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THESIS

**PASDARAN INCORPORATED:
EVOLVING FROM REVOLUTIONARY
TO PRAETORIAN GUARD**

by

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March 2010

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EVOLVING FROM REVOLUTIONARY TO PRAETORIAN GUARD**

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ABSTRACT

Although the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, also known as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), was originally an ideologically driven militia, it has recently taken an ever more assertive role in virtually every aspect of Iranian society. Why and how did the IRGC become such a relevant actor?

This study traces the historical and political evolution of the IRGC and challenges the conventional wisdom that portrays the Corps as a mere instrument of the state. Instead, it argues that the rise of the IRGC within the Iranian regime is the result of two negative dynamics in civil-military relations. First, the mismanagement of service rivalries between Iran's Army and the Corps allowed the latter to have excessive control over key state functions, including security strategy, foreign policy and the defense sector. Second, once empowered, there was nothing to keep the IRGC checked and balanced, since Iran suffers from a weak system of civilian control. These two perverse dynamics not only shaped the Corps' identity as a self-contained corporation, but it actually propelled it into the center of Iran's politics.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

C2 - command and control structure
CMR - civil-military relations
IIAF - Imperial Iranian Armed Forces
IRGAF - Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Air Force
IRGC - Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
IRGN - Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Navy
IRGQF - Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' *Qods* Force
IRI - Islamic Republic of Iran
IRIAF - Islamic Republic of Iran (Regular) Air Force
IRIN - Islamic Republic of Iran (Regular) Navy
JS - Joint Staff (of the Armed Forces)
LEF - Law Enforcement Forces
MFA - Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MODAFL - Ministry of Defense and the Armed Forces Logistics
MOI - Ministry of Interior
MOIS - Ministry of Intelligence and Security
ORBAT - order of battle
SNSC - Supreme National Security Council

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps¹ (IRGC) of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is a unique establishment that has few parallels in the past and none in the present.² Created during the Islamic revolution of 1978–1979, the corps evolved over three decades from a vigilante-group nucleus into one of the major and most influential state institutions in Iran. The phenomenon of the *Pasdaran* has many distinctive dimensions that are relevant to research in fields such as Iranian and regional studies, national security affairs, military politics, terrorism, and asymmetric and unconventional warfare. Yet an important factor that has been overlooked and underestimated has surfaced just recently—namely, civil–military relations.

Until recently, conventional wisdom saw the IRGC as just a paramilitary element of the IRI national-security system. It was generally portrayed as a force fully subordinate to and controlled by the ruling clerics, who used the IRGC as a counterbalance to the regular armed forces and as a tool of control and coercion over society in general and political opposition in particular.³ However, there is mounting evidence that the corps has already surpassed the assumptions appropriate to an ordinary component of the security system. The IRGC currently wields responsibility over an impressive variety of functions, missions, and tasks in the defense, security, political, ideological, and economic domains of Iran, to a degree that overrides any other known military or paramilitary force or security apparati worldwide. Over the past thirty years, the pathological state of civil–military relations in Iran contributed to the formation of a *Pasdaran* corporate identity, strengthening its capabilities and creating potential

¹ In Farsi, *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghab Eslami*. Hereafter, in this text the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps will be called the *Pasdaran*, the corps, the guards or the IRGC.

² Two comparative historical examples to mention are the SS establishment in Nazi Germany during World War II and the Republican Guard that existed before the regime change in Iraq.

³ For an example of a “traditional” point of view, see Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 175–176.

incentives, if not outright designs, to take over the state. The IRGC represents a fascinating and symbolic case of malfunction in civil–military relations in general and of civilian control in particular, thus providing an inspiring subject of study.

The main purpose of this thesis is to challenge the still-widespread perception that paints the IRGC as a tool at the disposal of the theocratic regime and state. That view was indeed relevant in the recent past stages in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Instead, this thesis argues that the corps is currently sidelining its civilian principal—the clerical regime—and steadily moving to where it might be able to establish control *de facto* over the key segments and nodes of the state. The thesis supports an emerging alternative view that the current clergy-centered system is devolving into a facade for a “creeping coup” by the guards.⁴

Accordingly, this thesis addresses the following puzzle: How was the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps able to challenge the power of its civilian principals, when it was merely created as a “trusted agent,” delegated with domestic security missions? In other words, what chain of events and set of factors led to the rise of the corps as a major actor and stakeholder in the Islamic Republic of Iran?

This thesis argues that the rise of the *Pasdaran* was essentially an unintended consequence of its having been delegated many functions by the ruling regime (mainly by the clergy establishment). The regime’s motives were to assure its own existence and achieve political and ideological goals, both domestic and foreign. However, this excessive empowerment, with its associated privileges, impunity, and freedom of action, as well as the secrecy, lack of transparency, and unaccountability it was afforded, created a breach in civil–military relations in Iran. This, in turn, shaped the corps into a self-contained, elitist corporation and propelled it into the center of Iranian politics—eventually setting the preconditions for a potential takeover of the state.

Accordingly, the problem in question will be treated and analyzed primarily as a phenomenon in civil–military relations (CMR) rather than through the prism of domestic,

⁴ Michael Slackman, “Hard-Line Force Extends Grip over a Splintered Iran,” *New York Times*, July 21, 2009, A.1.

regional, or international politics. Other related issues, such as Iran's nuclear program, state support to terrorism, meddling in Iraq, and other high-profile issues, although cited, are not the subject matter of this thesis.

This study advances the proposition that excessive empowerment of the corps was a result of corrupt, poorly functioning, mishandled civil–military relations in Iran, particularly in the areas of civilian control and national-security decision making. Though CMR is mismanaged by the regime in different ways, one component is especially important in contributing to the *Pasdaran's* ascendance. This component is *interservice rivalry*—a commonplace reality within the military domain that skillful civilian principals use as an effective technique of CMR management—but which, in Iran, was either misused or not used at all.

This mismanagement of CMR is a sub-product of Iran's complex system of power and politics. Its hallmarks are the centrality of a single figure (the IRI supreme leader), the predominance of politico-ideological (religious) paradigms, the creation of hollow institutions, the exaggerated importance of personal relationships, and the existence of a constellation of informal groups, networks, and centers of power, driven by competition and rivalry. These factors led to the emergence of the IRGC as the *dominant* actor of defense and security sector in Iran with the established privileged relations with the supreme leader and his allies. These relations have evolved to a level of symbiosis; the corps has pledged its hard-power support and loyalty in exchange for endorsement and material incentives. The primary interlocutor on behalf of the IRGC in these symbiotic relations with the leader is an elitist-corporate group of acting and former servicemen with high governmental or social status (informally known as the corps' "alumni").⁵ This alliance is wrapped in a veil of politico-ideological sanctimony due to the IRGC's official role as the "guardians of the revolution" and justifying its upgraded status. At the same time, other peers from the defense and security sector, foremost among them the regular

⁵ The notion of the IRGC alumni was developed in several sources and gradually became used in analytical discourse, though the initial source of this definition is not established. For example, see: Reza Zarabi, "The Sepah Pasdaran: Changing Tides in Iran's Power Paradigm," *Global Politics* 6 (May 16, 2008), <http://www.global-politics.com/issue6/Zarabi> (accessed January 3, 2010).

army (a.k.a. the *Artesh*),⁶ are sidelined or even suppressed. This gulf between the corps and the “others” is observable in different fields of interservice rivalry, such as influence over security, foreign policies, information and intelligence, and war doctrines, as well as competition over institutional capabilities, responsibilities, and resources. In all these fields of rivalry, the corps is entrenched as the prevailing force. In the absence of checks and balances provided by equally strong, competing services and agencies, the corps is emboldened by almost unrestrained freedom of action.

The factors contributing into the increase of the IRGC’s role are: (i) its empowerment by the supreme leader; (ii) its inherent political role, granted upon its creation and amplified by further politicization; (iii) its corporatism and separate institutional identity; and (iv) a virtual absence of the checks, balances and governmental levers of influence that are the product of sustained interservice rivalry. The IRGC’s powers were granted intentionally. All these factors have led to unintended and perhaps unanticipated outcome.

The main argument of this thesis is that the regime violated the core principle of interservice rivalry, which is equal treatment of all participants. By the permanent, one-sided privileging of the IRGC, the regime, or more precisely, its dominant faction, deprived itself of an effective lever and created an environment where no other service or agency, individually or together, is in a position to counterweight or contain the corps. This distorted, politicized, and uneven interservice rivalry has crippled the CMR dynamic and triggered the strategic politics currently observed in Iran.

B. IMPORTANCE

A number of policy and theoretical issues justify this thesis. From the policy perspective, given that the growing role of the IRGC corporate elite is far beyond its own institutional framework, the study of the *Pasdaran* phenomenon will provide an understanding of current and future dynamics in Iran and its region, especially in light of

⁶ The regular army (or *Artesh* in Farsi) in Iranian discourse refers to a regular armed forces, consisting of the ground, air, and naval forces. Subsequently, both terms (army and *Artesh*) are used in the text exactly in this meaning.

the Iranian nuclear quest and defiant international behavior. A civil-military relations problem, which once originated domestically in Iran, may now have broader regional and international implications. In other words, if Iran emerges as a serious international challenge, the IRGC will be at the very heart of it.

From a theoretical point of view—though at a glance the case in focus appears to be an isolated phenomenon concerning a rare type of political regime (theocracy), as well as a product of Iran’s unique military dualism⁷—the study is still relevant for a number of reasons. First, it provides insights in identifying patterns of CMR in nondemocratic (authoritarian) regimes, whereas the current literature concentrates primarily on democracies or states in transition, leaving “the rest” largely out of consideration. Second, the study of the IRGC phenomenon provides an opportunity to understand how excessive empowerment eventually corporatizes military elites by providing strong incentives to concentrate more power. Third, the case in question provides insights about the politicization and indoctrination of the military and security forces within a regime (otherwise known as subjective civilian control) and its unintended consequences. Fourth, it illustrates how overdependence on the part of a regime that is focused on a survivalist agenda enables its protectors to defeat the notion of civilian control. Fifth, it helps in evaluating how tools of military influence (such as information asymmetry, doctrinal monopoly, and institutional autonomy) deform interaction between the governments and the militaries in the field national-security decision-making. Sixth, it identifies patterns and techniques for bypassing, overcoming, or mitigating civilian checks and balances.

