

IRANIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM AND THE IRGC

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INTRODUCTION

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was seen as an attempt by the US government to begin a process of democratising the governments in West Asia. The lack of political freedom and inability to express dissent were seen as factors that contributed to the rise of radical Islam in the region. This is a marked change from the policy that the US had followed towards the region right from the days of the Cold War. During that period, the Western nations, led by the US, had dealt with, and provided support to, the monarchies and dictatorships in West Asia to deter the spread of Communism. Iran, under the autocracy of the Shah, was the one of the biggest allies of the Western camp during the 1960s and 1970s. The relationship between Iran and the US was often compared with the close ties that existed between Israel and the US. Iran was the beneficiary of US largesse and even of the latest military hardware, some of which was not accessible to even fellow North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies of the US. The beginning of 1979 saw one of the biggest realignments of the Cold War alliance system that existed in the West Asian region. The Iranian revolution led to a loss of an important ally as far as the West was concerned and was a massive setback to US interests in the region. After a turbulent decade, wherein there were several incidents that could have led to war between the two sides, the 1990s was a period during which the US and Iran politically distanced themselves from each other.

The situation altered dramatically with the September 2001 terrorist attacks

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against targets in the US. Though there had been a level of cooperation between the US and Iran with regard to Afghanistan, tensions between the US and Iran have increased on the issue of Iran's nuclear programme. The US has also accused Iran of providing training and support to Iraqi Shia militant groups who, in turn, launched attacks against occupying US troops. Regime change in Iran has become one of the stated objectives of US foreign policy. Even though the US and Iran have had no diplomatic relations with each other since 1979, successive US governments have never come this far in openly calling for the overthrow of the Iranian government. The presence of ideological hardliners like the neo-conservatives in the US Administration and the changed geo-political situation in West Asia after the downfall of Saddam can be factors that contributed to such a change in US policy towards Iran. Saddam's regime was seen as a bulwark against Iranian expansionism in the region. The disappearance of this major obstacle has increased the threat perceptions of an Iran trying to spread its hegemony.

The Iranian regime is often widely described as a rabid theocracy in Western media sources. The rising rhetoric of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the occasional statements by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei have given the impression that Ahmadinejad is responsible for deciding the state policy on major issues in Iran. Being a former member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the revolutionary armed force of the Islamic Republic, Ahmadinejad's rise is seen as proof of the IRGC's increasing influence in Iranian politics. The emphasis in this paper will not be on giving a detailed account of the course of Iranian politics since the revolution. Instead, it will try to understand the nature of the Iranian political system as it exists today, with special emphasis on civil-military relations and the role of the IRGC in politics. It will look at the major changes that have occurred in the Iranian political system since the revolution of 1979 and identify the important institutions and factions in Iranian politics.

THE IRANIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

The Supreme Leader

In order to comprehend the nature of Iranian politics since the revolution of 1979,

it is imperative to have an understanding of the Iranian political system and its various institutions. The system of government that came into being in Iran in 1979 was unlike any other system that had existed until then and was called the *vilayat-i-faqih* which means the rule or governance by learned Islamic jurisprudence. The most powerful institution in the Iranian political system is the office of the Supreme Leader. The Iranian Constitution has given the highest authority to the Supreme Leader. This position was created after the revolution to give Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, absolute control over the political system. More than the constitutional guarantees, Khomeini's own personality and popularity increased the stature of the Supreme Leader in the eyes of the Iranian public. The power that Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Khamenei enjoys is a continuation of this legacy, despite Khamenei's own lack of charisma and popularity. Khomeini had earned the right to be Supreme Leader because of his political leadership and theological qualifications as a *marja-e taqlid* or Grand Ayatollah. As Khamenei did not hold such a qualification, the Iranian Constitution was amended and the requirement that the Supreme Leader should be *marja-e taqlid* was dropped.

The Supreme Leader is the commander-in-chief of all armed forces and has the authority to declare war or peace and mobilise the armed forces. He enjoys the right to appoint and dismiss six clerical jurists in the Council of Guardians, the head of the judiciary, the president of the state radio and television, the supreme commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and the supreme commander of the regular military and security services.¹ The Supreme Leader appoints a number of his representatives in every state ministry and institution and in most of the revolutionary and religious organisations. Almost all the representatives are clerics and are of the rank of *hojjatolislam*. These representatives are more powerful than

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1. Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Where is the Islamic Republic of Iran Heading?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 59, no. 1 2005, p. 27.

the ministers and other government functionaries. These representatives are present in the ministries in the executive branch, the armed forces and security services, provinces, revolutionary and religious organisations and, finally, the Iranian cultural centres in foreign countries.² Besides these powers, the Supreme Leader has the authority to issue proclamations for holding popular referenda. He is the final arbitrator in disputes between the executive, the legislative and the judiciary. This is in a situation where mediation efforts by the Expediency Council have failed.³

The President

The president of Iran is the head of the executive, according to the Iranian Constitution, which was revised in 1989. Before the revision, the powers of the executive were divided between the president and the prime minister. The president's power was ceremonial in nature while real power lay in the hands of

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the prime minister. This resulted in friction between the two leaders, especially when the two were from different factions. This happened especially during the tenures of Presidents Bani Sadr and Ali Khamenei. The clerics in the Assembly of Experts had created this system to prevent the emergence of a presidential dictatorship that could challenge

the concept of *vilayat-i-faqih*. In 1989, the position of prime minister was abolished and the powers of that post were transferred to the president. Presently, the president has the power to appoint and dismiss the ministers who must be confirmed by the Parliament.⁴ The president and his ministers can be removed only through a two-thirds majority no-confidence vote by the Parliament. The president of Iran is the second most powerful official in that country. But the power of the president is limited to the social, cultural and

2. Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2000), pp. 46-48.
3. M. Mahmood, *The Political System of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2006), p. 65.
4. Mohsen M. Milani, "The Evolution of the Iranian Presidency: From Bani Sadr to Rafsanjani," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1 1993, pp. 89-95.

economic policies while the Supreme Leader decides on matters relating to defence and foreign policy.⁵

