

The Revolutionary Guards' Role in Iranian Politics

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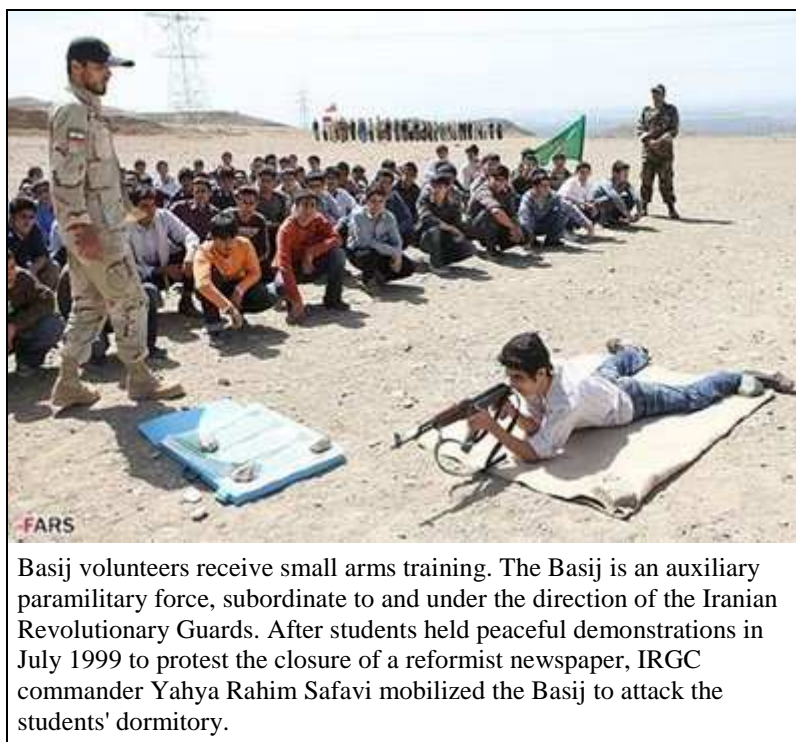
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Almost three decades after the Islamic Republic's founding, former Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commanders are infiltrating the political, economic, and cultural life of Iran. Half the members of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's cabinet are former IRGC officers,^[1] and he has appointed several IRGC officers to provincial governorships. The IRGC's rise has been deliberate. Facing both external opposition to Tehran's pursuit of an indigenous nuclear enrichment capability and internal pressures for political and economic reforms, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei considers the IRGC officer corps more apt at crisis management than the bureaucratic teams of either former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-97) or Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). IRGC chief General Mohammad Ali Ja'fari's announcement of internal restructuring to prepare the IRGC to counter "internal threats to the Islamic Republic"^[2] reflects the organization's expanding role. The Council of Guardians, which screens candidates before elections, privileged IRGC veterans, who won the bulk of seats in the March 2008 parliamentary elections. Whereas there has always been tension within the Islamic Republic's elite concerning whether the Revolutionary Guards' political or military role should be dominant, recent shifts suggest the debate is concluding as the IRGC cements a commanding influence over political decision-making.

Legal Framework

Within the Islamic Republic, the debate over the IRGC's political role is essentially a legal question. On December 4, 1979, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini formally created the IRGC by decree although it had existed in some form for several months before.^[3] The statute of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps provided the earliest legal framework for



Basij volunteers receive small arms training. The Basij is an auxiliary paramilitary force, subordinate to and under the direction of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. After students held peaceful demonstrations in July 1999 to protest the closure of a reformist newspaper, IRGC commander Yahya Rahim Safavi mobilized the Basij to attack the students' dormitory.

the organization's operations.