There are additional reasons for pursuing this study as well. The role of paramilitary forces in general—their positioning within a political regime and relationships with other institutions such as the regular armed forces—has not been sufficiently explored.⁸ More particularly, the study of CMR in Iran is an unexplored and

⁷ The phenomenon of the Iranian military dualism is based on the existence of two parallel forces (the regular armed forces and IRGC) and elaborated in more detail in Chapter III of the thesis.

⁸ Morris Janowitz, *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing Nations* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), ix.

neglected field;⁹ “many studies of the Iranian military have failed to take into account the relationship between the military establishment and the state apparatus.”¹⁰ It is modestly hoped that this research will partially bridge this gap.

C. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research question and hypothesis were inspired by certain concepts in the CMR literature. Civil–military relations are a broad category in social science, and some social-science theories are applied. However, this analysis will focus primarily on interservice rivalry and certain ideas in this regard as developed by Samuel P. Huntington,¹¹ Kenneth Allard,¹² and Richard K. Betts,¹³ among others.

Despite the pejorative connotation associated with the term, interservice rivalry is not necessarily a negative or harmful phenomenon.¹⁴ Contrary to the conventional wisdom, rivalry does not undermine civilian control over the military forces and its services. Quite the opposite: a “transition from civilian-service controversy to interservice controversy as the main focus of service political activity” has a direct and positive impact on CMR, by making a “potential conflict between civil and military institutions...sublimated and deflected into conflict among the services. Interservice controversy is substituted for civil-military controversy.”¹⁵ Civil authorities use division

⁹ Ahmed S. Hashim, “Civil-Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” in Joseph A. Kechichian, ed., *Iran, Iraq, and the Arab Gulf States* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 31–32.

¹⁰ Babak Ganji, “Civil-Military Relations, State Strategies and Presidential Elections in Iran,” *Conflict Studies Research Centre at the Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, Middle East* 05/26 (June 2005), 1, [http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/middle-east/05\(26\)-BG.pdf](http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/middle-east/05(26)-BG.pdf) (accessed July 24, 2009).

¹¹ Samuel P. Huntington, “Interservice Competition and the Political Roles of the Armed Services,” *The American Political Science Review* 55, no. 1 (March 1961), 40–52.

¹² Kenneth Allard, *Command, Control, and the Common Defense* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1996).

¹³ Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Cold War Crises* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991).

¹⁴ Huntington, “Interservice Competition and the Political Roles of the Armed Services,” 40, and Allard, *Command, Control, and the Common Defense*, 8.

¹⁵ Huntington, “Interservice Competition and the Political Roles of the Armed Services,” 41.

and friction between the services for purposes of control in almost every modern state, notwithstanding the type of political regime,¹⁶ using disagreement to “keep a maximum number of strategy choices and policy options.”¹⁷

The sources of interservice rivalry vary. They are largely shaped by the domains of warfare a service operates in (land, air, or sea) and the weapons used.¹⁸ Different ways of war result in differing professional and operational cultures and contrasting perspectives on division of labor and priorities of roles, missions and capabilities.¹⁹ Differences over budgets and procurements naturally follow.²⁰

Interservice rivalry is essentially a tension between the need for synergistic effort from the military forces as a whole versus the individual services’ need to maintain internal loyalty and protect organizational interests (autonomy, status, levels, and missions).²¹ The key areas under discussion will be command and control, division of labor, doctrine, and finances.²² It is important to note that division and rivalry take place not only among services, but within them as well.²³ The actors behind intra-service rivalry are the “elite nuclei” and informal groupings that can provide additional levers of influence to civilian principals.²⁴

The various ideologies of the services (particularly as reflected in their strategic and tactical doctrines) play an important role in driving rivalry.²⁵ They are linked to a given geostrategic environment and nature of present threats. Depending on those threats,

¹⁶ Huntington, “Interservice Competition and the Political Roles of the Armed Services,” 42.

¹⁷ Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Cold War Crises*, 117.

¹⁸ Huntington, “Interservice Competition and the Political Roles of the Armed Services,” 41, and Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Cold War Crises*, 122.

¹⁹ Allard, *Command, Control, and the Common Defense*, 4–6.

²⁰ Huntington, “Interservice Competition and the Political Roles of the Armed Services,” 40, and Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Cold War Crises*, 117.

²¹ Allard, *Command, Control, and the Common Defense*, 8, and Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Cold War Crises*, 117–118.

²² Allard, *Command, Control, and the Common Defense*, 15, and Huntington, “Interservice Competition and the Political Roles of the Armed Services,” 40.

²³ Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Cold War Crises*, 126.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁵ Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Cold War Crises*, 117.

a service might gain the advantage in determining national-security strategy. For instance, the U.S. Air Force dominated the field of national strategy between 1945 and 1961, when the need to contain communism was paramount. By contrast, the U.S. Army largely determined the strategies and policies of 1961 to 1972, the period of the Vietnam War.²⁶ Still, at least in democratic political settings, “changes in service interests and ideologies are more likely to derive from civilian policy changes than to determine it.”²⁷ Among the major drivers of interservice rivalries are the services’ separate identities. Those identities are shaped by tradition and a “profound historical legacy” that produces intellectual and psychological distinctions.²⁸

Most certainly, interservice rivalry has disadvantages, such as duplication, high cost, and friction,²⁹ which might affect the operational (i.e., war-fighting) effectiveness of the armed forces.³⁰ However, the benefits of civil–military relations in general—and for those exercising civilian control in particular—is still greater.³¹ While politically weakening the armed forces as a whole through rivalry, the civilian authority strengthens the motivation of the individual services to act as responsible, restrained political players and thus promote their own interests.³²

Western theory is not always helpful in assessing CMR phenomena in other parts of the world, especially in developing countries with nondemocratic political regimes. Indeed the literature on such is relatively scarce, yet it is possible to recognize certain patterns and trends in the Mid-Eastern region in general and Iran in particular. In the settings mentioned above, interservice rivalry as a CMR management technique is implemented in the form of military dualism, or dichotomy (i.e., the creation of twin military forces with disparate statuses). One manifestation of such a policy is a formation

²⁶ Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Cold War Crises*, 122–125.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁸ Allard, *Command, Control, and the Common Defense*, 8–10.

²⁹ Huntington, “Interservice Competition and the Political Roles of the Armed Services,” 40.

³⁰ Allard, *Command, Control, and the Common Defense*, 1.

³¹ Huntington, “Interservice Competition and the Political Roles of the Armed Services,” 42.

³² *Ibid.*, 44.

of “highly ideological parallel military structures.”³³ Those paramilitary “ideological militias” are closely linked with authoritarian states concerned about the loyalty of their militaries. The militias are intended to balance the regular defense forces. However, at a certain point the distinction and separation between the regular and paramilitary forces in performing external defense and internal (political) security missions might become blurred, or altered in favor of the paramilitary force, especially at the post-revolutionary, stabilization stage.³⁴ The creation of a parallel paramilitary branch to provide checks and balances against the regular military launches a spiral of competition, involving the establishment as *de facto* tool of political struggle at the disposal of different groups within the regime. This competition in turn amplifies already existing interservice friction and affects civil–military relations.³⁵ Since the concern over the regime’s survival from *internal* threats becomes predominant, its policy towards the military turns towards strengthening the components and nodes of interservice rivalry, which weakens its defensive capability.³⁶

Notwithstanding these differences, interservice rivalry, if applied rightly, becomes an effective management tool over the defense and security sector. It helps reduce the excessive political energy of the military establishment by redirecting it into narrow professional competition. It gives an opportunity to create a system of mutual checks and balances. Finally, it gives the civil authority an effective lever with which to influence military organizations.

³³ Mehran Kamrava, “Military Professionalization and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East,” *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 1 (Spring 2000), 82-87, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2658034> (accessed August 13, 2009).

³⁴ Janowitz, *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing Nations*, 30.

³⁵ Hashim, “Civil-Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 37–38, 51, and Risa Brooks, “Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East,” in Nora Bensahel and Daniel L. Byman, eds., *The Future Security Environment in the Middle East: Conflict, Stability and Political Change* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), 129–162.

³⁶ Barry Rubin, “The Military in Contemporary Middle East Politics,” in Barry Rubin and Thomas A. Keaney, eds., *Armed Forces in the Middle East: Politics and Strategy* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 2, 5–9.

D. ORGANIZATION OF THIS THESIS

The thesis is structured as follows: the introduction in Chapter I, Chapter II places the IRGC in a strategic context, tracing the underlying causes and patterns of the corps' emergence, empowerment and ascendancy through different stages: the revolution (1979–1980), the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988), the “Second Republic” (1988–1997), the “Third Republic” (1997–2005), and the “Fourth Republic” (since 2005). The chapter concludes with a summary of findings.

Chapter III provides an overview of the national-security system, decision-making process, and tools of civilian control. The emphasis is the flaws and pathologies of the system that have made the IRGC able to overcome the engines of control and operate as an independent and influential actor.

Chapter IV presents a focused case study of a selected slice of CMR and civilian control: the domain of interservice rivalry between Iran's military forces. It addresses the issue of services' identities and institutional cultures as sources of difference and rivalry between them, traces the origins and nature of rivalry between the IRGC and its competitors throughout different periods of time. It also provides an analysis of this rivalry in fields such as national-security strategy, foreign policy, intelligence, military doctrine, institutional influences, and competition for resources. Finally, it addresses the societal aspects of the rivalry.