The Constitutional Assemblies

Iran's political system includes powerful constitutional assemblies like the Council of Guardians and the Assembly of Experts. The Iranian Parliament which is called the Majlis has enjoyed considerable power since the death of Khomeini in 1989. The members of the Parliament are elected by the people from territorial constituencies. The term of a Parliament member lasts for four years and the current strength is fixed at 290.⁶ The responsibilities of the Parliament include drafting legislation, ratifying international treaties, approving state-of-emergency declarations and loans, examining and approving the annual state budget and, finally, in case of necessity, removing from office the president and his appointed ministers.⁷ The Council of Guardians consists of twelve jurists who determine the compatibility with the *sharia* (Islamic law) of laws passed by the Parliament. Six of the council's twelve members, whose term of office lasts six years, are Islamic jurists appointed by the Supreme Leader. The remaining six are non-clerical jurists appointed by the Parliament at the recommendation of the head of the judiciary.⁸ The Council of Guardians can interpret the Iranian Constitution and any such interpretation reached by three-fourths of the members assumes the same validity as the Constitution itself. The Constitution gives the council supreme oversight over all public referenda as well as over elections for the Parliament, the Assembly of Experts, and, as mentioned earlier, the presidency. After examining an individual's Islamic convictions and loyalty to the regime, the Council of Guardians decides whether parliamentary and presidential aspirants are qualified to run for office.

The Assembly of Experts, based in the city of Qom which is the largest Shia theological centre of Iran, consists of 86 clerics popularly elected to eight-year

5. Buchta, n. 2, p. 23.

6. Mahmood, n. 3, p. 67.

7. Buchta, n. 2, p. 58.

8. Mandana Naini, "Iran's Second Chamber? The Guardian Council," *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2006, pp. 200-202.

terms, who, in turn, elect the Supreme Leader from their own ranks. The assembly can remove the Supreme Leader if he becomes unable to fulfil his duties, if he loses one or more of the qualifications necessary to perform in his office, or if it is revealed that he never possessed these qualifications in the first place. A leadership council composed of the president, the head of the judiciary branch and an Islamic jurist from the Council of Guardians would then assume the leader's duties until a new leader is elected. The Expediency Council was created by Khomeini to arbitrate in disputes between the Parliament and the Council of Guardians.⁹ It also acts as an advisory body to the Supreme Leader.¹⁰ The arbitration takes place in a situation where the Council of Guardians vetoes a Bill but the Parliament does not agree to it.

THE IRANIAN ARMED FORCES AND THE COMMAND AND CONTROL MECHANISM OF THE IRGC

The Iranian Armed Forces and Security Agencies

Besides the Regular Armed Forces, the main revolutionary armed security forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran are the Islamic Revolutionary Guards

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Corps (IRGC), which is called the *sepah-pasdaran* in Farsi, the Basij militia and the Law Enforcement Forces. The IRGC is also generally known as Pasdaran. The IRGC is politically more powerful than the Regular Armed Forces and the Basij militia is under the command of the IRGC. According to the Iranian Constitution, the main duty of the IRGC is the protection of the Iranian revolution and its ideals while it is the responsibility of the Regular Armed Forces to protect Iranian territory from external attack.

9. Buchta, n. 2, pp. 59-61.

10. Mahmood, n. 3, p. 79.

The Pasdaran's responsibilities include putting down internal opposition to the government. The Pasdaran's secondary function is defending against an external attack as it did during the Iran-Iraq War, besides its other functions like providing security in the border areas, including the war against drugs flowing from Pakistan and Afghanistan, deployment of relief forces for disaster operations during natural calamities like floods and earthquakes, and supporting pro-Iranian movements abroad.

The IRGC also has the task of fighting exiled militant opponents of the government. More importantly, the IRGC has been in charge of Iran's missile and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programmes since the 1980s. The IRGC has developed a logistical infrastructure and has its own weapons procurement organisation independent of the regular military. The duty of the Basij is the maintenance of security in the urban areas. Besides these formal security agencies, there are various gangs called *ansar-e-hezbollah* or the "helpers of God" who act as the foot soldiers of extreme conservative elements in the ruling elite. They attack and intimidate critics and dissidents and usually go unpunished because of the bias of the judiciary which is dominated by the conservatives.¹¹ The main purpose behind the creation of the IRGC was to counter-balance the power of the Regular Iranian Armed Forces. The history of the IRGC's activities in Iranian politics will be dealt with in greater detail in a later section.

The Command and Control Mechanism of the IRGC

Though the Iranian Constitution gives the complete control over the armed forces to the Supreme Leader, he does not exercise this right through any direct chain of command. Today, the Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS), chaired by the president, is the main policy-making body with regard to national defence and security. The representatives of the Supreme Leader, the Regular Armed Forces which are called Artesh, the revolutionary guards and other security agencies are present in this council which discusses and formulates on national defence policy.

11. Wilfried Buchta, *Iran's Security Sector: An Overview*, Working Paper- No. 146 (Geneva: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces, 2004), pp. 6-7.

The fact that the president chairs the SCNS does not mean that he is in charge of formulating defence and security policy. The Supreme Leader wields more clout in this institution through his representatives. During the 1998 Afghan crisis, the SCNS was responsible for formulating the response to the threat of the Taliban. The Supreme Leader is responsible for the overall formulation of defence policy and not the day-to-day management of defence related activities.

In spite of such formal structures, decision-making in Iran is achieved through consensus among the elites. Though such a system would appear to be complex, no actor would conduct important operations without the tacit approval of the

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senior leadership. Factors like family, kinship, educational affiliations and support from religious clerical personalities and factions influence military politics in the revolutionary guards. This phenomenon is less in the Regular Armed Forces where recruitment is done through conscription and where officers are

trained in military academies.¹² In the period following the revolution, the revolutionary government created the Politico-Ideological Bureau (PIB) for the purpose of ensuring effective political control of the armed forces and its branches were introduced in all the sections of the army. The bureau's offices are supervised by religious clerics and their tasks included ensuring that the military conforms with the Islamic ideology and the Islamic indoctrination of the officer corps.¹³

THE IRANIAN ARMED FORCES AND IRANIAN POLITICS DURING THE KHOMEINI ERA (1979-1989)

The Origin and Development of the IRGC and its Functions

Before the Iranian revolution, the Iranian armed forces were the mainstay of the Shah. The Shah was able to maintain his control over the country with the

12. Daniel Byman, "Security Decision-making in Iran," in Daniel Byman *et al.*, eds., *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001), pp. 24-26.