According to *Payam-e Enghelab*, the IRGC's official organ, the statute was prepared by "some brothers from the Guards" and ratified by the Council of the Revolution,^[4] the *de facto* highest governing body, in the months after Khomeini returned to Iran.^[5]

The Islamic Republic had ratified its first constitution the day before, on December 3, 1979. Article 150 declared,

The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps ... is to be maintained so that it may continue in its role of guarding the revolution and its achievements. The scope of the duties of this corps and its areas of responsibility, in relation to the duties and areas of responsibility of the other armed forces, are to be determined by law with emphasis on brotherly cooperation and harmony among them.^[6]

A strict reading of Article 150 shows that the Guards' intervention in politics is not constitutionally mandated, yet at the same time such behavior is not legally prohibited. Nowhere does the constitution define the "enemies" against which the IRGC is obliged to guard the revolution. It is even unclear whether the IRGC's primary role will be defense against external threats, in which case it should act as an army, or internal threats, in which it might act as a police force.

Again, the Guards provided their own guidance on these issues. On March 19, 1980, "Obligations of the Guards" appeared in *Payam-e Enghelab*.^[7] In it, the IRGC stated that

Cooperation with the government in military and security matters, [including] pursuit and arrest of armed counterrevolutionary movements. ... Disarming unauthorized persons. ... Investigation and intelligence gathering. ... preserv[ation] of the public order at demonstrations and gatherings in order to prevent disruption of law and order ... [and] support for freedom and justice-seeking movements of oppressed people under the supervision of the Council of the Revolution, and with authorization from the government.

The July 25, 1981 issue of *Payam-e Enghelab* defined "the two main tasks of the Guards" as "guarding the principle of government by the supreme jurist and the principle of jihad." Therefore, the article concluded, "the Guards cannot be robbed of a political dimension or ideological beliefs."^[8]

The statute of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, passed by parliament on September 6, 1982, enshrined these principles in law^[9] but differentiated between individual and institutional activities. The statute prohibited individual guardsmen from political activity and made "non-membership in political parties, groupings, and institutions ... [a] condition of being a member of the Revolutionary Guards"^[10] but enabled ample avenues for the Guards to intervene as a whole. Indeed, the statute's first chapter charged the Guards, under the supreme leader's direction, to "realize the divine ideology and expand the rule of God through the legislation of the Islamic Republic of Iran," and in the second chapter enabled the IRGC to "reinforce the defense body of the Islamic Republic through cooperation with other armed forces and military training and organization of popular forces."^[11]

From its very start, therefore, Islamic Republic law made the Revolutionary Guards not only a military organization deterring foreign threats but also a political-military organization tasked with fighting domestic opposition. Article 2 of the statute's second chapter defined an IRGC role as the "legal fight against elements or movements who aim at sabotaging or dismantlement of the Islamic Republic or act against the Islamic Revolution of Iran," and Article 3 stressed the IRGC's mission also as a "legal fight against elements waging an armed struggle to nullify the authority of the laws of the Islamic Republic."[\[12\]](#) Today, many proponents of the Guards' expansionist role cite this legal framework to justify IRGC interventions.[\[13\]](#)

A History of Politicization

The Islamic Republic leadership has continuously used the Guards to suppress internal dissent. Khomeini actively employed the Revolutionary Guards to coerce and, when necessary, crush former political allies as he consolidated power within the revolution's broad coalition. The IRGC's *Payam-e Enghelab* provides an interesting window into the shifting fortunes of Khomeini's former allies and how, with Khomeini's blessings, the Guards destroyed them one after another.

The first group *Payam-e Enghelab* attacked was the Tudeh, Iran's communist party. In a March 1980 column, writer Mohammad Eslami Moballeghi accuses the Tudeh of being a Marxist-Stalinist entity and warns that officials should ignore the Tudeh's claim that it has become a "follower of the Imam [Khomeini]."[\[14\]](#) The paper continued to vilify the Tudeh, often calling its members infidels.[\[15\]](#) While the regime tolerated Tudeh for a little while longer, the writing was on the wall. By February 1983, its top leaders had all been incarcerated.[\[16\]](#)

Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, who presided over the first post-revolutionary transitional government, opposed the IRGC's existence outside the control of the formal power centers[\[17\]](#) and warned the Iranian public of the "imminent danger" of the Guards' intervention in politics. He begged Khomeini to enforce the principle of the military's nonintervention in political affairs, to no avail.[\[18\]](#) Khomeini desired a complete purge of the system.