Chapter V follows with a summation and conclusion, including findings and possible scenarios in relation to the issues in focus.

II. CORPS: THE “GRAND PICTURE”

A. INTRODUCTION

The Iranian people trace their national identity back three millennia, and military tradition is deeply rooted in the culture.³⁷ Multiple wars, always imminent due to Iran's location and history, through the centuries have promoted a societal respect and piety toward the military profession in Iran. Military force was the mainstay of power for ruling dynasties. However, since Iran has emerged as a nation-state in the modern history, the military never performed as an independent actor, nor intervened in political processes. Even in 1953, when the Imperial Iranian Armed Forces (IIAF) staged a coup to overthrow the government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh,³⁸ it acted at the behest of the shah, the supreme commander in chief. In some previous and post-coup cases, the military performed as an object rather than a subject of politics, loyal first to the monarchy and only then to the state.³⁹ Such nonengagement in politics earned the military the nickname “*the Big Mute*” in Iranian society.⁴⁰ This factor played one of the crucial roles in the collapse of the throne in 1979.

The Islamic Revolution of 1978–1979, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, was one of the major tectonic, sociopolitical shifts of the latter third of the past century.⁴¹ During the revolution, the army did little to save the monarchy, though mass popular uprising was

³⁷ Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 1–10.

³⁸ Michael Barutciski, “Iran,” in Karl DeRouen Jr. and Uk Heo, eds., *Defense & Security: A Compendium of National Armed Forces & Security Policies* 1 (Santa Barbara CA, Denver CO, Oxford UK: ABC-CLIO Inc, 2005), 307.

³⁹ Michael Rubin, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guard – a Rogue Outfit?” *The Middle East Quarterly* XV, no. 4 (Fall 2008), <http://www.meforum.org/1990/irans-revolutionary-guards-a-rogue-outfit> (accessed July 15, 2009).

⁴⁰ Amir Taheri, “The Monster and Cinderella.” *Al-Arabiya.com*, October 16, 2009, <http://www.alarabiya.net/views/2009/10/16/88272.html> (accessed October 31, 2009). However, the opposite view that portrays the Iranian military as always been a political force. For example see: Hashim, “Civil-Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 33.

⁴¹ For more details on the revolution see: “Iranian Revolution at 30,” *The Middle East Institute Special Viewpoint* (2009), http://www.mei.edu/Portals/0/Publications/Iran_Final.pdf (accessed November 1, 2009).

treated with continuous use of deadly force throughout the months of unrest. A military government was imposed in November 1978 in a futile effort to end the upheaval by means of the iron fist.⁴² However, the departure of the shah abroad in January 1979 deeply demoralized the military elite,⁴³ groomed by the monarch, but disconnected from both society and reality. The IIAF rapidly crumbled, especially due to the revolutionaries' ability to drive a wedge between the upper- and junior-officer corps and amid ranks already divided by social-class affiliation.⁴⁴ The uprising of the air-force warrant officers and technicians in Tehran on February 9, 1979, correlated with a claim of neutrality by the IIAF top commanders, stated at the meeting of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces two days later,⁴⁵ made the victory of the revolution irreversible. On February 11, 1979, the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran was proclaimed.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps was a child of the Islamic Revolution. Created for the protection of the new Islamic republic, in thirty years it went through an unprecedented evolution. One outcome was that the corps became the first military force in modern Iranian history to operate as an independent player with the potential to take over the state. To understand the present and assess the future, one must review the past. This chapter traces the *Pasdaran's* ascendancy to show how power was gained, as analyzed from the perspective of civil–military relations.

B. POST-REVOLUTIONARY STAGE (1979–1980): INCEPTION

In the immediate post-revolutionary stage, the new regime that emerged from the rubble of monarchy represented an unlikely alliance of different political factions and forces, facing four complex and interrelated security challenges: to reestablish and maintain order; to keep the country from falling apart; to prevent an anticipated military coup by the perceived pro-monarchy elements left over in the top army command; and to

⁴² Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 218.

⁴³ Hashim, "Civil-Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 36.

⁴⁴ Mark Roberts, "Khomeini's Incorporation of the Iranian Military," *McNair Papers 48*, *National Defense University* (1996), <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/mcnair/mcnair48/mcnair48.pdf> (accessed July 26, 2009), 13.

⁴⁵ Hashim, "Civil-Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 37.

severe the link between regrouping monarchists abroad and any revisionist forces inside the country. In other words, the new regime desperately needed to keep disruptive elements and potential opposition under control, the army down, and monarchists out. To fulfill this mission, the Islamic government required a trusted security force, which it would need to create.

At the cumulative stage of the revolution in late 1978 to early 1979, a broad variety of paramilitary structures had emerged, such as party militias, urban self-defense groups, personal security details, and army defectors' groups. After the overthrow of the monarchy, in the midst of an enduring mess and rapidly exacerbating struggle for power between secular and religious trends within the new regime, hard-line Islamic factions were able to rapidly intercept an agenda and fill the power vacuum by creating their own enforcement "triad," encompassing the revolutionary committees (command and control structures), revolutionary tribunals (law enforcement), and vigilantes. The latter consisted primarily, but not only, of radical university students or members of the lower class who had been recruited into the revolutionary movement, providing muscle for the two first legs of the triad. On May 5, 1979, these groups were merged as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, which was officially endorsed by Ayatollah Khomeini on December 4, 1979.⁴⁶ An official institutionalization gave the corps formal legitimization. Within months of its creation, the corps was already heavily engaged in the political processes, taking part in the repression of monarchist and other opposition elements as well as suppressing the rising separatist movements of ethnic Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen on the borders. However, the paramount task for the new force was not just to counterbalance, but effectively neutralize the former IIAF (since renamed the Islamic Republic of Iran Army).

⁴⁶ Mahjoob Zweiri, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps: Guardians of Revolutionary Order," *Islam Online*, October 16, 2007, http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&pagename=Zone-English-Muslim_Affairs%2FMAELayout&cid=1190886371485 (accessed December 14, 2009) and Ali Alfoneh, "The Revolutionary Guards' Role in the Iranian Politics," *Middle East Quarterly* XV, no. 4 (Fall 2008), <http://www.aei.org/article/28594> (accessed November 30, 2009).

During the revolution, the IIAF was deeply demoralized and effectively disintegrated.⁴⁷ However, though the army command declared its political neutrality and accepted the *fait accompli*, it felt betrayed, disoriented, and humiliated by the need to shift loyalty.⁴⁸ At the same time, the most influential wing of the new regime, associated with the clerics, deeply mistrusted the military. Despite of the fact that the army's inaction helped overthrow the monarchy, the military was viewed as an inherently counterrevolutionary force, perceived through a lens of anti-Americanism, especially because a portion of the officer corps in the previous decade had been trained in the USA or by American advisors.⁴⁹ The new regime dealt with the former shah's military in an extremely radical way, by unfolding a campaign of repression against the higher echelon of the officer corps. Hundreds of generals and senior officers were executed, imprisoned, prematurely retired, or forced into exile. For instance, to understand the scope of the purges, between February 13 and 18, not less than eight top generals faced the firing squad, while 156 more generals and admirals were forcibly retired within one week, between February 17 and 24 (as estimated in an official media report).⁵⁰ At the same time, junior and inexperienced officers, as well as those retired by the shah for their political activities, were pushed into key commands.

The stress put on the military by spiraling repression, political disarray, and consolidation of the opposition, eventually led to the new regime's obsessive fears of a coup d'état becoming materialized in reality. A conspiracy linked to pro-shah emigrants abroad and aimed at toppling the government by force (known in the modern Iranian political discourse as the *Negab* plot) was interdicted at an air-force base at a very last moment in July 1980, involving a massive use of the *Pasdaran* to suppress the perpetrators.⁵¹ The event taught the regime two lessons: first, it verified its worst

⁴⁷ Roberts, *Khomeini's Incorporation of the Iranian Military* (McNair Papers 48).

⁴⁸ For more details see, Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 221–230.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Compiled from: Roberts, "Khomeini's Incorporation of the Iranian Military," 26–27.

⁵¹ Babak Ganji, "Civil-Military Relations, State Strategies and Presidential Elections in Iran," *Conflict Studies Research Centre at the Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, Middle East* 05/26 (June 2005), [http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/middle-east/05\(26\)-BG.pdf](http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/middle-east/05(26)-BG.pdf) (accessed July 24, 2009), 2.

expectations regarding the military, and second, it proved the high utility of the IRGC as a counterbalance and internal-security tool. The corps attained a domestic security role as a guarantor of regime survival, creating an initial dependency that it would be able to exploit to its own benefit in subsequent stages. Moreover, it emerged as a parallel tier in the new defense system of the IRI that irreversibly took its “dual” shape. Within its first year of existence, the IRGC grew from 6,000 to 100,000 members.⁵²

The IRGC, from its very creating, was an indoctrinated force, reflecting the nature of the emerging regime, which used religion-centered ideology to control the corps itself and the wider audience through it. The politico-ideological modalities of the emerging corps were highlighted by its association with the zealous students who participated in the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in November 1979, many of whom soon joined its ranks.⁵³ By 1980, the IRGC became a full-fledged actor on the Iranian political stage. Yet, at that period it did not act independently, but rather as a coercive tool at the disposal of the rapidly shaping Khomeinist trend within the regime.

C. WAR (1980–1988): BAPTISM OF FIRE

In September 1980, Iran was invaded by Iraq; the decision to attack was particularly inspired by a perception of the military weakness of the Islamic Republic, as revealed by the attempted coup, and a predicted imminent collapse of the regime.⁵⁴ Partially, those assumptions proved true, since initially the Iranian army gave some ground to the enemy. However, the hard-line clerical factions within the regime used the factor of foreign aggression to rally the population around the national cause and consequently destroy political foes inside, to strengthen their grip over the country. The eight-year war propelled the *Pasdaran* to a new level.

