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The Rise of the Pasdaran

Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's
Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps

Frederic Wehrey, Jerrold D. Green, Brian Nichiporuk,
Alireza Nader, Lydia Hansell, Rasool Nafisi, S. R. Bohandy

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



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The research described in this report was prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). The research was conducted in the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the OSD, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Department of the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community under Contract W74V8H-06-C-0002.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this publication.

ISBN 978-0-8330-4620-8

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Published 2009 by the RAND Corporation

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Summary

Founded by a decree from Ayatollah Khomeini shortly after the victory of the 1978–1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has evolved well beyond its original foundations as an ideological guard for the nascent revolutionary regime. Today, the IRGC functions as an expansive socio-political-economic conglomerate whose influence extends into virtually every corner of Iranian political life and society. Bound together by the shared experience of war and the socialization of military service, the Pasdaran have articulated a populist, authoritarian, and assertive vision for the Islamic Republic of Iran that they maintain is a more faithful reflection of the revolution’s early ideals.

The IRGC’s presence is particularly powerful in Iran’s highly factionalized political system, in which the president, much of the cabinet, many members of parliament, and a range of other provincial and local administrators hail from the ranks of the IRGC. Outside the political realm, the IRGC oversees a robust apparatus of media resources, training activities, and education programs designed to bolster loyalty to the regime, prepare the citizenry for homeland defense, and burnish its own institutional credibility vis-à-vis other factional actors. It is in the economic sphere, however, that the IRGC has seen the greatest growth and diversification—strategic industries and commercial services ranging from dam and pipeline construction to automobile manufacturing and laser eye surgery have fallen under its sway, along with a number of illicit smuggling and black-market enterprises.

Taken in sum, these attributes argue for a reexamination of the IRGC, less as a traditional military entity wielding a navy, ground forces, air force, and a clandestine paramilitary wing (the Qods Force) and more as a domestic actor, albeit one that is not monolithic and is itself beset by internal differences and factionalism. Certainly, elements of Iran's military forces present worrisome threats to U.S. strategy, most notably in the areas of asymmetric naval tactics, intermediate-range ballistic missiles, and support for terrorism. But to policymakers and analysts concerned with the broader trajectory of the Islamic Republic of Iran—the internal roots of its external behavior and the sources of its durability and weakness—the IRGC may be more profitably viewed as a deeply entrenched domestic institution. Arguably, this internal role overshadows its significance as a purely military force.

With this in mind, this monograph assesses the extent of the IRGC's penetration into Iran's society, economy, and politics. We begin by situating the IRGC within the context of Iran's factional landscape and security bureaucracy, highlighting the origins and early development of its domestic roles. Next, we cover the IRGC's role in popular paramilitary training, higher education, the indoctrination of youth, and its influence over Iran's domestic media. This extensive apparatus serves both the regime's interests—mobilizing the population into a “10 million-man army” for the defense of the homeland and countering reform activism, particularly on university campuses—and the more parochial goal of blunting any criticism of Pasdaran nepotism and economic corruption. We then discuss the IRGC's economic role. We survey its broad-ranging business interests in numerous Iranian market sectors, as well as its role in public works, highlighting how these activities lend the institution a multidimensional quality. Finally, we conclude with an assessment of the IRGC as a political actor, paying special attention to emerging factionalism within its ranks and highlighting instances in which these fissures have surfaced in the past.

From these lines of inquiry, the following conclusions emerge and have implications for future U.S. analysis and policy toward the IRGC and the Islamic Republic of Iran writ large.

The IRGC is but one actor in Iran's security and factional landscape whose influence is exerted informally. Within Iran's security hierarchy, the IRGC frequently vies with other security organs, such as the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), Ministry of the Interior, and Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), for visibility, power, and influence. This rivalry may shed light on IRGC actions that appear at first glance to be detrimental to the larger interests of the state. Moreover, much of the IRGC's ascendancy has been facilitated by the complex structure of the Iranian political system, which results in a default drift toward informality in decisionmaking. At the same time, the IRGC's informal influence is subject to the same factional fissures that define the broader political spectrum—among conservative traditionalists, conservative pragmatists, radicals, and reformists. Similarly, although other security organs and institutions of power may be staffed by former Pasdaran, it does not follow that these individuals act in lockstep with the corporate interests of the IRGC—office-holding tends to generate its own set of priorities that can offset even the powerful social bonds and ideology imparted by military service.

The IRGC has attempted to cultivate legitimacy today by burnishing its role in the Iran-Iraq War and the postwar reconstruction; this early history has been a matter of factional contention and public ambivalence. Understanding the IRGC's early history and, particularly, its expansion and deviation from the role envisioned for it by the Islamic Republic's founders is critical to discerning its future trajectory. Much of the institution's rise to prominence over competing militias and paramilitaries in the postrevolutionary period was due to its effectiveness in suppressing internal dissent. Similarly, many in the IRGC's leadership saw the Iran-Iraq War as a mechanism to consolidate their internal position and marginalize the regular forces politically—goals that may have taken precedence over matters of military strategy.