In a 1981 retrospective, *Payam-e Enghelab* praised the future Revolutionary Guardsmen's work in destabilizing the Bazargan government, especially their seizure of the U.S. embassy, a move that forced Bazargan's resignation. The paper declared that the hostage affair

showed the true nature of gangs and groups and deviant lines, whose positions had alienated them from the nation and [forced them to] oppose the line of the Imam [Khomeini]. ... Was it not for this affair, assessment of these intellectual and political movements would have taken years ... The affair "cleansed the revolution from impure elements."[\[19\]](#)

In a column, a certain Brother Eslami explained the reasons for the purge when he wrote: "Socialism, nationalism, modernism, and liberalism are all the entrance avenues of imperialism and materialism."[\[20\]](#)

Indeed, while the Iranian government today demands U.S. apologies for the CIA's role in ousting Prime Minister Mohammad Musaddiq, in the first years of the revolution, the regime considered Musaddiq a nationalist who had opposed clerical conservatives and, therefore, an enemy. In February 1981, *Payam-e Enghelab* called Musaddiq and Iranian nationalists "agents of the SAVAK, Israel, and the United States" and quoted Khomeini: "Let them get lost! We have suffered in their hands. We want Islam, and nothing but Islam."[\[21\]](#) By April 1981, *Payam-e Enghelab* openly accused National Front members of treason against the Islamic Republic.[\[22\]](#)

The Guards next set its sights on the Mojahedin-e Khalq organization, a onetime ally of Khomeini, and on Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr, the first president of the Islamic Republic. Khomeini had also appointed Bani-Sadr to be commander in chief of the armed forces.[\[23\]](#) As Bani-Sadr used his power of appointment to weaken and constrain the Guards,[\[24\]](#) the IRGC targeted both Bani-Sadr and the Mojahedin-e Khalq. *Payam-e Enghelab* regularly depicted them as enemies of the *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurisprudent) principle upon which the theocracy and Khomeini's rule both rested.[\[25\]](#) Victorious after the Iranian parliament declared Bani-Sadr "politically incompetent" on June 21, 1981, then-speaker of the parliament Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani explained to the readers of *Payam-e Enghelab* that Bani-Sadr had worked consistently against the regime.[\[26\]](#) Such character assassination intensified in the next month's issue.[\[27\]](#)

The Islamic Revolution's myriad factions purged, the radical clergy successfully consolidated power.

The Khamenei and Rafsanjani Presidencies

With Bani-Sadr's dismissal, Ali Khamenei assumed the presidency (1981-89). Both he and his successor, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-97) may have benefited from the Guards' purge of their enemies and competitors, but both feared the IRGC's inherent volatility. They sought to bureaucratize political decision-making and professionalize and depoliticize the Guards, along with the rest of the bureaucracy of the Islamic Republic.

Here, the Mehdi Hashemi affair is particularly illustrative. Seyyed Mehdi Hashemi was director of the Bureau of Assistance to the Islamic Liberation Movements in the World, an organization within the greater Revolutionary Guards framework charged with exporting the revolution. As the brother of the son-in-law of Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, Khomeini's designated successor, he was also well-connected politically.

In the mid-1980s, the Iranian leadership felt it important to project an impression of pragmatism in its foreign relations. The government tried to rein in extra-governmental bodies such as Hashemi's and reach out to former adversaries, including the United States. Hashemi and his followers grew frustrated with what they saw as the Iranian leadership's betrayal of its hard-line principles. To retaliate, they leaked word of the secret contacts between the Reagan administration and Rafsanjani, an episode that developed into the Iran-Contra affair.[\[28\]](#) Arrested by Iranian security in 1986 after the leak, Hashemi and forty followers each "confessed" to a long list of crimes. On September 28, 1987, Hashemi was executed. While Mehdi Hashemi's

execution was an integral part of a plot to bring down Ayatollah Montazeri by Khomeini's son, Ahmad, and then-parliamentary speaker, Rafsanjani,^[29] the case also demonstrates the reassertion of civilian supremacy against armed extra-governmental agencies.^[30]

