than to one individual. This increased both the efficiency and the bureaucratic clout of the regular armed forces. The fact that Khamene'i issued this directive also suggests that the revolutionary leadership's suspicion of the military had declined.¹⁴

Since these reforms were enacted, the defense establishment has demonstrated the growing integration of its various elements through regular military exercises, on land and offshore as well. Units from the IRGC and the *Artesh* have been seen working quite closely in these exercises, sharing command and systems. The navies of the two institutions are better integrated than are their land and air forces. Nevertheless, considerable problems remain. The two militaries do not have a coherent way of dividing up arms Iran

¹³Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* p. 147.

¹⁴Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* p. 147.

procures abroad or develops at home. Friction is acute in the ground and air forces, and integration in these services is fitful at best.

THE *BASIJ*

Another element of the post-revolution Iranian defense establishment is the *Basij*, the large and initially highly motivated group of volunteers who were trained by the IRGC and who often made the first wave of Iranian offensives against Iraq. In essence, the *Basij* had two functions: first, to fight the domestic enemies of the revolution as the regime's urban shock troops; and second, to provide the large pool of reservists for front-line operations against Iraq.

In the 1980s, the *Basij* was required to fulfill both these functions simultaneously. During the war with Iraq, the *Basij*'s numbers fluctuated between 100,000 and 500,000, depending on the regime's war needs, but its role and presence in military campaigns were never questioned. Today, the *Basij*'s numbers stand at around 100,000, but the *Basij* reserve force is estimated to be around 1 million—most of whom have received some military training or served at the war fronts in the 1980s.

The end of the war and the demobilization of hundreds of thousands of young men, many of whom were volunteer *Basij*, caused an immediate headache for the government. The question was how to appease these dedicated supporters and meet their material needs while also tackling the structural problems of the economy—which required reducing subsidies and other measures that populist regimes traditionally use to sustain key constituencies.

Two responses were adopted with vigor. One policy was to use the *Basij* for nonmilitary national reconstruction work, particularly relevant during the Rafsanjani administration's first five-year development plan, when much state investment concentrated on capital projects, the improvement of the country's infrastructure, and the rebuilding of the war-damaged regions. Engaging the *Basij* with reconstruction priorities provided the men with an income and a role serving the revolution as well.

The second policy initiated direct *Basij* intervention in society. The youth who had gathered around the *Basij* in the 1980s were mobi-

lized in the 1990s as the principle force responsible for upholding Islamic norms in society. Some *Basij* were enrolled in the *Ansar-e Velayat*, a paramilitary group that helps the regime control major urban areas. This was a rather convenient solution to a serious problem facing the Islamic elite—how to reweave the *Basij* back into a peacetime institutional framework cost effectively while also including it in a core function of the Islamic state.

With each passing year, the *Basij* becomes less of a military factor, let alone an active player. The *Basij* is now rarely seen as the third military pillar, as it was during the Iran-Iraq war. The *Artesh* in particular has little time for the *Basij*. Even the IRGC, which once relied heavily on the *Basij*, no longer views it as important, largely because it does not meet the IRGC's level of professionalism. However, the IRGC still encourages the *Basij* to participate in maneuvers and other limited forms of cooperation.

Yet the *Basij* still seeks some external security role. The *Basij* leaders derive a great deal of prestige and legitimacy from their role as a military factor and clearly do not want to lose this status. Most *Basij* leaders do not want to lose their revolutionary edge and are committed to following the IRGC's instructions on training and other operational procedures. However, for *Basij* leaders, official positions are much more important than military training. The relationship between the IRGC and the *Basij* leadership is a close one, driven as it is by family ties, political association, and war experience.

OTHER PARAMILITARY GROUPS AND SECURITY PLAYERS

Numerous other actors also play a role in formulating and implementing Iran's security policy. These include paramilitary groups, parastatal organizations, and cultural organizations. Also important are several religious leaders, including many not affiliated with the regime, who have a significant following outside of Iran. A complete listing of these groups is beyond the scope of this study. However, several of the more important ones are noted below.