13. Mehran Kamrava, "Military Professionalization and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 115, no. 1, 2000, p. 83.

help of the armed forces and the intelligence agency, the SAVAK. In the build-up to the revolution, the underground revolutionary militias which belonged to leftists and religious groups had fought pitched battles with the Iranian armed forces. Because of this reason, the revolutionary government was suspicious of the loyalty of the Iranian Regular Armed Forces. They were seen as bastions of the monarchists who wished the return of the Pahlavis. In order to counter the influence of the Regular Armed Forces, the IRGC was created in accordance with a decree issued by Khomeini. The threat from the armed forces was not the only factor that prompted the authorities to create the IRGC. The Iranian revolutionaries saw their revolution as an alternative to Communism and capitalism and they wanted to spread their revolutionary ideals in the wider Islamic world and places where national liberation movements and revolutionary struggles were going on. The IRGC was a platform for “exporting the revolution” abroad. Even before their official formation, many of these revolutionary guards groups had existed as extensions of various originally underground revolutionary leftist and extremist Islamic organisations.

During the provisional government of Mehdi Bazargan (February-November 1979), these militiamen performed a variety of functions in support of the Islamic authorities, taking over mosques, police stations, prisons, government buildings, and army barracks and acting as agents for the revolutionary authorities. Iranian political organisations, including the Mujahideen-i-Khalq, Fedayeen, and Tudeh (Communist), powerful clerics, judges, Cabinet and Parliament members, and many other high-ranking civilian officials kept their own armed guards or *pasdars* as they are known in Farsi. Although remaining ultimately loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini, many of the revolutionary guards groups acted autonomously and recognised little authority beyond their immediate patrons, prompting Khomeini to create the IRGC keeping the dangers in mind of such fragmentation among Khomeini’s immediate followers. By 1986, during the height of the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC, or the Pasdaran numbered around 350,000.¹⁴ The guards gained valuable

14. Nikola B. Shahgaldian, *The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1987), pp.65-69.

military experience in 1979 when several thousands of them were dispatched from Tehran to fight against Kurdish rebels in Iranian Kurdistan.

In spite of the efforts of the authorities to professionalise the corps, clashes due to politicisation of the Pasdaran badly affected its solidarity. The multiplicity of power centres among the revolutionary guards compelled each rival group to increase its influence within the institution, in part by recruiting as many loyal people as they could. This pattern of recruitment became even more common after September 1980 when the need for mobilising more IRGC volunteers against the Iraqi forces became obvious. The Shia *mullahs* were also recruiting agents for the Pasdaran. Iranian social and family structures, particularly in some tribal and rural areas, made individual recruitment all but impossible. Entire extended families and clans would join the IRGC once their heads decided to enter the Pasdaran. Such a situation was not to the liking of many senior clerics who had all along pressed for a strong and united army loyal to their own religious and ideological beliefs. Although they had little power to influence local recruitment, a lot could be done once the recruits joined the IRGC. A programme of religious education was introduced in the corps.

Besides such activities, purges were conducted within the revolutionary guards. In late 1979 and early 1980 many leftists were thrown out of the organisation, followed by the Mujahideen and supporters of Bani Sadr in June-September of 1981. In March 1982, Khomeini banned IRGC members from getting involved in political matters and from becoming members of any political group or party, regardless of its ideology. Although such steps brought some internal organisational order and solidarity among the Pasdaran in the years after 1982, they did not end the factional rivalry between Pasdaran units and commanders, nor did they prevent the IRGC from meddling in politics or being exploited by politicians. As it grew in numbers, the IRGC began to acquire a political weight of its own. It gained much influence when the clerics of the Islamic Republic Party (IRP) succeeded during the first half of 1980 in gaining the upper hand within the IRGC.

During Bani Sadr's presidency (January 1980-June 1981), it became the major responsibility of the Pasdaran to organise mobs against the president's

supporters in addition to fighting against the remaining anti-clerics opposition forces. Many public personalities competed with each other for gaining influence within the IRGC.¹⁵ It was in this context that Khomeini banned the revolutionary guards from participating in politics. Pasdaran leaders were divided into various sub-groups, according to their political and ideological preferences. The publicly voiced opinions of Pasdaran leaders reflected the views of dominant clerical figures of the day, indicating that the Pasdaran was affected by the same political and ideological divisions that divided the ruling clerical establishment. Pasdaran factions appeared to consist of a smaller number of core members who had direct family and marriage ties with major Shia clerical figures.¹⁶

The IRGC's Domestic Activities

The Iranian revolution was brought about by a number of movements with different political orientations. Though Khomeini was the leader of the revolution, the anti-Shah forces included leftists and liberals. Each of these political movements wanted to rebuild Iran according to its respective viewpoint. This was a major obstacle to Khomeini's vision of an Islamic Republic in Iran. Among these movements, the radical leftists had the most powerful guerrilla organisations. Khomeini created the revolutionary guards to defend his government from possible attacks from his former allies. The new government also faced revolts from ethnic minorities like the Kurds. Khomeini needed his paramilitary organisation to enforce his Islamic doctrines in Iranian society. Because of these reasons, the duties of the Pasdaran were primarily internal in nature. The Pasdaran was established throughout Iran, even in the most remote villages, and training centres were set up in the country's main towns so that reinforcements could be sent anywhere in the country at a moment's notice.¹⁷ The IRGC had played an important role in crushing the Kurdish insurgency in Iran which began in 1979 and was led by the Kurdish Democratic Party in Iran (KDPI) headed by Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou.¹⁸

15. Shahgaldian, *Ibid.*, pp. 69-73.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

17. *The Times of India* (New Delhi), September 29, 1979.