After Khomeini's death in 1989, the Iranian political elite feared resurgent IRGC political intervention, and so they presented both the public and the Guards with Khomeini's "Political and Divine Testament," which read:

My emphatic counsel to the armed forces is to observe [and] abide by the military rule of noninvolvement in politics. Do not join any political party or faction. No military man, security policeman, no Revolutionary Guard, or Basij may enter into politics. Stay away from politics, and you'll be able to preserve and maintain your military prowess and be immune to internal division and dispute. Military commanders must forbid entrance into political ties by the men under their command.

And, as the revolution belongs to all the nation, its preservation is also the duty of all. Therefore, the government, the nation, the Defense Council, and the Islamic Consultative Assembly are all charged with the religious and national responsibility to oppose, from the very beginning, any interference in politics or any action against the interests of Islam and the country by the armed forces, regardless of category, class, branch, and rank. Such involvement will surely corrupt and pervert them. It is incumbent on the leader and the Leadership Council to prevent such involvement of the armed forces by decisive action so that no harm may beset the country.^[31]

While Khomeini was clear on the IRGC's noninvolvement in politics, some guardsmen believed that the noninterference between the political and military spheres should be mutual. In 1991, as the Pentagon deployed tens of thousands of troops to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in preparation for Kuwait's liberation, mutinous units of the Revolutionary Guards, allegedly with the blessing of Ahmad Khomeini, attempted to launch missile attacks against U.S.-led coalition forces in Saudi Arabia to trigger an armed conflict between Iran and the United States. Regular Iranian army forces and Guards members under the command of IRGC chief Mohsen Rezai, then a Rafsanjani loyalist, rushed to the missile battery at Khorramshahr to prevent the missiles' firing.^[32] After this incident, Ahmad Khomeini lived an isolated life until he died under mysterious circumstances in March 1995.

During his presidency, Rafsanjani continued his policy of depoliticizing the armed forces. But in so doing, he may have created new problems. To dissuade the IRGC from political involvement, he effectively bribed them, funding a central role for the IRGC in postwar reconstruction schemes.^[33] This placated many IRGC commanders, but not all of them. A year before Khatami's victory, for example, Rezai warned an assembly of anti-riot force commanders in Tehran that "the cancerous tumor of liberalism is spreading in some corners of our country."^[34] Throughout May 1996, Guards commanders made public statements against "liberals," a reference to Rafsanjani and his technocratic elite. The IRGC and its allies—the paramilitary Basij and vigilante group Ansar-e Hezbollah^[35]—used force to back the commander's words, attacking cinemas and universities. Rezai defended the Basij actions: "The duty of the Basij Force is not only security and protection, but ... challenging the counterrevolutionary forces."^[36] As the civil-military tension

continued, however, the civilians won another battle. On May 23, 1997, Khatami won a landslide election. On September 9, 1997, a month after Khatami's inauguration, Khamenei replaced Rezai. The longtime commander of the IRGC had paid for his opposition to "liberals" such as Rafsanjani and Khatami.

A Khatami Backlash

Khatami's landslide victory demonstrated popular support for political and social reform. Many Revolutionary Guardsmen, however, feared that Khatami could be another Mikhail Gorbachev: He might be sincere in his loyalty to regime ideology but might inadvertently unleash forces that would spin out of control and destroy the system.