The *Ansar-e Hezbollah* is a paramilitary force of little or no military value but useful for defending the revolutionary order against an array of its critics. In essence, the *Ansar* is a response to the rapid social liberalization that has been going on in the 1990s. The *Ansar*

members are the thugs upon whom the right relies to intimidate society.

Factionalism, a constant feature of the republican regime, has caused Iran's top leaders to recruit their own armed guards, who have in the past been deployed against rivals. The most public instances of such deployments were those between Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Shariatmadari in the early 1980s and between Khomeini and Ayatollah Montazeri in the late 1980s.

The parastatal organizations, the *bonyads*, also play a role in foreign policy.¹⁵ Many *bonyad* leaders have ties to the security institutions. The archetypal example is the former head of the *Bonyad-e Mostazafan*, Mohsen Rafiqdoust, who went from being Khomeini's driver to assuming a leading IRGC position before heading the *Bonyad-e Mostazafan*. Huge sums are transferred from the *bonyads*, particularly the *Bonyad-e Mostazafan*, to the Supreme Leader. This gives him considerable autonomy and the ability to exercise policy without support from other Iranian institutions. The *bonyads* at times act without the formal support of all of Iran's policy makers. The *Bonyad-e 15th Khordad* established, and raised, the bounty on Salman Rushdie, despite efforts by Khatami to annul the edict calling for his death, effectively hindering Iran's rapprochement with Europe. Many Iranians believe that the *bonyads* provide support to the Lebanese Hezbollah, but hard evidence is lacking. In 1993, however, Hezbollah leaders claimed that the *Jihad al-Binaa* would provide \$8.7 million to repair houses damaged by Israeli strikes. The *Bonyad-e Shahid* also provides stipends to families of martyrs.¹⁶

Various cultural and information agencies play an important role in Iran's foreign policy. Cultural bureaus acting out of embassies often represent the Supreme Leader, placing their activities outside the formal control of Iran's Foreign Ministry. These institutions provide financial support to friendly Muslim movements and proselytize.¹⁷ The Islamic Propagation Organization (IPO) also devotes some re-

¹⁵The *Jihad-e Sazandeghi* (Reconstruction Crusade) is also technically part of the security forces, as it is allowed, in emergencies, to apply force to ensure order in rural areas. Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* p. 65.

¹⁶Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997), p. 124.

¹⁷Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* p. 50.

sources to proselytizing and organizing supporters abroad, particularly in Lebanon. The IPO, active in Europe, Pakistan, and India, appears to have increased the level of its activities in recent years.

COMPARING THE SECURITY INSTITUTIONS

In general, the various institutions emphasize different issues, to their mutual satisfaction, though in practice they overlap considerably in their duties. The intelligence services and the IRGC are far more focused on the defense of the revolution from its internal enemies than is the *Artesh*. Often, in their view, this requires attacks on dissidents abroad and coercive actions against Iranian citizens, both of which have implications for Iranian foreign policy. The IRGC also focuses on less traditional defense duties, particularly those that involve unusual missions or capabilities. These duties range from stopping smuggling and controlling Iran's WMD (weapons of mass destruction) and missile forces to preparing for closing the Straits of Hormuz. In contrast, the *Artesh* focuses its efforts on more traditional threats, such as an Iraqi attack.

These different missions affect the institutional ethos of the various security institutions. The *Artesh* is content with a strategy of damage limitation and risk minimization. The IRGC and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), in contrast, are more proactive and interested in actively defending the republic's interests and developing their own niches.¹⁸

The institutions' respective stars rise and fall according to their match with Iran's overall ambitions. When exporting the revolution or countering internal enemies such as the MKO is deemed vital, the MOIS's and IRGC's profiles rise. When economics, ethnicity, and geopolitics dominate, the *Artesh*'s views become more important.

¹⁸There is little sign that the IRGC's internal security duties are hindering its conduct of broader military operations. Of course, different bits of the IRGC are encouraged to train for different types of operations. The potential danger is that they may not get the appropriate training, etc., with regard to their particular operational activities and parameters.