Today, the IRGC is attempting to trumpet its role in the “sacred defense” of the Islamic Republic of Iran during the “imposed war.” Its current mobilization of the populace against both internal and external enemies is, in some sense, a reenactment of this period. Similarly, IRGC leaders frequently point to their service in Iran's postwar construc-

tion to justify the IRGC's current expansion into new business sectors. These themes are being contested by competing factions and the public alike. Anecdotal reports suggest that many in the Iranian public offer a radically different interpretation of the IRGC's wartime performance, believing that the IRGC's excessive zealotry and *nadanan kari* (inexperience) prevented the complete battlefield defeat of Iraqi forces.

Although well developed and extensive, the IRGC's efforts at popular mobilization and indoctrination have met with mixed results. There appears to be an urban-rural split in public views toward the IRGC. Part of its foundational mandate, the IRGC's role in indoctrination and ideological outreach to the Iranian public has taken on a new urgency, given the regime's heightened threat perception—particularly from a U.S.-sponsored “velvet revolution,” i.e., the erosion of revolutionary ideals via civil-society organizations and ethnic dissent. To combat this, the IRGC relies extensively on its poorly trained popular auxiliary, the Basij Resistance Force, whose command structure was formally merged with the IRGC's in 2007. The Basij's role in the Iran-Iraq War—characterized by sheer numbers, youth, and ideological fervor—set the template for the regime's homeland defense strategy today, which relies on partisan warfare against an invading force by a populace that has been mobilized and indoctrinated by the IRGC. The key unknown is the populace's receptivity to this training and even the commitment of the Basij itself, as monthly training is often a prerequisite for societal benefits, such as loans and scholarships.

In tandem with this paramilitary training, the IRGC exerts its ideological influence through its own media outlets, including Web sites and periodicals that highlight its positive contributions to Iranian society, which include disaster relief, drug interdiction, and rural infrastructure development. Similarly, the IRGC has a presence in Iranian higher education—both through its own affiliate universities and through campus organizations, such as the Lecturers' Basij Organization (LBO) and the Student Basij Organization (SBO). The latter is particularly focused on mitigating student reform activism, although it has been only partly successful in this effort.

Finally, public perceptions of the IRGC appear split between urban areas, where it is seen as the regime's shock-troop force for quell-

ing dissent and enforcing strict social mores, and rural areas, where its construction projects and promises of upward mobility through training have induced a more favorable view among certain marginalized population segments.

By expanding its business interests and control of the “shadow economy,” the IRGC runs the risk of provoking a backlash or diluting its own cohesion. From laser eye surgery and construction to automobile manufacturing and real estate, the IRGC has extended its influence into virtually every sector of the Iranian market. More than any other aspect of its domestic involvement, the IRGC’s business activities embody the institution’s multidimensional nature. The commercialization of the IRGC has the potential to broaden its circle of constituents by co-opting financial elites into its constellation of subsidiary companies and subcontractors. At the same time, the monopolization of key sectors has displaced competitors. The key IRGC affiliate in both dynamics is the engineering firm Khatam al-Anbia, which has been awarded more than 750 contracts in various construction, infrastructure, oil, and gas projects. Outside of its declared enterprises, the IRGC is reported to control an underground shadow economy of black-market goods, smuggled into Iran via illegal jetties and other entry points that it alone controls. Reports of dissent against the IRGC’s institutional aggrandizement and the personal enrichment of its officers remain fragmentary. According to one Western diplomat resident in Iran from 2003 to 2006,

There is no bazaari backlash at this point. The general population doesn’t know about the IRGC’s illegal jetties, the Caspian Sea villas, and their Swiss bank accounts.¹

What is indisputable is that the IRGC’s growing economic might has increased its sense of political privilege and entitlement. Nowhere is this more apparent than in its abrupt closure of the newly opened Imam Khomeini Airport in May 2004 and its ejection of a Turkish firm that had been contracted to administer the airport’s opera-

¹ Authors’ discussion with a Western diplomat based in Tehran from 2003 to 2006, Los Angeles, California, July 18, 2007.

tions, reportedly because the IRGC's own firm had lost the contract. Similarly, the IRGC's elite appeared to ignore an injunction from the Supreme Leader to privatize their holdings—a significant development that could portend the IRGC moving closer to becoming an effective counterauthority to the Supreme Leader. At the same time, its expansion into the business sector runs the risk of spurring internal fractionalization and a dilution of its profession identity.