Yahya Rahim Safavi, who owed his appointment as IRGC chief to his moderate and noninterventionist views, became a radical opponent of the reform movement. Speaking to senior IRGC navy commanders on April 27, 1998, he asked, "Can we withstand American threats and domineering attitude with a policy of détente? Can we foil dangers coming from [America] through dialogue between civilizations?" He then trained his sights on Ataollah Mohajerani, the reformist minister of Islamic Guidance and Culture: "I argued with Mr. Mohajerani for one hour and told him that his path threatened our national security and asked him if he knew where he was going," Safavi said. "Newspapers are published these days that threaten our national security. I am after uprooting anti-revolutionaries everywhere. We must behead some and cut out the tongues of others." Then, turning on the universities, he complained, "Liberals have taken over our universities, and our youth are chanting 'Death to dictatorship' slogans."[\[37\]](#) Soon after, the IRGC's public relations department warned about "newspapers and poisoned and suspicious pens which have taken advantage of the free atmosphere in the country and the meekness and patience of revolutionary forces to inculcate sick ideas and debased thoughts in order to distract public opinion from the conspiracies and enmities of the sworn enemies of Islamic Iran."[\[38\]](#) Safavi continued attacking Khatami and mobilized the Basij to counter the student movement.[\[39\]](#)

Tensions erupted in July 1999 when paramilitary forces attacked a student dormitory after the students held a peaceful demonstration against the closure of a reformist daily. Within days, student protests spread nationwide and threatened to spin out of control. Khamenei and the IRGC commanders considered the protests as a threat to the regime's foundations. On July 12, twenty-four top IRGC commanders sent Khatami a letter demanding immediate action, declaring, "Our patience has run out. We cannot tolerate this situation any longer."[\[40\]](#) Khatami stood aside as they suppressed the uprising.

Safavi continued his interventions after the restoration of calm. A constant theme of Safavi's justification was the need to defend against U.S. plots although these were more imaginary than real. In May 2002, he accused "uninformed people, traitors, and internal political factions" of aiding the United States by

creating suspicion among the people; undermining the nation's resistance against America's domination; changing some articles if not the entire constitution; attacking fundamentals of revolution; separating the government from its religious and

revolutionary aspect; and creating doubts and hesitation in the principles of the order of the Islamic Republic and the government's ability to overcome the country's difficulties.[\[41\]](#)

Speaking in Mashhad, Safavi warned against "the suspicious acts and behavior of some people siding with the U.S. policies and interests in the country," and added that some of these might even be working in governmental organizations.[\[42\]](#) He subsequently sent a letter to Parliamentary Speaker Mehdi Karrubi, asking him to control the "extreme behavior of some Majlis deputies" and reminding him that taking legal action against elements and movements involved in sabotaging the Islamic Revolution remained a core IRGC mission.[\[43\]](#) Indeed, the IRGC soon began using special courts to harass and intimidate opponents. It lodged criminal complaints against dissenting clergy, such as Asadollah Bayat, summoned to a Special Clerical Court in Qom after he criticized Safavi's remarks in a press interview.[\[44\]](#)

The IRGC also used the courts to silence the media. On July 12, 2000, the IRGC filed a complaint against the weekly *Omid-e Zanjaan* at Branch 1408 of Tehran's Public Court for insulting the IRGC and its commander in an article criticizing their interference in politics.[\[45\]](#) Safavi also condemned the student publication *Mowj* for "insulting the Lord of the Age," the so-called Hidden Imam.[\[46\]](#) *Mowj* was only one of several dozen newspapers and magazines banned during the Khatami presidency.[\[47\]](#) Despite his criticism and intimidation of the Khatami administration, Safavi drew a fine line between legal interference and treason. Speaking at the Fada'iyan-e Emam combat camp, he said that the IRGC and Basij supported the Khatami government but hoped to strengthen it, though he added that "intellectuals and writers must respect the sanctity and honor of the forces which are defending the revolution, the system, the government, and the people."[\[48\]](#)