THE SECURITY INSTITUTIONS AND IRAN'S MILITARY POSTURE

In general, Iran's limited economic resources and restrictions on its purchases from abroad have prevented military officials from dramatically improving Iran's forces. As Table 4.1 makes clear, Iran has not made a major drive to modernize its forces in the last decade, and most of its force structure is aging. Iran's military budget has stayed relatively limited. Though Iran has made major purchases, including T-72 tanks, MiG-29 fighters, and Kilo submarines, it has not purchased these in large enough numbers to significantly alter the regional military balance.

Table 4.1
Selected Iranian Military Order-of-Battle Information

	1989/1990	1992	1997
Defense expenditures (\$ billion)	5.77	2.3	4.7
Total armed forces	604,500	513,000	545,600
Main battle tanks (estimates)	Perhaps 500 total: largely T-54/-55; T-62; some T-72; Chieftain Mk3/5; M-47/-48; M-60A1	Perhaps 1,245 total: including around 150 T-72; 190 T-54/-55; 260 Ch T-59; 150 T-62; 135 M-60A1; 135 M-47/-48	Some 1,345 total: including 400 T-54/-55 and T-59; 75 T-62; 480 T-72; 140 Chieftain Mk3/5; 150 M-47/-48; 100 M-60A1
Key naval assets	3 destroyers; 5 frigates; 10 missile craft; 7 amphibious	2 Kilo submarines; 2 destroyers; 3 frigates; 10 missile craft; 8 amphibious	3 Kilo submarines; 3 frigates; 9 amphibious; 20 missile craft
Key air assets	4 squadrons F-4D/E; 4 squadrons F-5E/F; 1 squadron with 15 F-14	4 squadrons F-4D/E; 4 squadrons F-5E/F; 4 squadrons F-14; 1 squadron F-7; 1 squadron Su-24; 2 squadrons MiG-29	4 squadrons F-4D/E; 4 squadrons F-5E/F; 1 squadron Su-24; 2 squadrons MiG-29

Source: *The Military Balance* (London, UK: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1989, 1994, and 1999).

Budget limits aside, Iran's military, however, has influence over several aspects of its own development. These include the drive to build a domestic arms industry, an overall quest for increased military professionalism, an emphasis on missile programs, and a desire to gain WMD. Accomplishing all these goals, however, requires political backing.

The Drive for Military Autonomy

Iran has made much of the principle of self-sufficiency when arming its conventional forces. In practical terms, this has meant producing arms and spare parts domestically, an enterprise that is both expensive and likely to lead to a larger gap in military technology between Iran and countries armed by the West. Iran's emphasis on self-reliance reflects the lessons it learned from the war with Iraq, when its former Western suppliers refused to sell it arms. As the industry has developed, it has gained its own voice, and it now represents an important domestic interest.

Both the *Artesh* and the IRGC support the domestic arms industry by ordering main battle tanks, howitzers, munitions, and other arms from the state-owned firms affiliated with the logistics wing of the Ministry of Defense. The IRGC is particularly focused on supporting the domestic arms industry and otherwise preserving autonomy. The IRGC usually takes the initiative, but it frequently draws on the *Artesh* to provide expertise.

A Commitment to Military Professionalism

Iran's commitment to enhanced military professionalism and better military coordination appears secure. Instability along Iran's borders and the formal U.S. military and political presence in the Persian Gulf have increased the premium on Iran's maintaining a modern, well-equipped, and efficient army. Iranian leaders have learned through bitter experience that a ramshackle amateur army of volunteers—an army of “professional martyrs,” as some Iranians

have called it—is no match against today's armies.¹⁹ The need, therefore, for a well-equipped and drilled army that can respond in a coordinated fashion to several challenges simultaneously is accepted by almost all of Iran's leaders.

Iran's security policies in the 1990s reflected these concerns. Iran's rearmament drive of the 1990s required investment in all the services and the import of new military hardware. More important still, to realize its objectives, the regime had to upgrade its relations with the regular armed forces, giving them due recognition and a greater public presence. Military parades have again become commonplace, and senior members of Iran's clerical elite seem to make a habit of attending military rallies and of being seen with military officers. Both the IRGC and the *Artesh* have increased their emphasis on professionalism. They are increasing the technical training offered to soldiers and basing promotion criteria more on education and expertise.

¹⁹Shahram Chubin, *Iran's National Security Policy: Capabilities, Intentions and Impact* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1994).