The immediate and desperate defensive efforts to hold the crumbling front and stop the Iraqi advance required the deployment of the guard units as a conventional

⁵² Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America* (New York, NY: Random House, 2004), 151.

⁵³ Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 236–238.

⁵⁴ Efraim Karsh, *The Iran–Iraq War 1980–1988* (Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Osprey Publishing Ltd, 2002), 14.

fighting force, for which they were not initially trained. The *Pasdaran* became a major contributing factor in the emergence of what is now called the “Iranian way of war.”⁵⁵ Though discussion of the operational aspects is not a purpose of this thesis, there are two relevant socio-political dimensions. First, the use of poorly trained guard soldiers and militiamen from the *Basij* volunteer force, controlled by the IRGC, for the attacks against a well-entrenched enemy who enjoyed overwhelming firepower, led to enormous loss in human lives, growing from one campaign to another. The phenomenon of “human waves” attacks, not acceptable in Western politico-cultural settings, was common in the Iran-Iraq war, being magnified by certain specifics of the Shiite trend of Islam emphasizing a “cult of martyrdom.”⁵⁶ In the post-war period it was translated into the widespread fame and popularity of the corps, increasing its social capital. It also helped define the asymmetric war-fighting *modus operandi* that constitutes one of the major pillars of current doctrinal dominance of the corps in the field of national defense (as discussed in Chapter IV). Furthermore, the existing revolutionary core of the IRGC was augmented by the addition of citizen soldiers, due to a mandatory war mobilization and Iran's transition into a “nation at arms.” Consequently, the corps gained a strong social dimension by fighting in a war that left a deep footprint in the modern Iranian psyche, with its draft soldiers who were brought from every corner of the country and represented all but one of its social strata and ethnic groups. The war expanded the future societal outreach of the corps.

Even more important for the topic of this research, the war coined the institutional and corporate identity of the *Pasdaran*. The members who joined the corps at the wave of revolution shortly before the war, under the call of the religious leaders, were mostly young men in their early 20s (i.e., student aged) with limited life experience. The war shaped their beliefs, visions, and philosophy, broadly enhancing their practical

⁵⁵ For details see, William D. Bryant, *The Iranian Way of War* (Maxwell, AL: School of Advanced Air & Space Studies at Air University, 2007).

⁵⁶ For explanation and more details, see Sepehr Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 1988), 140–141, and Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War 1980–1988*, 39.

knowledge and skills.⁵⁷ The latter meant a *de facto* professionalization. However, the first-generation *Pasdaran* was self-professionalized in the school of battle (learning by fighting) rather than in military academies. All acting and former members of the IRGC alumni, placed currently in top positions in the state and security establishment, are graduates of the battlefield. Thus, the professionalization of the corps occurred not through “civilianization” of the military, as in Western-type democracies, but to the contrary, through the militarization of a large mass of people with an essentially civilian background (this issue will be addressed in more detail in Chapter IV). During the war, the corps achieved its institutional ego and corporate identity, realizing itself as an entity. Henceforth the terms “corps,” “IRGC,” and “*Pasdaran*,” depending on the context, are used in this text to identify not only the institution itself, but also the “corporation”—a broader category of individuals who left it technically, yet remaining tied by political, ideological, and spiritual affiliation.

The war caused a paradoxical effect on the relations between the *Pasdaran* and *Artesh*. On one side, it helped close the gap between the ranks and junior officers of both Iranian military systems fighting for the national cause, and even to create a spirit of solidarity and comradeship. On the other hand, it generated mounting friction over operational conduct and overall strategy between the army command and the IRGC commanders. Since the Iraqi advance had stalled by 1981, the immediate threat of defeat had therefore waned. Consequently, the struggle for power between the secular and clerical groupings within Iranian leadership, which had diminished during the invasion, erupted again. This rift obviously affected the course of war by placing domestic political considerations ahead of effective strategy (as illustrated in Chapter IV). In 1986 the IRGC the radical clergy from the other part of regime, supported by hawkish guard commanders, were able, over the objection of the army, to convince Ayatollah Khomeini, the IRI supreme leader, to commit resources into a massive last effort against Iraq.⁵⁸ However, the “year of the last offensive” claimed in January 1987, turned into a disaster

⁵⁷ Farideh Fahri, “The Antinomies of Iran’s War Generation,” in *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick (Gordonville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

⁵⁸ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America*, 221–223.

with no gains and dozens of thousands of deaths. Iraq not only endured but was able to deliver substantial blows to the Iranians. In August 1988, Iran had to accept reality and agree on a ceasefire, thus putting the war to an end.

Politicization of the war strategy and the associated decision-making process provided the corps more clout, and in particular led to an institutional expansion of the corps. While formally remaining a paramilitary entity in status, it was organizationally spread into a tri-service conventional military structure by 1985.⁵⁹ The war indicated emergence of the IRGC influence on the war-fighting doctrines and decision-making process that is still enjoyed now.

The war period added to the IRGC's role one more important feature. When Israel invaded Lebanon in summer 1982, large numbers of corps members were deployed as “volunteers” to fight the “Zionist enemy” at the behest of the regime, who identified it as another rallying cause for the nation.⁶⁰ For the first time the corps tested the waters of the covert and overt revolutionary missions abroad that soon became its trademark and created a high degree of influence on the entire security and foreign policy of the IRI.

D. THE “SECOND REPUBLIC” (1988–1997): CONSOLIDATION

The end of a protracted war of attrition with Iraq and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 were a critical junction in Iran’s history. The closure of a decade of post-revolutionary mess and wartime suffering brought to the a forefront the need for political stabilization and economic rebuilding, which became the primary task of President A. Hashemi-Rafsanjani, who served two consecutive terms from 1989 till 1997. In this period, for the first time, the regime demonstrated some signs of fear of the radicalism of the guard, which had become resurgent in its strength and morale during the conflict with Iraq.⁶¹ As in many other historical cases of unsuccessful wars, the emergent

⁵⁹ Kenneth Katzman, “The Pasdaran: Institutionalization of Revolutionary Armed Forces,” *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 3-4 (Summer / Fall 1993), 390–402.

⁶⁰ Doron Zimmermann, *Tangled Skein or Gordian Knot? Iran and Syria as State Supporters of Political Violence Movements in the Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories* (Zurich: Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, 2004), 16.

⁶¹ Ali Alfoneh, “The Revolutionary Guards’ Role in the Iranian Politics.”

task was to control thousands of seasoned and zealous, but disaffected, veterans, subordinate to empowered generals. This task was fulfilled in several ways.

The first step was a gradual demobilization of the draftees and flushing of war volunteers from the ranks. Simultaneously, the government detached the mobilization force *Basij* from the IRGC structure to limit its power. Further, it restrained the institutional framework of the guards, disbanding in the process the bureaucratic tug-of-war its ministry created in 1982.⁶² And most important, the Hashemi-Rafsanjani government turned back again towards the *Artesh*. The army had been exonerated by its brave and professional conduct during the war,⁶³ cleared of its pro-monarchy stigma, and was now viewed as a counterbalance to the guards (i.e., almost the mirror of the situation less than a decade earlier). One of the indicators of the resurgent role of the regular army, perhaps, was that most of the new weapons purchased abroad during that period, were transferred to its control, while the *Pasdaran* mostly retained war trophies taken from Iraq.⁶⁴

Yet, these quite short sticks came in packages with long carrots. The way chosen to keep the radical guard elements disenchanted by the war's outcome at bay and to prevent them from turning against the regime, reflected the specifically cultural dimension of Iran. The key Guards commanders were awarded with lucrative economic opportunities arising from the launch of a massive rebuilding and reconstruction campaign.⁶⁵ Arranged through specially created funds (known in Farsi as *bonyads*),⁶⁶ the campaign was essentially a distribution of reconstruction contracts and financial credits on the basis of political loyalty. It was supervised personally by Ayatollah Ali

⁶² Kenneth Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 105.

⁶³ Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 304–305.

⁶⁴ Frederick Kagan, "Security Structures of Iran," *Iran Tracker*, February 20, 2009, <http://www.irantracker.org/basics/security-structures-iran> (accessed December 12, 2009).

⁶⁵ Ali Alfoneh, "How Intertwined are the Revolutionary Guards in Iran's Economy?" *Iran Tracker*, October 22, 2007, <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/how-intertwined-are-revolutionary-guards-irans-economy> (accessed October 18, 2009).

⁶⁶ Bobby Gosh, "Iran's Quiet Coup," *Time*, October 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1924402,00.html> (accessed October 11, 2009).

Khamenei,⁶⁷ who replaced Khomeini as supreme leader. This process marked the beginning of the accumulation of fiscal resource and material wealth (later reinvested into other fields) by the emerging corps' elite. This new elite was represented by the active service officers in the command echelon and those retired guardsmen (mostly young people still in their 30s, from the urban lower class) who left the service for civilian opportunities yet kept intact their ties with comrades in arms and the institutional identity shaped by war. The economic windfall of the early and mid-90s was significant in the empowerment of the Corps for three reasons. It marked the beginning of its power as an oligarchy, strengthened its social significance, and began the crucial relational link between the guards' alumni and the supreme leader.⁶⁸

The reasons for emergence of "deep and symbiotic" relationships⁶⁹ between the IRGC and the new supreme leader were political. Khamenei, being less powerful, having no such strong sacral aura as his predecessor Ayatollah Khomeini, and dealing with strong politicians such as Rafsanjani, needed a strong ally. In exchange for its pledged loyalty, the corps apparently got material incentives, simultaneously maximizing its maneuverability on the domestic political field. The first indicators of the corps taking sides in the atmosphere of growing friction between the Khamenei and Hashemi-Rafsanjani followed public criticism of the president's policy as "deviant from the revolutionary course."⁷⁰

Most likely, close relations with the supreme leader were key in overcoming government attempts to impose institutional control over the guards. After the disbandment of its ministry, the corps was subordinated directly to Khamenei. Though deprived of its territorial mobilization wing (the *Basij*), the IRGC retained 125,000 uniformed men in three services, a special-operations branch, and an emerging

⁶⁷ Alfoneh, "How Intertwined are the Revolutionary Guards in Iran's Economy?"