Rise of the Guards under Ahmadinejad

Iranian presidents can serve only two consecutive terms. On June 24, 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the mayor of Tehran, won a surprise victory in a runoff election to determine who would succeed Khatami. As president, Ahmadinejad distinguishes himself from his predecessors in several regards. Unlike most previous presidents of the Islamic Republic, with the exception of the short presidencies of Bani-Sadr and Mohammad Rajai, Ahmadinejad was not a cleric or even the son of a cleric. His humble provincial background and his family's migration to Tehran, his admission to the Polytechnical University in Narmak (the former University of Science and Technology), all personified the politicized, new middle class that emerged from the shah's unbalanced modernization schemes.[\[49\]](#) But Ahmadinejad also distinguished himself from his fellow revolutionaries in another regard. Despite participation in the revolution and some role with the Students Following the Line of the Imam, the group that seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran, it was the war with Iraq that shaped Ahmadinejad's political fortunes. Not satisfied with Rafsanjani's attempts to bribe them out of politics and fearful of political oblivion, the generation that fought trench warfare demanded their share of political influence. Their infiltration of centers of power in Iran was blessed not only by their soldier-president but also by the supreme leader and his representatives in the Revolutionary Guards.[\[50\]](#)

IRGC intervention in internal Iranian politics has peaked under Ahmadinejad. While the presence of former IRGC officers in the cabinet is not a new phenomenon, their numbers under Ahmadinejad—they occupy nine of the twenty-one ministry portfolios—are unprecedented. Nor do these commanders-turned-ministers only occupy secondary posts. The ministers of energy, welfare and social security, industries and mines, justice, culture and Islamic guidance, petroleum, defense, commerce, and cooperatives are all war veterans and former IRGC or Basij officers.

Ahmadinejad has continued this takeover with appointments of governors and deputy governors to Iran's thirty provinces. He systematically swept provincial governorships of Rafsanjani and Khatami supporters, replacing them with officials recruited from the ranks of the IRGC, the Basij, and the Islamic Republic prison administration. The governors of Kerman, West Azerbaijan, Khuzestan, Hamadan, and Ilam are all IRGC veterans while the governors of Zanjan, Lorestan, Isfahan, and South Khorasan are veterans of the prison administration. To head the administration of West Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, Hormozgan, and Khorasan Razavi, Ahmadinejad tapped associates from his time as Tehran mayor. These lists are not comprehensive but rather depend upon available biographical materials of appointees. It is possible that the IRGC and security presence is even higher.

The significance of such appointments is great. As journalist Kasra Naji's discussion of Ahmadinejad's tenure as governor of Ardebil demonstrates, governors exert considerable influence on presidential elections both by diverting public funds to candidates and by transferring income from trans-border smuggling operations to campaigns. Naji writes that Ahmadinejad was engaged in such activities to support parliamentary speaker Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, the hard-line front-runner in the 1997 campaign, which Khatami ultimately won.^[51] By appointing his old comrades as governors of the thirty provinces of Iran, Ahmadinejad expects the same support in the 2009 presidential campaign.

The 2008 parliamentary elections solidified the IRGC's political infiltration and demonstrated that the supreme leader supports the IRGC's growing role. According to the minister of interior, 7,168 candidates registered for the elections,^[52] of whom 31.5 percent were veterans of the Iran-Iraq war. By January 22, 2008, the Council of Guardians had approved the candidacy of about five thousand candidates, or 69 percent of the registrants. Of the 31 percent whose candidacy was not approved, two-thirds were simply disqualified, and the remaining one-third were members of the outgoing parliament who had approval of their credentials revoked.^[53] The Ministry of Interior provided a number of excuses to those who failed to qualify: 69 candidates had missed the deadline to file paperwork; 131 had a record of treason, fraud, or embezzlement; and 329 persons had a bad reputation in their neighborhood. In addition, 188 individuals were deemed to have deficient educational background or lacked five years of senior professional experience.^[54] The bulk of those disqualified, the ministry explained, had lost their right to candidacy for narcotics addiction or involvement in drug-smuggling, connections to the shah's pre-revolutionary government, lack of belief in or insufficient practice of Islam, being "against" the Islamic Republic, or having connections to foreign intelligence services.^[55] If such measures were not enough to bar undesired candidates from winning the parliamentary elections, Khamenei also appointed former IRGC commander Ali-Reza Afshar to oversee the elections. Another IRGC veteran,

Ezzatollah Zarghami, who now heads Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), refused to air remarks by reformist candidates.