18. Edgar O' Balance, *The Gulf War* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988), p.132.

One of the most powerful and organised opponents of Khomeini's regime was the leftist guerrilla organisation, the Mujahideen-i-Khalq. The Mujahideen and other leftist organisations were the most ardent supporters of President Bani Sadr. Bani Sadr and the IRP were bitter rivals. But as long as Bani Sadr was in the government, there was an uneasy peace between the Islamic authorities and the Mujahideen. The situation changed drastically with the ouster of Bani Sadr from the presidency. The crushing of a Mujahideen led protest march convinced the Mujahideen that the Pasdaran would show no mercy to Khomeini's opponents.¹⁹ The Mujahideen-i-Khalq, allied to six smaller left-wing groups, declared war on the Islamic government and a series of major explosions occurred in Tehran in which there was huge loss of life and damage to property. The government fought back, using the Pasdaran on the streets, and by arrests, torture and execution without trial. The Pasdaran was responsible for locating and raiding safe houses inhabited by opposition guerrilla organisations. Throughout 1981-1982, the revolutionary guards and different Islamic committees suppressed several strikes in different parts of the country. They took the offensive by attacking striking workers, arresting some and dismissing others, and by completely suppressing protests by the workers.²⁰ The elimination of the Mujahideen and other leftist organisations from the Iranian political scene would not have been possible without the Pasdaran.

The Pasdaran also suppressed coup attempts by the Regular Armed Forces. Another prominent opposition movement to Khomeini's regime was led by Ayatollah Shariatmadari. The Muslim Republican Party (MPRP) led by Ayatollah Shariatmadari took control of the local television station in Tabriz in mid-December 1981 and expelled the governor general and other city officials. After negotiations, when Shariatmadari pledged that he would ask his followers to desist from further protests, he ordered his followers to disperse. The Pasdaran reoccupied the television station and government buildings. When the MPRP was forced to dissolve, its offices in Tabriz and other towns were occupied by the Pasdaran and other leftist armed group who were then allied with the regime. The Pasdaran was

19. Sepehr Zabih, *Iran Since the Revolution* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), pp. 104-105.

20. John Bulloch and Harvey Morris, *The Gulf War: Its Origins, History and Consequences* (London: Methuen London; 1989), p. 68.

responsible for keeping a tight control on Shariatmadari after the dissolution of the Party.²¹ By 1983, the only major opposition force that remained was the Tudeh party. Though it was allied with the Khomeini regime, the revolutionary authorities feared that the Tudeh would take over with Soviet help after the death of Khomeini. So, by the end of 1982, the Iranian government decided to crush the Tudeh and any other party that was not Islamic. On April 27, 1983, the day some 500 Tudeh members were detained, all Tudeh members were ordered to identify themselves and report immediately to the nearest Pasdaran office.²² After the crackdown on the Tudeh and the arrest and execution of prominent leaders like Nuredin Kianouri, the Tudeh was officially dissolved.

The Political Influence of the IRGC

Because of the nature of its duties, the Pasdaran had tremendous political influence in Iran. It was the policy of the government to frequently praise the Pasdaran in public sermons and on the national media.²³ Such a deliberate policy of the government translated into political power for the Pasdaran in practical terms. This fact became obvious to the first post-revolutionary government of Iran, headed by Mehdi Bazargan. Many requests were made by Prime Minister Bazargan for Khomeini's aid against these forces without result. Very soon, the Bazargan government was forced to face the reality that, in fact, it occupied the governmental offices only at the pleasure of the top level Khomeini supporters – Ayatollahs Beheshti and Montazeri, for example – who considered moderate politicians potentially dangerous. Behind these hardline leaders stood the student militias, the revolutionary guards, the revolutionary committees that ran the government, the revolutionary courts, and the Islamic Republican Party.²⁴

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21. Zabih, n.19, pp. 77-78.

22. O' Balance, n.18, p. 130.

23. Nader Entessar, "The Military and Politics," in Hooshang Amirahmadi and Manoucher Parvin, eds., *Post Revolutionary Iran* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), p. 66.

24. Barry Rubin, *Paved with Good Intentions: The American Experience in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 291, 301.

The revolutionary, guards especially, were a source of friction between the Islamic Revolutionary Council and Mehdi Bazargan's government.

The power of the Pasdaran was also evident in the day-to-day life of revolutionary Iran. Prosecutor General Hojjatoislam Hossein Mussawi Tabrizi declared in 1981 that there would be street trials of arrested protestors at which the testimony of just two *pasdars* would be sufficient for death sentences to be carried out on the spot. Ayatollah Mohammadi Gilani, the chief judge of Tehran's revolutionary courts, declared that those who were wounded in the course of resisting arrest or attacking the Pasdaran should be shot on the spot.²⁵ The IRGC was given exceptional power to call upon manpower from all sectors for the war against Iraq.²⁶ The influence of the Pasdaran also became clear during elections to the Majlis in the spring of 1988. The bitterly disputed elections resulted in a virtual landslide for the conservatives and brought more than 140 new members into the Majlis, mainly young candidates who had come through revolutionary institutions such as the Pasdaran.²⁷ The rising influence of the Pasdaran did not escape the critical scrutiny of prominent Iranian leaders during the late 1980s when the revolution had become more stabilised. Ayatollah Montazeri, in a strongly worded letter to Prime Minister Mussavi, on October 1, 1988, criticised the revolutionary guards' intervention in commerce.

At the same time, the Pasdaran was hated by the upper classes for their excesses which included arbitrary searches and arrests and on the spot executions. Their excesses were such that even their Commander, Rezai, was obliged to admit that they tended to get involved in unwanted matters. The government did not stop such excesses of the Pasdaran.²⁸ The Pasdaran were idealised and pampered by the clerics throughout the country, especially in the cities. For example, they were allowed to carry arms everywhere they went, even on leave. Regular soldiers, away from the war front, were not allowed to carry arms under any circumstances.²⁹ The Iran-Iraq War also gave the Pasdaran the image of protectors of the nation. Various incidents exposed the Iranian public to

25. Zabih, n. 19, p. 205.

26. Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd., 1988), p. 76.