⁶⁸ The peculiarities of system of power in Iran that help to understand the importance of such link are addressed in Chapter III.

⁶⁹ Scott Peterson, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards Tightens Grip," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 9, 2009, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2009/1209/p10s01-wome.html> (accessed December 14, 2009).

⁷⁰ Houchang Hassan-Yari, "Iran: Defending the Islamic Revolution – The Corps of the Matter," *Eurasia Insight*, July 8, 2005, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp080705.shtml> (accessed July 9, 2009).

intelligence organization.⁷¹ The postwar fixation of the IRGC structure as a parallel conventional war machine, with the whole range of associated command and control, training, logistical, and other associated infrastructures, led to an emergence of a corps' bureaucracy, in a departure from a revolutionary towards a more formalized establishment.

That said, this was true only on an organizational side, since the politico-religious indoctrination of IRGC personnel and the regime security-assurance task both remained intact. It is proved by the continuous and even increasing participation of corps' elements in covert actions, operations, and "revolutionary" missions abroad. Among them was the alleged participation of the corps's covert operations wing in a series of assassinations of prominent Iranian opposition leaders abroad.⁷² Furthermore, corps personnel in the 90s were continuously involved in ideologically justified missions in support of the "revolutionary movements" in many places, ranging from Sudan to Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁷³

Thus, during the postwar-recovery decade, the corps reached the next stage of power. Despite the humiliation associated with the failure of the "victorious war" lobbied by radicals in the corps command, it assured the corps' institutional survival, overcame timid government attempts to impose a sort of control, and not only retained, but even strengthened, cohesion. More importantly, the corps successfully forged privileged relations with the new supreme leader.

E. THE "THIRD REPUBLIC" (1997–2005): CAPITALIZATION

President Mohammad Khatami who replaced Rafsanjani at his post in 1997 and also served two consecutive four-year terms, apparently has tried to revise and moderate certain aspects of the domestic and foreign policy of the IRI; he is thus viewed as a

⁷¹ "Pasdaran – Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps," *Global Security.org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/pasdaran.htm> (accessed December 12, 2009).

⁷² For details see, "No Safe Heaven: Iran's Global Assassination Campaign," *Iran Human Rights Documentation Center* (2008), http://www.iranhrdc.org/httpdocs/English/pdfs/Reports/No-Safe-Heaven_May08.pdf (accessed November 19, 2009).

⁷³ "Pasdaran – Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps," *Global Security.org*.

“reformer” in country and abroad.⁷⁴ As such, Khatami and his “reformist” team, even before assuming office, were treated with suspicion by the supreme leader, the conservative factions within the regime, and the IRGC command. Not surprisingly, prior to elections, IRGC Commander-in-Chief Mohsen Rezai endorsed an internal order to guards’ personnel to vote for a hardline candidate.⁷⁵

Soon after the election, the new government was sucked into a political crisis, caused on one side by a growing social demand for change, and on the other, by the increasing resistance of conservative forces. Caught in the middle, the Khatami government tried to contain the growing pressure from the security establishment, using legal procedures. For example, the serial killings of several prominent figures associated with the political opposition in 1998–2000 revealed a role of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security behind them.⁷⁶ This gave Khatami a chance to purge the top echelon of the MOIS that had gained so much notoriety during the post-revolutionary repressions and was regarded as a “bastion of hardliners” and an obstacle to the reformist course⁷⁷. The partial subduing of the MOIS and diminishment of its role for the first time since the revolution was objectively in favor of the corps, who competed with the MOIS in the fields of intelligence gathering, decision making, influence on leadership, and other aspects of clout. Thus, government action against the MOIS caused an additional non-intended empowerment of the *Pasdaran*.

However, he was not willing or able to conduct the same restraining procedure with the IRGC. The failure to address the issue of control and sideline the conservative elements of corps command caused a serious backlash very soon. At the peak of mass student protests in the capital and other major cities in the summer of 1999, rallying under a demand of change, the corps undertook its first overt intervention into politics,

⁷⁴ The President Khatami’s agenda might be considered as a “reformist” only in relative terms to other existed political alternatives in Iran. See, Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (New York, NY: A Holt Paperback, Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 44–45.

⁷⁵ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America*, 306.

⁷⁶ Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2000), 156–170.

⁷⁷ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America*, 313–314.

causing the major crisis in CMR since the Islamic Revolution.⁷⁸ On July 19, 1999, a conservative newspaper published an open letter to President Khatami signed by twenty-four top IRGC commanders, both acting and retired.⁷⁹ The document issued an explicit warning to the president to follow the “line of the Imam” (i.e., Khomeini). The “Letter of Twenty-Four” urged Khatami to put an end to the ongoing political upheavals and expressed a determination to intervene in the process, if necessary. The document effectively imposed a grid of restrictions on the “reformist” agenda and defined a restrictive field of maneuver for the president. The following violent crackdown of the student movement by paramilitary forces clearly indicated the prevalence of conservative factions within the regime.

The internal crises of the late 90s to early 00s, as well as other developments associated with the activities of the “reformist” government, apparently taught a major lesson to the IRGC establishment. It realized that the political course of Iran might be altered through the legal electoral process, affecting major interests of the regime’s conservative wing. To prevent such a scenario and to intercept its cause, the corps increasingly invested its efforts and available political, financial, and cadre resources (i.e., relationship with the supreme leader, generated money, and the IRGC “alumni” members) into elections. The ultimate goal was attaining legislative influence. The IRGC started positioning itself firmly in the political sphere by inserting its alumni’s members, linked through preserved *esprit de corps*, indoctrination anchors, and personal ties. The major effort of this strategy effort was focused on the legislative domain at its provincial and national levels. This effort was increased after the reelection of President Khatami for the second term in 2001.⁸⁰ The first manifestation of the emerging shift occurred during the 2003 municipal elections, where guard candidates got many slots in the local province and city councils. The next year, in elections to parliament, the alumni won an estimated

⁷⁸ Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*, 187–192.

⁷⁹ Michael Eisenstadt, “The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Assessment,” in Barry Rubin and Thomas A. Keaney, eds., *Armed Forces in the Middle East: Politics and Strategy* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 242.

⁸⁰ Babak Rahimi, “The Role of the Revolutionary Guards and Basij Militia in Iran’s ‘Electoral Coup’,” *Terrorism Monitor* VII, no. 21 (July 17, 2009), *The Jamestown Foundation*, http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM_007_58.pdf (accessed January 8, 2010), 6.

eighty of 290 seats in the top national legislative body.⁸¹ This gain enhanced the previously generated administrative resource, since an estimated thirty-four former IRGC officers were already placed in senior posts in the executive branch by 2004.⁸²

These internal developments in Iran were associated with the major post-9/11 shifts in the global and regional geopolitical and security environment that decisively reshaped the Iranian strategic vision and threat perceptions.⁸³ More specifically, intervention in Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban regime in 2001 and the war on Iraq to topple the Saddam Hussein regime resulted in the establishment of a long-lasting and significant U.S. military presence in the areas surrounding Iran. Coupled with certain political actions and statements, such as the inclusion of Iran in the “axis of evil” by the USA, the perception was generated within most factions of the regime that the IRI would likely become the next target for American military action.⁸⁴ Though such a view changed by 2005 (after the U.S. bogged down in Iraq) it reinforced the hawks in the political and security establishment, primarily in the IRGC, who advocated a more proactive posture to interdict such developments. The major Iranian response concentrated on Iraq, which was quite rightly defined as the center of gravity of the U.S. effort in the region. The corps emerged as a major driver behind this strategy and subsequently was defined as a “lead agency” in the Iraqi theatre. The mass infiltration of pro-Iranian proxy groups and the meddling into post-Saddam Iraq was managed by the IRGC.⁸⁵ This example illustrates an unusual use of what is still regarded as a paramilitary internal-security force for a complex and high-stakes external mission. The launch of a

⁸¹ Abbas Milani, “Iran: Clerical Authoritarianism,” *Undermining Democracy – 21st Century Authoritarians*, June 2009, <http://www.underminingdemocracy.org/files/iran.pdf> (accessed December 4, 2009).

⁸² David E. Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics (RAND Report 878)* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), 58.

⁸³ For the post-9/11 Iran’s threat perceptions see, Anthony H. Cordesman, “Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Broader Strategic Context,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (2008), http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/081208_cordesman_irannucstratcon.pdf (accessed November 28, 2009), 1.

⁸⁴ Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 314.

⁸⁵ “About the Badr Corps,” *Iran Terror Database*, February 2, 2006, <http://www.iranterror.com/content/view/185/26/> (accessed September 13, 2009).

“preemptive” Iranian campaign in Iraq furthermore extended IRGC clout within the regime concerned by a perceived strategic threat.

In an associated development, the corps has emerged as a primary overseer and supervisory agency for the presumably weapon-oriented nuclear program of the IRI, whose existence was publicly revealed in 2004 by the Iranian opposition.⁸⁶ Linked with increasing ballistic-missile capabilities (i.e., potential weapons-of-mass-destruction delivery means that fell solely under order of battle to the IRGC,⁸⁷ in another departure from the conventional painting of the *Pasdaran* as an internal-security force), the corps effectively became a strategic factor from the international perspective.