While not all biographies of incoming parliamentarians are available, the list is dominated by the Comprehensive Principalist Alliance led by Rezai, by former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani, and Mohammed Bagher Qalibaf, former IRGC commander and current Tehran mayor. The winning candidates are a veritable who's who of IRGC veterans.

Not surprisingly, the IRGC commander in chief, Safavi, embraced the Ahmadinejad government. Speaking to trainees participating in the Velayat Programme of the Student Basij, Safavi defended the regime: "Some political groups are trying to weaken the new administration and pitch up the people's demands. ... These groups are trying to obstruct the work of the new administration."[\[56\]](#) Several months later, as criticism of Ahmadinejad intensified, Safavi warned, "We know you, and we will sort you out in due course. The IRGC will stand against anyone who intends to confront the revolution."[\[57\]](#)

But Safavi's expression of loyalty towards Ahmadinejad was not enough to secure him the position, and by September 1, 2007, Maj.-Gen. Mohammad Ali Ja'fari succeeded Safavi as the commander in chief of the IRGC.

Ja'fari's appointment is an important development in the structural dynamics of the Guards. In a September 2007 speech, he confirmed the IRGC's new role:

The Revolutionary Guards are not a one dimensional military organization. The mission of the Guards is guarding the revolution and its achievements against internal threats ... The current strategy, which has been clarified by the leadership of the revolution, differs from the strategies of the [war] years. The main mission of the Guards today is countering internal threats.[\[58\]](#)

Ja'fari later described the IRGC as not "solely a military organization" but also a "political and ideological organization."[\[59\]](#)

Mohammad Kowsari, another IRGC commander, said the Guards' intervention in politics has been "successful" since those who left school to fight at the Iraq-Iran war front can now enter "a new scene" to preserve the "Islamic nature of the regime."[\[60\]](#) Indeed, the supreme leader's representative to the organization urged the officer corps to take an active role in parliamentary politics.[\[61\]](#)

Khamenei's decision to mobilize the IRGC officer corps has not gone unchallenged. Seyyed Hossein Mousavi Tabrizi, a former member of the Assembly of Experts and former prosecutor-general of the Islamic Republic, protested against what he called "a military takeover" ahead of the latest round of parliamentary elections in Iran.[\[62\]](#) Former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, currently chair of both the Expediency Council and the Assembly of Experts, protested against the Guards' intervention in politics. Speaking in his capacity as the leader of Friday prayers in Tehran, Rafsanjani warned, "No one should allow himself to monopolize such forces [the IRGC and the Basij] since such an act would be an act of treason against them [the armed forces] and against the country."[\[63\]](#) Ayatollah Yusuf Sane'i declared

military intervention "opposed to democracy."[\[64\]](#) Most dramatically, Seyyed Hassan Khomeini, grandson of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, also criticized the IRGC's growing involvement in politics,[\[65\]](#) provoking a storm of attacks against him and the Khomeini household.[\[66\]](#)

After the March 14, 2008 elections, the Islamic Republic's reformist faction complained that the Ministry of Interior, the election's organizer, had been transformed into a "military base."[\[67\]](#) Mehdi Karrubi, a former parliamentary speaker and an unsuccessful presidential candidate in 2005, was more refined, asking rhetorically, "Does it mean that if two individuals are engaged in a rivalry during elections, this force [the IRGC] should engage supporting one of the two?"[\[68\]](#) Karrubi may have meant his question to be rhetorical, but within the Islamic Republic today, it has no easy answer.