27. Bullock and Morris, n. 20, p. 218.

28. Homa Omid, *Islam and the Post-Revolutionary State in Iran* (n.d., St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 106-109.

29. Chubin and Tripp, n. 26, pp. 186.

the role played by the IRGC on the warfront. Provisions for the Pasdaran were not included in the defence budget. As the Pasdaran had to acquire war provisions from the Iranian public, they became more popular among the public who became aware about their role in the war. This was in sharp contrast to the public perception of the Regular Armed Forces whose provisions were taken care of by the government itself.

THE IRGC'S ROLE IN POLITICS DURING THE RAFSANJANI AND KHATAMI PERIODS (1989-2005)

The Nature of Factional Politics in Iran

Before going into the post-Khomeini period in Iranian politics, it is necessary to realise the different political factions that came into being during this period and the reasons for their emergence. The German academician, Wilfried Buchta, has divided Iranian political factions into two broad divisions. These include the rightist and leftist factions. These two factions have further divisions within them. The major divisions between the leftists and the rightists and within them are based on their views regarding social and cultural issues. The main factions can, therefore, be described as the Islamic left, the traditionalist right and the modernist right. As mentioned earlier, the Iranian revolution was brought about by a combination of forces like the Communists and liberals and not just theocratic supporters of Khomeini. The ouster of President Bani Sadr from power signalled the victory of the pro-Khomeini forces in Iran.

The umbrella organisation for Iran's theocratic pro-Khomeini groups was the Islamic Republican Party (IRP) which was founded in 1979 by a number of clerical followers of Khomeini who included Rafsanjani and Khamenei. But divisions began to emerge between the IRP's left and right camps. The right camp consisted of religious traditionalists, socio-politically conservative clerics, and a number of religious technocrats, and it supported a pragmatic domestic and foreign policy oriented towards consolidation of what had already been attained. The left camp recruited from among social revolutionary, left-leaning Islamic clerics and religious laypersons. The members of this camp support a

state-controlled and egalitarian economic policy and the export of the revolution which for them are most important ideological goals of the revolution.

Khomeini was not able to prevent the split among his immediate followers and in June 1987, the IRP was dissolved. After this event, two political unions of clerics emerged. The union of the Islamic left is the Combatant Clerics Society and that of the traditionalist right is the Militant Clergy Association. In December 1998, a broad alliance of clerics, religious laypersons, Islam-oriented workers, and Islamic women's activists who supported the then Iranian President Mohammad Khatami formed a new and important sub-group inside the mainstream of the Islamic left, the Islamic Participation Party of Iran. Because of its openness to all reform-oriented forces, the Islamic Participation Party is referred to as the modern left. The prominent members of the traditionalist right Militant Clergy Association include Supreme Leader Khamenei. Some of the most influential members of the Militant Clergy Association are also members of the Council of Guardians and the Assembly of Experts, two powerful institutions in the Iranian political system. In principle, the Militant Clergy Association advocates private property ownership and private enterprise.

The modernist-right faction is far more liberal on social and cultural issues in comparison with the traditionalist right. This faction is grouped less around an organisation than the person of Hashemi Rafsanjani. The principle demand of the modernist-rightists, who declared themselves open to the policy of social and economic modernisation pursued by Rafsanjani when he was president, was increased efficiency in the country's economic development. The primary goal of the modernist right is to transform Iran into a modern state. Between 1980 and 1992, Islamic-left clerics and intellectuals held large parliamentary majorities. During this time, especially during the war years from 1980 to 1988, they supported a strict austerity policy and strict state control over the economy, charted a more restrictive course in social and cultural affairs, and supported the export of the revolution. When the Islamic left lost its parliamentary majority in the elections of 1992, it decided to withdraw for the time being from day-to-day politics. But even then, it retained a solid social base as well as links to certain sections of the Pasdaran.³⁰

30. Buchta, n. 2, pp. 11-17.

The Rafsanjani Period

In a comparison between Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, the general impression is that Khatami did more to restrain the power of the IRGC than Rafsanjani. But Rafsanjani's actions after he became Iran's president give a different picture. In 1992, at Rafsanjani's request, Ayatollah Khamenei ordered that there should be one head for the Regular Armed Forces and the IRGC, to be called the chief of staff of the Armed Forces General Command. He named Hassan Firoozabadi, then deputy chief of staff of the Regular Armed Forces as the first chief of staff of the unified command.³¹ This can be seen as an attempt by Rafsanjani to decrease the power of the revolutionary institutions perhaps because he saw them as a counterweight to his own influence. But Rafsanjani's effort in this direction was not destined to be successful, as similar attempts had failed in the past.

An effort to create a coordination mechanism between the Regular Armed Forces and the IRGC had begun in 1988 after some battlefield setbacks in the Iran-Iraq War when the first Joint Armed Forces General Staff was created. When Khamenei came to power, he began looking for supporters as his base of power was not strong. In an effort to win the support of the IRGC, he allowed the reestablishment of a separate IRGC Headquarters which undermined the earlier efforts to create a unified command of the armed forces.³² Likewise, Rafsanjani's efforts did not lead to a declining of the power of the IRGC.

On the other hand, the IRGC and other security forces began to disobey orders, signalling that they were not always ready to follow the diktats of their political masters. During the riots in the city of Qazvin in 1994, the commanders of the IRGC garrison refused to shoot at the civilian population to restore order in the area. Ultimately, special IRGC units trained specifically in suppressing such unrest, named the "Ashura battalions", were brought in for the task.³³ Following this incident, four senior officers of the army, air force, IRGC and Law Enforcement Foundation (LEF) addressed a letter to the political leadership, warning it against deployment of the armed forces to crush civilian unrest or internal conflict, and

31. Dilip Hiro, *Neighbours, Not Friends: Iraq and Iran after the Gulf Wars* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.195.