Thus, the growing sense of insecurity, “strategic envelopment,” and shadow of anticipated invasion due to the American military influx into the Gulf region in the aftermath of the 9/11, was effectively overplayed by the corps establishment. It was used to alter regime’s foreign-policy behavior, manipulate threat perceptions, and amplify security dilemmas.⁸⁸ The practical gains of the IRGC were its increasing institutional autonomy, growing dependence of the government on the corps’ professional expertise, and sidelining of other services and agencies in the process of decision-making in the field of national security. The negative outcome of such development was emerged information asymmetry and doctrinal monopoly of the IRGC (as analyzed in more detail in chapters III and IV). Consequently, the IRI regime became more dependent on the IRGC as a defender and protector, this time from the external existential threat. Though it is hard to assess precisely to what extent the change in the Iranian security environment influenced the failure of the “reformist” wing and the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005, this factor most likely played its important role.

⁸⁶ Though the origination of the IRI nuclear program, for understandable reasons are unknown, clearly it was launched prior to 2004; yet, this date is important for the topic of this research since for the first time the IRGC was linked to it. For detailed account see, Alireza Jafarzadeh, *The Iran Threat: President Ahmadinejad and the Coming Nuclear Crisis* (New York, NY: Palgrave McMillan, 2008), 125–198.

⁸⁷ Matthew M. Frick, “Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 49 (2nd Quarter 2008), http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Press/jfq_pages/editions/i49/31.pdf (accessed November 13, 2009), 122–123.

⁸⁸ The fact that the IRGC establishment itself believes the existence of such security threats does not necessarily restrains from overplaying it in the process of interaction with the political leaders in order to maximize own influence and achieve relatively narrow (institutional) goals.

The years 1997–2005 apparently was a period of capitalization for the IRGC in the major spheres of domestic, foreign and security policy. For the first time, the corps intervened in the political process by threat of force, operating not on behalf of any regime or faction, but rather *as itself*, as a corporate entity. The “Letter of Twenty-Four” became a moment of truth that clearly indicated that the role of the IRGC was as a reactionary and counter-modernizing political force. The culmination of the corps’ corporative advancement effort arrived in the June 2005 presidential elections, when Mahmud Ahmadinejad, once a low- or mid-rank officer in the IRGC with radical political visions and conservative religious beliefs,⁸⁹ was elected as president of Iran. The establishment of the IRGC point man in the presidency became a decisive point in its ascendancy.

F. THE “FOURTH REPUBLIC” (AFTER 2005): EXPANSION

The presidential election campaign of 2005 became an eloquent indicator of the rising political ambitions of the corps. Four of the candidates—M. Rezai, a former IRGC commander (1981–1997), M. Qalibaf, the chief of law-enforcement forces, A. Larijani, a secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, and M. Ahmadinejad, the mayor of Tehran—were high-ranking alumni and Iran–Iraq war veterans.⁹⁰ The election of Ahmadinejad placed an alumnus in the nation’s top executive position, enabling him to act as a point man and powerbroker on behalf of the guards. It created a comfortable environment for the alumni to start expanding its control of key government positions and gradually sideline the ruling elites and competitors in the defense and security sectors. Nine of twenty-one members of his first cabinet, proposed by the new president after the election and approved by the parliament, were former guardsmen who were given portfolios in the defense, commerce, energy, welfare, industries and mines, justice,

⁸⁹ On Ahmadinejad’s politico-ideological credo see, Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 18, 22, and 95.

⁹⁰ Adam Goodman, “Iran: Informal Networks and Leadership Politics,” *Conflict Studies Research Centre at the Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, Middle East* 08/12 (April 2008), 6, [http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/middle-east/08\(12\)AG.pdf/](http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/middle-east/08(12)AG.pdf/) (accessed October 20, 2009).

culture, and Islamic-guidance ministries.⁹¹ The important point was that the alumni in the parliament influenced the approval process and helped likeminded candidates to pass, despite that some of them were unqualified due to lack of professional expertise in governance or economics. Thus, the emergent legislative resource (i.e., the parliamentary faction created by the 2004 elections) just a year later became converted into an administrative resource with the influx of a cohort of former officers and operatives into top governmental positions. In addition, many other administrative positions that required no approval from the parliament, especially at the provincial level, were filled by former guards appointed directly by the president.⁹²

Gaining from experience, not surprisingly the IRGC accelerated its investment effort by expanding its existing foothold in the legislative branch. The March 2008 parliamentary elections added a number of seats controlled by the alumni. The Council of Guardians, a structure that according to the Iranian constitution is in charge of vetting candidates, gave obvious privileges to the guards, most likely under direct guidance from the supreme leader.⁹³ Another notable indicator of the growing IRGC influence on the electoral process was the appointment by Khamenei of IRGC Brigadier General Alireza Afshar, who was formally transferred to the structure of the ministry of the interior (MOI) to oversee and manage the polls.⁹⁴ This action marked a departure from a post-revolutionary tradition of having the MOI in charge of elections management.

Along with pushing on the legislative front, the IRGC used the opportunity of having a former member in the president's office to launch an aggressive institutional expansion campaign, putting pressure on peers in the defense and security sector (i.e., the *Artesh* and MOIS). In 2007, the IRGC managed to reincorporate the *Basij* territorial mobilization force that for almost two decades had existed as a separate entity controlled

⁹¹ Jonathan Spyer, "Iran's New Elite – The Revolutionary Guards," *The Jerusalem Post*, September 28, 2008.

⁹² See the list of some IRGC's "alumni" appointees in Frederick Wehrey and others, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), 103–107.

⁹³ Ali Alfoneh, "The Revolutionary Guards' Role in the Iranian Politics."

⁹⁴ Geneive Abdo, "Iran's Militia Could Tip Election in Ahmadinejad's Favor," *The Century Foundation*, June 11, 2009, <http://www.tcf.org/list.asp?type=NC&pubid=2333> (accessed August 11, 2009).

by appointed clerics and provincial governors, back into its own structure.⁹⁵ Reclaim of the *Basij* placed under corps control between thirteen and twenty million people.⁹⁶ The corps gained another huge tool of coercive influence that proved its utility in the control of opposition unrest in 2009.

Aspects and patterns of socioeconomic, domestic, and foreign policy under Ahmadinejad, and particularly the growth of IRGC clout, were treated with rising suspicion, anxiety, and discontent by alternative factions of the regime and segments of the population.⁹⁷ Thus, the essential task of retaining achieved gains came into the forefront. By 2009 (the year of the next presidential elections) factions supportive to Ahmadinejad started to mobilize its physical, administrative, political, and propaganda resources to arrange his reelection to a second term. The effort was ultimately led by the corps. The pressure and intimidation campaign against political forces supporting alternative candidates was launched months ahead the elections.⁹⁸ Top commanders sent warning messages across the political spectrum.⁹⁹ For instance, on May 4, 2009, Major General Mohammad Ali Jaafari, the IRGC commander, stated that the *Basij* force, transferred back under corps control, should “play a role” in the elections. He especially referred to the fact that technically it is not an official part of the armed forces, whose participation in the political process is banned by law.¹⁰⁰ In another case, Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, a chief of joint staff of the armed forces but a guardsman by affiliation, openly called for reelection of Ahmadinejad, pledging him institutional

⁹⁵ “Changed Threat Perception in Tehran,” *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly* 01, no. 22 (October 28, 2009), 15.

⁹⁶ Hossein Aryan, “Iran’s Basij Force – The Mainstay of Domestic Security,” *Eurasia Insights*, July 12, 2008, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp120708.shtml> (accessed July 18, 2009).

⁹⁷ Geneive Abdo, “The Rise of the Iranian Dictatorship,” *Foreign Policy.com*, October 7, 2009, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/10/07/the_rise_of_the_iranian_dictatorship (accessed October 17, 2009).

⁹⁸ Ali Alfoneh, “Iran’s Parliamentary Elections and the Revolutionary Guards’ Creeping Coup d’Etat,” *AEI Online (Middle Eastern Outlook)*, February 21, 2008, <http://www.aei.org/outlook/27549> (accessed August 9, 2009).

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Abdo, “Iran’s Militia Could Tip Election in Ahmadinejad’s Favor.”

support against other candidates.¹⁰¹ To facilitate the desired outcome, an estimated thirty percent of corps personnel were deployed with tasks ranging from riot control to vote counting (the last point allegedly).¹⁰²

The elections of June 12, 2009, in which Ahmadinejad was declared a winner, created the most serious and protracted political crisis in Iran since the Islamic Revolution. A widening citizen dissent and growing sociopolitical ferment were turned into mass street protests against suspected election fraud. The opposition unrest that was tacitly supported by counter-elites became entrenched across different segments of the regime's spectrum.¹⁰³ In the rapidly evolving situation and mounting pressure, the regime demonstrated a violent reaction, launching a protester crackdown that was executed by *Basij* units rather than by interior-ministry police and supervised by the corps' command, which obviously got *carte blanche* from Khamenei. Note that the guards, before suppressing the opposition, first sought approval for their display of resolve and use of force from the supreme leader. As in 1999, the top Guard commanders issued a flurry of political statements with warnings on their determination to "crush any revolution"¹⁰⁴ and turn against opposition (i.e., counter-elite) candidates accused of stirring trouble. For instance, on September 1, 2009, Brigadier General Hejazi, the senior IRGC commander, publicly blamed former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami of being "part of a plot to overthrow" the supreme leader.¹⁰⁵ These facts clearly indicate that the IRGC emerged as a major beneficiary of the existing system, rather than just its defender in favor of

¹⁰¹ Ali Alfoneh, "Supremely Undemocratic: The Revolutionary Guards Engineer Iran's Elections," *AEI Online - Middle Eastern Outlook* 4 (June 2009), <http://www.aei.org/outlook/100045> (accessed September 20, 2009).

¹⁰² Babak Rahimi, "The Role of the Revolutionary Guards and Basij Militia in Iran's 'Electoral Coup,'" 8.

¹⁰³ "Iran: The Factionalization of the State," *Stratfor*, August 20, 2009, http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20090819_iran_fracturing_state (accessed August 31, 2009).