Ahmadinejad and Khamenei do not intend the IRGC's and Basij's insertion into politics to be temporary. On April 30, 2007, two decades after the Basij's nominal independence from the Guards, Ja'fari again imposed formal IRGC control over the Basij in order better to fight "internal enemies."[\[69\]](#) *Sobh-e Sadeqh* weekly, successor to *Payam-e Enghelab* as mouthpiece of the IRGC, addressed the apprehension of civilian politicians in a long piece meant to assuage those worried by the Guards' new role. But far from choosing a conciliatory tone towards the critics of the Guards, Yadollah Javani, head of the political bureau of the IRGC's Joint Command Council, explained,

In case a movement, or a party, or group has the political or cultural potential to topple [the regime], one can't expect the Guards to deal with it militarily. Under such circumstances, the duty of the Guards is political and cultural resistance. Therefore, and because the Guards is needed to get involved in political or cultural work, one can't restrict the nature of the Guards into the military sphere alone. [\[70\]](#)

Conclusion

While democracies fear external enemies, undemocratic regimes fear their own populations, whose choices and aspirations they suppress by military means. In the short term, Khamenei's tactic might work. A unified and consolidated elite composed of the IRGC officer corps enables the Islamic Republic to maintain a tough international stance while repressing unrest at home. But the price for such policy will prove high. Not only will it politicize civil society and radicalize university students, labor activists, women in urban centers, and civil rights activists against the regime, but it will also alienate traditional regime supporters such as the bazaar merchant class, Rafsanjani-era technocratic and economic elites, and Khatami-era reformers whose hopes are already frustrated. More dangerously, the supreme leader's sole reliance on the Revolutionary Guards—should the IRGC manage to preserve its cohesion as a social group in Iranian politics—make Khamenei a prisoner of his own Praetorian Guard, paving the way for a military dictatorship. As the Islamic Republic approaches its thirtieth anniversary, the Iranian president has commissioned a "symphony of the glorious Islamic Revolution."[\[71\]](#) To judge by the current political trends in Iran, the symphony will most probably be a military march.

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[1] See data collected in Ali Alfoneh, "[Ahmadinejad versus the Technocrats](#)," *Middle Eastern Outlook*, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., May 2008.

[2] *Hamshahri* (Tehran), [Sept. 29, 2007](#).

[3] Kenneth Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam. Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 30-4, 51, 81-2; Mohsen Rafiqdoust, *Khaterat-e Mohsen Rafiqdoust* (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Enghelab-e Eslami, 2004), pp. 131-7.

[4] *Payam-e Enghelab* (Tehran), Feb. 16, 1981.

[5] Majid Sa'eli Kordeh-Deh, *Showra-ye Enghelab-e Eslami-ye Iran* (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Enghelab-e Eslami, 2005), pp. 20-40.

[6] "The Army and the [Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps](#). The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran," Sec. Three.

[7] *Payam-e Enghelab*, Mar. 19, 1980.

[8] *Payam-e Enghelab*, July 25, 1981.

[9] "[Asasnameh-ye Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami](#)," Islamic Republic of Iran, at Tooba Islamic Research Center, Tehran, accessed June 30, 2008.

[10] "Asasnameh-ye Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami," [Madeh-ye 34 Dal](#), Islamic Republic of Iran, at Tooba Islamic Research Center, accessed June 30, 2008.

[11] "[Asasnameh-ye Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami](#)," Islamic Republic of Iran.

[12] *Ibid*.

[13] "Nirou-ha-ye Mossalah; Voroud ya Adam-e Voroud – Barresi-ye Mabani-ye Jorm-Engari-ye Fa'aliyat-e Siyasi-ye Nirou-ha-ye Mossalah," *Sobh-e Sadeqh* (Tehran), [Dec. 31, 2006](#).

[14] *Payam-e Enghelab*, Mar. 19, 1980.

[15] *Payam-e Enghelab*, Jan. 31, 1981.

[16] David Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution* (New York: Holmes and Meir, 1990), pp. 280-3.

[17] Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam*, pp. 51-2.

[18] [Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran](#) (Iran Freedom Movement), June 14, 1981.

[19] *Payam-e Enghelab*, Jan. 31, 1981.

[20] *Payam-e Enghelab*, Jan. 31, 1981.

[21] *Payam-e Enghelab*, Feb. 28, 1981.

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