32. Buchta, n.11, p. 10.

33. Buchta, n.2, p. 11.

The IRGC's involvement in Iranian politics increased during the two presidential terms of Khatami.

adding that the armed forces could no longer remain silent while Iran was threatened by external threat and internal disintegration.³⁴ Summing up the Rafsanjani period, the IRGC did not see the executive as a major threat to the rule of the clergy. Rafsanjani's objective was only the modernisation of the Iranian economy and not the liberalisation of the Iranian political system and society. Mohammad Khatami's government, on the other hand was seen by the IRGC as a grave threat to the stability of the system. Because of this reason, the IRGC's involvement in Iranian politics increased during the two presidential terms of Khatami.

The Khatami Period

Even during the 1997 presidential elections, uncertainty was caused by rumours that surfaced a few weeks prior to the vote, implying that the IRGC and the Basij would not tolerate the conservative candidate Nateq Nuri's electoral defeat. Such rumours motivated prominent Islamic-leftists Mehdi Karrubi and Mohammad Musavi Kuiniha to warn Khamenei that Khatami intended to withdraw his candidacy in protest against the unfair electoral conditions. Fearing damage to the image of the Islamic Republic, Khamenei gave in and, during the final phase of the campaign, reiterated his neutral stance.³⁵ During the polls, 73 percent of IRGC members voted for Khatami despite the fact that Mohsen Rezai, the commander of the IRGC, vocally supported Khatami's competitor which violated the IRGC's neutrality obligation.³⁶ This indicates that though the senior commanders of the IRGC were supportive of the traditionalist rightists, the IRGC rank and file included many supporters of the Islamic left. When Khatami became president, he tried to weaken the IRGC by successfully persuading the Supreme Leader to dismiss Mohsen Rezai, the commander of the IRGC since 1981 because of his activities during the elections. This step did not

34. Hiro, n. 31, p. 208.

35. Buchta, n.2, p. 33.

36. Michael Eisenstadt, "The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Assessment," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2001, p. 7.

bring about much structural change as Rezai's successor Yahya Rahim Safavi continued the policies of his predecessor.³⁷

Khatami's efforts to decrease the influence of the armed forces were not just limited to the IRGC. In August 1998, at Khatami's request, Khamenei put the command of the LEF under Musavi Lari, the interior minister. Akin to the example of the IRGC, this step did not decrease the autonomy of the LEF or ensure greater accountability to the executive. Musavi Lari was unable to wield real *de facto* control over the LEF, as was proved when members of the LEF took part in numerous violent attacks on Khatami's partisans in the following months, and also in the bloody student unrest of July 1999. In December 1999, Musavi Lari publicly confessed his powerlessness when he said in a Press conference in Tehran that the officers in the LEF, who are loyal to the traditionalist right, do not obey his orders.³⁸

One of the ways by which the exclusive political influence enjoyed by the IRGC among the Iranian armed forces could be decreased was by giving more autonomy to the Regular Armed Forces. Such an opportunity arrived during the 1998 tensions with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Recognising the fact that the expertise of the regular army would be needed in the event of a conflict, Khamenei created the position of the supreme commander of the Regular Armed Forces which technically put the regular army on the same level as the IRGC.³⁹ But in reality, only the ground forces are independent from the IRGC while the air force and the navy are under the command of IRGC officers.⁴⁰

In this period, the IRGC showed signs that it was not only ready to disagree with the civilian authorities but also warn the government if it did not agree with state policies. During the July 1999 student protests, the IRGC viewed the reformist movement as a threat to the political system. Twenty-four commanders of the IRGC land, air and naval wings wrote an open letter to Khatami threatening to stage a military coup if he did not agree with their demand of supporting the crushing of the student protests.⁴¹ This forced

37. Buchta, n. 11, p. 9.

38. Buchta, n. 2, p. 143.

39. Eisenstadt, n. 36, p. 6.

40. Buchta, n. 11, p. 11.

41. Kaveh Ehsani, "Do-e Khordad and the Spectre of Democracy," *Middle East Report*, no. 212, 1999, p. 11.

Khatami to distance himself from the students which cost him politically.⁴² There were further such warnings issued by the IRGC commanders. Threats were issued against Khatami and his supporters by Yahya Rahim Safavi, the commander of the IRGC. In late April 1998, in a confidential speech made before IRGC naval officers in Qom, Rahim Safavi castigated Khatami's liberal tendencies. The speech was widely noted and circulated as an audio tape. This attracted strong criticism from the Iranian domestic and expatriate Press. In spite of such reactions, Khamenei saw no reason to bring the IRGC commander to justice.⁴³

One of the reasons for Khatami's inability to rein in the IRGC was the Parliament's lack of influence over the security forces. The Parliament under Khatami created several investigative committees to look into matters relating to illegal activities committed by members of the security forces. Despite the fact that the committees were not very effective, because of a biased judiciary, the very fact that such committees were formed for the first time in Iranian history can be seen as an important achievement.⁴⁴ The efforts by Khatami's followers also came to nought because of the support the traditional right provided to the IRGC through institutions dominated by them like the judiciary and the Council of Guardians.

The judiciary shut down a large number of pro-democracy newspapers, and arrested and put on trial a large number of journalists who were pro-Khatami. Even the Regular Armed Forces could not stress complete independence from the IRGC. Though the regular military numbers around 400,000 (versus the 120,000 men of the IRGC), it does not have the political influence of the latter. The IRGC has considerable influence on the professional development and advancement of future senior officers in the Regular Armed Forces. The IRGC has influence over the regular army through the Ministry of Defence whose current head is Admiral Ali Shamkhani, an IRGC officer, who is affiliated with the hardline faction of Iran's conservative leadership. Shamkhani, in an act of disloyalty, had run for

42. Hiro, n. 31, p. 246.

43. Buchta, n. 2, p. 143.

44. Buchta, n. 11, p. 20.

the presidency in 2001 against his own chief of Cabinet, President Khatami.⁴⁵

Towards the end of Khatami's two terms as president of Iran, there were signs of the IRGC's glowing influence in Iran's domestic affairs, signalling that instead of a subdued IRGC's, Khatami's efforts had ended up emboldening the revolutionary armed force to play a more high profile role. Mahmud Ahmadinejad, a former IRGC commander had become the mayor of Tehran as a part of this trend. The IRGC encouraged its personnel to contest in the parliamentary elections of February 2004. A new right-wing faction called the Abadgaran-e Iran-e Islami (Developers of Islamic Iran) fielded a large number of candidates who had an IRGC or Basij background. This faction will be hereafter referred to as the Abadgaran and its background and ideology will be discussed in the section on Mahmud Ahmadinejad where it would become more relevant. The Abadgaran became the largest faction in the seventh Majlis. At least 90 members of the present Parliament are affiliated to the IRGC and other revolutionary organisations.