¹⁰⁴ Hendawi, "Revolutionary Guard Tighten Hold in Iran Crisis."

¹⁰⁵ Kamal Nazer Yasin, "A New Dynamic in Iran," *ISN Security Watch*, September 3, 2009, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?lng=en&id=105525> (accessed September 15, 2009).

others.¹⁰⁶ The elections of 2009 and subsequent developments became the tipping point in the corps' meddling with politics. It finally leaped from threats of use of force against regime opponents to actual use of force.

Notwithstanding the political crisis, and even likely because of it, after the endorsement of Ahmadinejad by the supreme leader in late summer 2009, the alumni accelerated the process of predatory expansion. The set of cabinet appointments of September 2009 reduced the number of ministers with IRGC background, compared with the first term of Ahmadinejad, leaving additional secondary portfolios to technocrats. However, the ministry of energy (i.e., of oil) a key establishment from the standpoint of financial opportunities, fell under the guards' control.¹⁰⁷ In an even more important development, the head of the ministry of defense and armed-forces logistics, supervising both the *Artesh* and the *Pasdaran*, Brigadier General M. Najjar (an alumnus himself), was transferred to the position of minister of the interior, with his former position given to Brigadier General A. Vahidi (also an alumnus)—while the new head of the MOIS became Heydar Moslehi (though a mid-rank cleric, he spent most of its career in the ranks and is under influence of the guards).¹⁰⁸ Thus, after a period of bureaucratic turf struggle and institutional tug-of-war, centered on lobbying and convincing the supreme leader, the IRGC establishment was able to extend control over its traditional competitors—the law enforcement, intelligence, and security services—by inserting alumni into command positions. The partial takeover of the MOIS, an agency traditionally controlled and headed by clerics since the revolution, reduced an important check on the corps' way of monopolizing domestic and foreign intelligence. Sidelining the MOI in such key areas as ballot counts, crisis management, and crackdown on street protests raised even more the guards' utility in the eyes of the supreme leader. The entire

¹⁰⁶ Michael Slackman, "Hard-Line Force Extends Grip Over a Splintered Iran," *New York Times*, July 21, 2009.

¹⁰⁷ Martin Fletcher, "President Ahmadinejad Nominates Cabinet of Inexperienced Cronies," *The Times*, August 21, 2009.

¹⁰⁸ "Iran's List of the Approved Cabinet Ministers," *Iran Focus*, September 3, 2009, <http://www.iranfocus.com/en/iran-general/irans-list-of-approved-cabinet-ministers-18631.html> (accessed September 5, 2009); Louisa Glenn, "Background Brief: Ahmadinejad's Cabinet," *The National Democratic Institute*, September 1, 2009, <http://www.ndi.org/node/15709> (accessed September 4, 2009).

defense and security block ministries were placed under alumni control.¹⁰⁹ The regime was left with less counterbalance options and increased dependency on the guards in defense, internal security, and information awareness.

The complex and tense internal political dynamic in Iran has been developing in parallel with the growingly aggressive posture of the Islamic Republic in the international arena. The patterns of Iranian international behavior clearly demonstrate how substantial is the degree of influence that the *Pasdaran* exercises in the IRI foreign and security policy domains. The IRGC emerged as a primary spoiler in Iraq¹¹⁰ and handler behind the increased Iranian support to radical militant movements across the Middle East (particularly in Palestine, Lebanon, and, more recently, Afghanistan and Yemen).¹¹¹ One example was the role of the IRGC in advising and supplying the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon during its summer 2006 war with Israel.¹¹² These activities were accompanied by an increasing rhetorical and practical embrace of asymmetric warfare, proactive defense, and retaliation doctrines advocated by the corps command.¹¹³ They represented an attempt to deter any attack against the developing Iranian nuclear program, which in turn reflected the change in threat perceptions in Tehran since 2003: declining fear of major invasion and growing anxiety on a potential “surgical” surprise attack, as well as of popular revolution and ethnic-minority disturbance at home, sponsored from abroad.¹¹⁴ The IRGC strategists become a major source of such perceptual shift and successfully convince the leadership of the feasibility of the threat. As a result, the corps essentially advanced in monopolizing information gathering, decision making, resource allocation, and practical implementation of the response. It started to exert a decisive influence on

¹⁰⁹ Michael Slackman, “Ahmadinejad Wins Approval of Key Cabinet Slots,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 2009.

¹¹⁰ Greg Bruno, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guards: Backgrounder,” *Council for Foreign Relations*, June 22, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/14324> (accessed December 7, 2009).

¹¹¹ “Special Report: Hezbollah’s Iranian Connection,” *Stratfor*, July 21, 2006, http://www.stratfor.com/special_report/hezbollahs_iranian_connection (accessed November 13, 2009).

¹¹² “Iranian Proxies: An Intricate and Active Web,” *Stratfor*, February 3, 2010, http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20100203_iranian_proxies_intricate_and_active_web (accessed February 5, 2010).

¹¹³ For more details, see Chapter IV.

¹¹⁴ “Changed Threat Perception in Tehran,” 15.

Iranian foreign and security policies through a decision-making process and doctrines oriented. The activities of the IRGC in this field were loosely controlled by its civilian principals.

Despite all these turbulent developments, the corps elite and alumni continuously exploited the presidency of Ahmadinejad to exponentially build wealth and accelerate oligarchical control over key sectors of the national economy. According to some estimates, by 2009 they controlled over a hundred companies and enterprises with the estimated capital of \$12 billion to \$15 billion invested across the most profitable sectors.¹¹⁵

The last five years of corps' history is safe to consider it as a period of overall increase in power, influence, significance, and outreach. A previous phase of capitalization translated into a phase of expansion. Partial explanation of this phenomenal might be found in evolution of the special relations established between corps' alumni and the supreme leader, who represents a center of gravity in the IRI political system. That relationship, forged in late '80s—early '90s, had gradually changed in nuance since the emerged dependency of the supreme leader, the conservative right factions of the regime, and associated ruling elites on corps protection. The IRGC was allowed to “cross the lines” in exchange for security.¹¹⁶ As the present moment, despite the dormant political crisis in Iran, Ahmadinejad and the regime forces behind him—the IRGC establishment foremost—were able to contain opposition and competing factions, maintain situational control, and increase indirect influence on the supreme leader. Overall, the IRGC fully exploited the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen their position.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Milani, “Iran: Clerical Authoritarianism.”

¹¹⁶ Babak Yektafar, “Confronting History, and the IRGC, in Iran,” *World Politics Review*, December 9, 2009, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/article.aspx?id=4780> (accessed January 11, 2010).

¹¹⁷ “Iran: The Intra-Hardliner Rift Intensifies,” *Stratfor*, July 31, 2009, http://www.stratfor.com/node/143269/analysis/20090731_iran_intra_hardliner_rift_intensifies (accessed August 19, 2009).

G. CHAPTER SUMMARY

Within thirty years of its creation, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps of Iran conducted an impressive and unparalleled political ascendancy. Initially it was created just as a paramilitary force within the defense and security pool to support the new regime as it established itself after taking the power. As such, it did not differ initially from its many analogs existing in third-world countries, especially within non-democratic political systems. However, the Corps surpassed its initial role and meaning, due to a unique context of internal and external developments surrounding Iran, in general, and because of constant empowerment by a regime concerned with survival, in particular. As a result, most likely unintended, at the certain stage the “incorporated” corps developed an identity as a key stakeholder in contemporary Iran, anchored by accumulated power and wealth. The clerical regime is gradually becomes *de facto* sidelined, being dependent on protection from IRGC and left just as a source of legitimacy and ideology. The corps became a force for the *status-quo*, willing to violently suppress any attempt to change the regime from within or without.

The emergence of the guards’ “brigadiers’ government” during Ahmadinejad’s presidency eventually violated an existed equation in the Iranian political system. It left no shielding counterbalance to the IRGC, except that of the army, which had been wiped from politics by post-revolutionary purges, and “non-muscular” legalistic checking structures and procedures: the Supreme National Security Council, the Expediency Council, the judiciary, and the supreme leader’s power of veto. This shift is diminishing the role of the supreme leader as a ruler and arbiter, giving him steadily shrinking room for maneuver between the continually empowered guards and steadily marginalized “old elites” of the revolutionary generation. In practical terms, the last several years were a period of a “sneaking institutional coup.”¹¹⁸ It was conducted through legal means such as elections, institutional expansion, and other soft techniques, rather than by toppling civilian rule in a classical military *coup d’état* by display of a hard power. The new self-styled elite that arose from the alumni would likely to move beyond protecting the system

¹¹⁸ Alfoneh, “Iran’s Parliamentary Elections and the Revolutionary Guards’ Creeping Coup d’Etat.”

to dominating it.¹¹⁹ There is a consensus emerging inside and outside the country that sees the conversion of Iran into a “military state” where “there is nobody left to guard the Guard.”¹²⁰

The political and geopolitical entourage associated with Iranian dynamics should not hide the primary cause that led to such a strategic shift. This cause is loopholes in civil–military relations in Iran that let regimes miss the point and gave the corps a way to gain momentum in transformation from the revolutionary into the praetorian (and counterrevolutionary) guard. The next chapter puts in analytical context the patterns of civil-military relations, its deviations, and some ways and means that enable the IRGC to overcome or negate civilian control and exert so high influence in politics, government, and society.

¹¹⁹ Hendawi, “Revolutionary Guard Tighten Hold in Iran Crisis.”

¹²⁰ Gosh, “Iran’s Quiet Coup.”