As a political actor, the IRGC is susceptible to factional debates—between dogmatic and more pragmatic currents and over the opportunity costs inflicted by Iran's isolation. The issue of the politicization of the IRGC has been hotly contested, with opposing voices marshaling the authority of Ayatollah Khomeini, who, in many respects, appeared to emulate the views of the former shah in his wariness of the army's interference in politics. Generally marginalized during the Rafsanjani era, the IRGC emerged as political force during the Khatami era when they forged a *de facto* alliance with conservatives seeking to displace the reformists. Today, the IRGC's political muscle manifests itself in diverse ways—from Basij intimidation of voters to the presence of an ex-IRGC officer as the Deputy Minister of the Interior, responsible for ballot validation and counting in the March 2008 Majles (parliamentary) elections. Nonetheless, as mentioned previously, the IRGC itself is beset with political factionalism, which surfaced even in the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose real constituents were lower-ranking Basij rather than the IRGC writ large. Earlier incidents revealed fissures along different lines; for example, the 1994 Qazvin riots, in which locally garrisoned IRGC commanders refused to fire on protestors, revealed that the parochial identities of ethnicity and locale still pervade the IRGC's institutional culture. The Khatami era highlighted the lack of ideological uniformity between the IRGC senior leadership, which supported the conservatives, and the rank-and-file, who were more sympathetic to the reformists.

Most recently, splits have emerged over the economic opportunity costs and hardships incurred by Ahmadinejad's administration, with retired IRGC Brigadier General Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf emerging as a prominent voice by appearing to articulate a more pragmatic path that tries to reconcile ideological steadfastness with economic progress.

Qalibaf's 2005 presidential slogan was "Iranians have a right to the good life," and he has openly made the startling assertion that Iran needs an "Islamist Mohammad Reza Khan." Other IRGC figures who might be termed "pragmatic conservatives" include former Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) chief Ali Larijani and ex-IRGC commander Mohsen Rezai, whose Web site, Tabnak, showcased strong critiques of Ahmadinejad.

Despite this risk of fractionalization, there are several potential scenarios for the IRGC's elite to consolidate their control over a post-Khamenei Iran. The death of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei will present an opportunity for the Pasdaran elite to buttress their institutional primacy and erode the position of rivals. One path to accomplish this would be to influence the appointment of a pliant, figurehead Supreme Leader who would grant a broad berth to the IRGC without any evident breaching of the constitution. Another scenario for the IRGC's consolidation includes the installation of a non-clerical military leader who, while not completely abandoning the precepts of Islamism, would place a greater emphasis on technocratic competence and economic progress. A variant of this trajectory and one that would harness the populace's growing weariness with the regime's top-down religiosity and clerical mismanagement is an overt assumption of power by the IRGC—what might be termed the "religious Turkish model." The focus here would be on the IRGC's promises to clean up politics, fight corruption, and improve Iran's economy.

The IRGC's domestic ascendancy is not unique, nor is its future trajectory immutable; in both respects, the IRGC can be profitably compared with the militaries of Pakistan and China. As its history has shown, the IRGC is subject to the same worldly pitfalls and evolutionary mutations that affect other bureaucracies—and this will only intensify as the IRGC delves deeper into profit-making financial activities. Indeed, from this observation, there is benefit in comparing the IRGC's past and future with the evolution of the Pakistani military and Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The parallels to Pakistan are particularly striking. The Pakistani military runs the country's largest construction consortium, which undertakes rural infrastructure projects and is also heavily involved in

such diverse subsidiary enterprises as gas stations, commercial plazas, and poultry farms. There are also a number of military-owned “charitable foundations” that oversee 100 companies involved in banking, insurance, education, and information technology. This expansion has reached such proportions that one scholar has coined the term “Milbus” (military-business) to describe it. One important conclusion emerging from the Pakistani case that has implications for Iran is that the largest supporters of the Pakistani military’s economic preeminence are those who might intuitively be assumed to oppose it in favor of a more liberal, free-market approach—the middle classes.

The case of the PLA, however, provides the clearest model for exploring the tensions between economic aggrandizement and military professionalism that are certain to accompany the IRGC’s future evolution. Although the PLA, since its origins in the 1920s, had always enjoyed a degree of economic self-sufficiency, by the late 1980s its profit-making enterprises had grown considerably: PLA-owned companies dominated the farming, transportation, information technology, and entertainment sectors. Responding to this, in 1998 the government of Jiang Zemin made the remarkable decision to force the divestiture of the PLA from all of its business activities. The reasons for this move stemmed principally from the civilian leadership’s perception that the corruption and black-marketeering that had accompanied the PLA’s economic rise had reached intolerable levels, to the point that they were negatively affecting popular perceptions of the Chinese Communist Party. Similarly, the civilian leadership perceived that the military’s financial pursuits were proving deleterious to its professionalism, morale, meritocracy, and ability to modernize. Finally, the PLA’s businesses had become increasingly decentralized and provincially based, raising fears in the central government of a return to the regional autonomy that defined the prerevolutionary warlord era.

All of this suggests that, in the case of Iran, the expansion and primacy of the IRGC as a political-economic actor will not go unchallenged and that there are inherent limits to whatever symbiosis occurs between civilian elites and military-run business ventures, particularly when these financial activities are perceived to be detrimental to the state’s larger national security interests.