Towards the end of Khatami's two terms as president of Iran, there were signs of the IRGC's growing influence in Iran's domestic affairs.

In May 2004, a former IRGC Commander, Ezatollah Zargami, was appointed the head of Iranian radio and television.⁴⁶ In the same month, the revolutionary guards and the Basij forcibly prevented the opening of Tehran's airport, in a dispute over who would control the lucrative services as it is widely rumoured to be a route for highly profitable smuggling. This was not like a struggle between Khatami and the traditional right, but an IRGC challenge to civilian authority.⁴⁷ These attempts to increase its economic clout had begun from the 1990s itself. Since the 1990s, the IRGC has become involved in a number of economic and financial enterprises independent from the state. The reformist Parliament, which had raised the issue of 72 illegal jetties on Iran's border owned

45. Buchta, *Ibid.*, p. 10.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

47. Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 161.

by the IRGC, was not capable of stopping smuggling of goods through these jetties. It is estimated that annually US\$ 9.5 billion worth of goods are smuggled through these jetties.⁴⁸

AHMADINEJAD, THE ABADGARAN AND THE REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS

The Politics of the Abadgaran

Mahmud Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 Iranian presidential elections came as a total surprise as the widely influential Rafsanjani was expected to make a comeback. Ahmadinejad's victory can be seen as a part of the increasing influence of the IRGC in Iranian politics considering the character of the support base that voted for the Abadgaran faction whose candidate Ahmadinejad was. The Basij, who form a good number of Iranian voters, voted for Ahmadinejad because of his past history and the nature of his personality. He was considered to be morally upright in comparison to Rafsanjani who was seen as linked with massive corruption in the system. Ahmadinejad was a member of the "Special Forces Brigade" in the IRGC and had fought in the Iran-Iraq War. In order to understand the true nature of the Abadgaran faction, it is important to make an addition to the model provided by Wilfried Buchta and mentioned earlier in this work. Walter Posch has added the "neo-conservatives" into the group of factions that make up the broad rightist faction. The Iranian neo-conservatives had in the beginning tried to organise themselves as a new radical leftist-fundamentalist organisation. Mohammad Mohammadi Reyshahri was the founder of the new organisation which was named the "Society for the Defence of the Values of the Islamic Revolution" and was politically opposed to the Islamic left which was still radical.

This new movement was directed against the then President Rafsanjani. It had strong links with extremist vigilant groups like Masud Dehnamaki's *ansar-e-hezbollah*, that, in turn, was closely connected to the Basij and elements in the Pasdaran and the Intelligence Ministry. Reyshari's attempt to win the presidency

48. Buchta, n. 11, p. 24.

in 1997 failed and he disbanded the organisation in 1998. This political option, however, remained on the margins of the political spectrum with big appeal amongst the Basij and the increasingly frustrated war-generation who saw themselves betrayed and denied the benefits of the revolution they had fought for. Abadgaran is the party that now functions as the new political outlet of the neo-conservatives. It is believed to have ties with extremists. The victory of Ahmadinejad can be seen as the outcome of a generation change among the traditional conservatives. Faced with Khatami's victory in the 1997 presidential elections and the loss of majority for the traditional rightists in the parliamentary elections in 2000, the younger generation of conservatives under the leadership of the Society of Islamic Engineers, of whom Ahmadinejad is a member, changed the message of the traditionalist rightists and accepted a more modern outlook.

The older generation of rightists helped the Abadgaran to come to power in the parliamentary elections of 2004 by preventing most reformist candidates from taking part in the elections. But, ultimately, it was the efforts of younger politicians like Mohammad Reza Bahonar, who was the president of the Islamic Engineers, which fetched victory for the Abadgaran. It was obvious that the neo-conservatives had set their eyes on the presidency in 2005. Ahmadinejad's appointment as mayor in Tehran appeared to be an attempt in this direction.⁴⁹ While the Abadgaran are ideologically hardcore and are from revolutionary guard backgrounds, they are not willing to accept the leadership of the older and clerical traditionalist rightists.⁵⁰

The Declining Popularity of Ahmadinejad

While the emergence of Ahmadinejad looked promising for the future of the revolutionary guards and the Basij in Iranian politics, his actions and declining domestic support has diminished such prospects. In the first few months of power, Ahmadinejad adopted a hardline stance on issues like the nuclear programme and Israel. This has brought Iran into a confrontationist position with the US and the European Union which is not liked by the rightists,

49. Walter Posch, *Islamist Neo-Cons Take Power in Iran*, Occasional Paper No. 3 (Ljubljana Institute for Security Studies, 2005), pp. 2-6.

50. Clawson and Rubin, n. 47, p. 161.

What has raised the domestic irk towards Ahmadinejad is his lacklustre performance on the economic front.

including Ahmadinejad's own allies. But what has raised the domestic irk towards Ahmadinejad is his lacklustre performance on the economic front. As he had come to power on the promise of shoring up Iran's economy and improving the living standards of the poor, the declining condition of the Iranian economy in spite of rising oil prices, affected his popularity. The economy is bedevilled by rising inflation, unemployment and rising prices in the housing sector. His policy of pumping petrodollars into the economy has only increased the deficit. These factors negatively affected the performance of the Abadgaran during the simultaneous elections for the Assembly of Experts and the municipal councils. The revolutionary guards and the Basij stayed away from the campaigning.⁵¹ This has given added confidence to rivals like Rafsanjani to attack Ahmadinejad's policies publicly in spite of Khamenei's support to him.⁵² Recently, the Majlis rejected three of Ahmadinejad's nominees for the post of oil minister, indicating that his former allies have begun withdrawing their support for him.⁵³ All these indicators point to the fact that there are less chances of Ahmadinejad getting elected for a second term. But what does the future hold in store for the IRGC with regard to its role in Iranian politics?

THE IRGC AND THE FUTURE OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

As has been already stated, the primary duty of the IRGC has been the protection of the Islamic Republic and its values and exporting these values to the wider Islamic world. These responsibilities of the IRGC are mainly of a political nature rather than a military one. This denotes that the IRGC is a predominantly political organisation which cannot be prevented from involvement in domestic politics. This does not naturally mean that the IRGC is bereft of its military responsibilities or will not fight an external invasion in the way it did during the

51. H. Graham Underwood and Ali Afshari, "Iran's Post-Election Balance," downloaded from http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/iran_election_4268.jsp on, June 12, 2007.

52. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6290101.stm.

53. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4462774.stm.

Iran-Iraq War. But the reality is that the IRGC is far changed from the times when it was a mere interest group, and is today an active player in Iranian politics. The loss of influence of either Ahmadinejad or the Abadgaran cannot be seen as sounding the death knell of the IRGC's political future. Since the nature of Iranian politics is very fluid, with individuals and institutions having links across the different political factions, an organisation like the IRGC can easily adapt according to changing circumstances and forge links with new political factions. At the same time, the Abadgaran cannot be completely written off as it is already distancing itself from the personality of Ahmadinejad.

This brings us to the question of whether the IRGC can be seen as a politically monolithic organisation. There are political differences within the IRGC itself. While the senior commanders are predominantly supporters of the traditionalist right, a good number of the rank and file were sympathisers of the Islamic left. One of the major reasons why the support of the IRGC personnel shifted to the Abadgaran was the increasing moderation in foreign policy by Khatami. These rank and file voters of the IRGC are increasingly being seen as an important voting bloc which can be a determining factor in Iranian politics. The general impression about Iran's politics in international media sources is that Iranian politicians who are conservative in social and cultural issues would also be supporters of spreading the Islamic revolution abroad. But the reality is just the opposite. While the traditional rightists are socially and culturally conservative, they do not support the spread of the revolutionary ideals beyond Iran's borders. While the Islamic left were firm supporters of spreading the revolution, they were not as conservative as the rightists on social and cultural issues. The Abadgaran chose to combine elements from both sides and while it believes in reinforcing the social and cultural norms of the revolution, it also has a radical foreign policy. The victory of the Abadgaran can also be seen as a part of the power struggle within the rightist faction. While revolutionary institutions like

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the IRGC whose members were predominantly from the lower and lower-middle classes were responsible for securing the stability of the Islamic Republic, political power was enjoyed mostly by the clerics. Ahmadinejad's victory can be seen as an outcome of efforts by former revolutionaries to bring power into the hands of the rightful inheritors of the revolution.

How has the Islamic Republic of Iran survived for 18 years after the death of Khomeini? The Iranian political system has been designed in such a manner that the office of the Supreme Leader is not affected by the disaffection of the Iranian population towards the president and his Cabinet. It is the sole responsibility of the president to introduce a manifesto and make sure that at least some of the proposals are implemented, while the Supreme Leader has to merely maintain the status quo. Things are made much more difficult in a situation where the

The Iranian political system has been designed in such a manner that the office of the Supreme Leader is not affected by the disaffection of the Iranian population towards the president and his Cabinet.

president does not have the mandate to restructure the political system. The post of the president has been occupied by politicians from different political factions, including the modernist right, the Islamic left and the neo-conservatives. Such a situation bodes ill for the future of the Iranian state in the long run though there is no sign of trouble in the near term. Once it is realised by the majority of the Iranian population that the political system cannot be changed by democratic norms, pro-democracy opposition and dissident movements can develop outside the political

system unlike the pattern that was seen since the death of Khomeini. As far as the IRGC is concerned, it would try to get former revolutionary guards and pro-IRGC clerics admitted into powerful institutions like the Council of Guardians and the Assembly of Experts rather than just focus on winning presidential and parliamentary elections. The political interests of the IRGC have been always served by keeping close links with the Supreme Leader.

It can be said that civil-military relations as such began in Iran during the

1920s when Reza Shah began to develop a powerful and modernised army. Until then, the monarchy had depended upon feudal and tribal chiefs to provide soldiers during times of war or revolt. In comparison with the military dictatorships in the Arab states, the military in Iran has always been subordinate to civilian rule. Such a situation prevailed in the Arab states like Egypt, Syria and Iraq because of the colonial legacy which created efficient bureaucracies and armed forces but no strong political movements. Iran had developed a strong political culture since the early 20th century which set it out on a political course different from that of the neighbouring states.

In comparison with the military dictatorships in the Arab states, the military in Iran has always been subordinate to civilian rule.

CONCLUSION

Today, the stability of the Islamic Republic does not depend on the personality of one individual as it did during the time of Ayatollah Khomeini. It is often hinted that Rafsanjani is bound to replace Khamenei as the Supreme Leader. But the stability of the republic is bound to hinge on alliances between institutions like the IRGC, which have a vital stake in the preservation of the system. Any democratic government that comes to power with complete authority is bound to dismantle revolutionary institutions like the IRGC. Therefore, it can be expected that the IRGC would be in the forefront of a struggle against pro-democracy forces. The IRGC, whether its senior commanders or the normal troops, is likely to support an aggressive foreign policy though it would not prefer hardline rhetoric of the type advocated by Ahmadinejad as it could have negative political consequences. The IRGC would, instead, prefer an external attack without any outright provocation by Iran as that could boost its popularity and support within the country. At the present moment, the IRGC's political influence shows no sign of diminishing.