III. CIVIL–MILITARY RELATIONS IN IRAN: SPECIFICS AND PATHOLOGIES

A. INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter traced the emergence and development of the IRGC as a political actor and placed the phenomenon in a strategic context. The current chapter elaborates and analyzes some of the causes that led to such an outcome. It will first provide a brief overview of the Iranian political system and relationships within this system, strategic culture and threat perceptions, and defense and security architecture. It will then address CMR issues, primarily its two major foci—national-security decision making (a.k.a. the decision-making process in the field of national security) and civilian control. More specifically, the chapter examines patterns of interaction between civilian leaders and top military commanders in elaborating and implementing strategic decisions related to the national security. Further, it reviews the mechanisms, techniques, and patterns of civilian control that are applied by the regime to manage the defense and security-forces pool. Particular emphasis is made on explaining the pathologies and loopholes in decision-making and civilian control, to better understand how an actor such as the IRGC is able to circumvent safeguards built into the system, and to exert influence and pressure on domestic and foreign policy.

B. IRAN’S POWER SYSTEM AND NATIONAL-SECURITY MACHINERY, 101

Iran is unique in the contemporary world. Its political regime combines mixed features of formal democracy, theocracy, and dictatorship.¹²¹ The system of power is engineered on the basis of *velayat-e-fakih* (roughly translated from Farsi as “rule of jurisprudence”) that stems from a Shiite historical politico-religious tradition and not only denies separation between state and religion, but subordinates all aspects of the former to

¹²¹ Pierre Tristam, “Who Rules Iran? A Primer on the Islamic Republic’s Power Structure,” *About.Com: Middle East Issues*, <http://middleeast.about.com/od/iran/a/who-rules-iran.htm> (accessed December 5, 2009).

the latter.¹²² The center of gravity of the entire system is the supreme leader (since 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei). According to the constitution, he maintains top religious, political, and governmental power, including authority as supreme commander in chief of the armed forces. The chief executive is a president, elected by popular vote each four years. One of the primary functions of the parliament is to balance the president and his cabinet. Other checks and balances are embedded to control and constrain both the executive and the legislative branches (the Guardians Council, the Expediency Council, the Assembly of Experts, and the Supreme National Security Council). Since Iran is a highly legalistic state, the judiciary ministry also plays an important checking role. Mutually balancing each other, these entities form a complex construct that makes the Iran's system of power unique.¹²³

Power and politics in Iran are best described as “kaleidoscopic factionalism.”¹²⁴ A crucial factor that influences the whole dynamic is the coexistence of formal institutions (both elective and appointed) with informal networks and inner circles.¹²⁵ Interaction within this constellation of actors is dynamic, fluid, obscure, competitive, and characterized by complex balances and shifting short-term alliances. The nature of the system *de facto* makes the supreme leader not a unilateral and omnipotent ruler, but rather a manager and mediator between different formal and informal centers of interest and influence. His power obviously has limits.¹²⁶ Moreover, since the incumbent's health is fading and his public posture diminishing, the supreme leader's control is increasingly being replaced by shifting balances between groupings. At previous periods in the

¹²² For more details on the issue of *velayat-e-fakih* see, “The Twisting Maze of the Iranian Politics,” *Stratfor*, January 14, 2004, http://www.stratfor.com/twisting_maze_iranian_politics (accessed January 12, 2010).

¹²³ Iran: The Supreme Leader Takes Control,” *Stratfor*, September 3, 2009, http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20090903_iran_supreme_leader_takes_control (accessed September 5, 2009).

¹²⁴ Babak Ganji, “Conservative Factionalism and Iranian Nuclear Policy,” *Conflict Studies Research Centre at the Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, Middle East Series* 05/22 (April 2005), 6, [http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/middle-east/05\(22\)-BJ.pdf](http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/middle-east/05(22)-BJ.pdf) (accessed January 3, 2010).

¹²⁵ David E. Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics (RAND Report 878)* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), xiii.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

existence of the Islamic Republic, the political power system was based on and driven by consensus, with the supreme leader acting as arbiter and last court of appeal for different interacting and conflicting elitist factions.¹²⁷ However, at the current stage, the system is evolving into an even more authoritarian construct with the corps alumni's exerting rising influence on the supreme leader.¹²⁸ In this environment, the role of inner circles and informal networks is crucial in understanding the nature of the political dynamic and decision making. The formal institutions tend to act as a playing ground for the networks.¹²⁹

This reality is further aggravated by the ongoing generational shift in Iranian politics, where the old guard of the revolutionary era is gradually replaced by the new elite, mostly associated through the Pasdaran pedigree of the war generation.¹³⁰ This cohort, associated with and represented by Ahmadinejad, has accumulated enormous economic power and is striving for political power.¹³¹ The change of generations exacerbates the existing elitist conflict, as indicated by the 2009 election upheavals.¹³² The political elites engaged in this conflict are divided into four broad groupings. They might be defined, with certain conditionality, as the "conservatives," (both traditionalists and pragmatists), the "reformists," and the "principlists."¹³³ The latter grouping, composed mostly from the IRGC alumni, including Ahmadinejad, is subdivided into two groups, namely, radical and relatively moderate "principlists." Ayatollah Khamenei, who has always been associated with the conservative trend, increasingly indicates his favor towards the "principlist" faction.

¹²⁷ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*.

¹²⁸ Ibid., iv.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 64.

¹³⁰ Fahri, "The Antinomies of Iran's War Generation," 101.

¹³¹ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 51-52.

¹³² George Friedman, "The Real Struggle in Iran and Implications for the U.S. Dialogue," *Stratfor*, June 29, 2009, http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20090629_real_struggle_iran_and_implications_u_s_dialogue (accessed October 12, 2009).

1. Strategic Culture and Threat Perceptions

The key determinant of contemporary Iran's strategic culture, after it was reshaped by the revolution, is a fusion of Iranian (Persian) nationalism and Shiite Islam. Its grand objectives might be defined as self-reliance, deterrence of perceived aggressors, and hunger for regional status.¹³⁴ Iran has a firm vision of itself as a natural leader in the Gulf, the Middle East, and more broadly, the entire Muslim world.¹³⁵ The Iranian strategic culture is underpinned by a set of past and modern grievances, a combination of assertiveness and caution, pragmatist and ideologist agendas, realist rationales, and emotional drivers. These components feed threat perceptions.

The centerpiece of the threat perception is the United States. There is a basic consensus among the elites that the USA is an inherently hostile power responsible for past sufferings and current problems and oriented towards the overthrow of the regime.¹³⁶ However, while more radical factions of the regime portray the Iranian–U.S. conflict as a geostrategic “battle,” the less radical view it as a geostrategic “competition.”¹³⁷ That dualism stems from the networks-centered elites' competition and reflects their different views of the world and Iran's role in it, and of the ways and tools of diplomacy.¹³⁸ The revelation of such a gap helps to understand the nature of the existing mix of confrontation and rationalism in Iranian international behavior that represents a continuation of domestic politics. The national security strategy and foreign policy are highly influenced by the politico-religious-ideological discourse and characterized by bifurcation, a combination of balancing and bandwagoning, the strong

¹³³ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 67–71.

¹³⁴ Eisenstadt, “The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Assessment,” 232–233.

¹³⁵ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 5.

¹³⁶ Ganji, “Main Currents in the Iranian Strategy since 9/11,” 1.

¹³⁷ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 63.

¹³⁸ Goodman, “Iran: Informal Networks and Leadership Politics,” 10–11, 16, and Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 75–76.

influence of security dilemmas, and the development of asymmetric response concepts, translated into practical doctrines that are not necessarily defensive, but rather, preemptive.¹³⁹

2. The Defense and Security Architecture

After the revolution, Iran developed a diverse pool of forces and agencies that operate in the national-security domain that is as perplexed as the entire power system.¹⁴⁰ The major feature of the defense architecture is its dualism. While many countries, especially in the Third World, have parallel military structures that mutually enhance and counterbalance at the same time, only Iran has two full-fledged parallel services:¹⁴¹ the regular army and the IRGC, consisting of separate but similar branches. The *Artesh*, based on conscription, has nearly 400,000 personnel (350,000 in the ground forces, 30,000 in the air force and 18,000 in the navy)¹⁴² and focuses exclusively on external defense. The *Pasdaran*'s strength is nearly 125,000, including some conscripts (100,000 in the ground forces, 20,000 in the navy, and presumably 5,000 in the air). While focusing officially on internal-security functions, the IRGC, nonetheless also has external defense, foreign intelligence, and covert action capabilities, such as the *Qods* force (a special-operations component). Furthermore, it maintains ballistic-missile units integrated into the order of battle and supervises the national nuclear program, which is presumably weapons-oriented.¹⁴³ Recently, the *Pasdaran* reinstalled its control over the *Basij* mobilization force ending its decade and a half of independent institutional existence. This act integrated an estimated one million paramilitary fighters (available on

¹³⁹ Ganji, "Main Currents in the Iranian Strategy since 9/11," 2, and "Iran: Political Infighting and Foreign Policy," *Stratfor*, August 4, 2009, http://stratfor.com/analysis/20090804_iran_political_infighting_and_foreign_policy (accessed 08/08/2009).

¹⁴⁰ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 33-34.

¹⁴¹ By fact, both the *Artesh* and the *Pasdaran* should be treated as agencies rather than services; however, for the sake of clarity they are defined as services.

¹⁴² All strength numbers displayed in this paragraph are found in *The Military Balance 2009*, (London, UK: Routledge for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2009): 245-247.

¹⁴³ Jaafarzadeh, *The Iran Threat: President Ahmadinejad and the Coming Nuclear Crisis*, 125-198.

partial mobilization)¹⁴⁴ charged with the task of internal security, law enforcement, indoctrination, and wartime reserve deployment. The function of the regime security is duplicated by the law-enforcement forces (LEF), which number no less than 500,000 and include police, border guards, and various tribal levies, controlled mostly by the Ministry of the Interior (MOI). Another major actor from the set of the defense and security forces and agencies is the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) with an estimated 30,000 employees.¹⁴⁵ The MOIS is in charge of regime stability and foreign-intelligence gathering. Finally, there are armed paramilitary vigilante groups, such as *Ansar-e-Hezbollah*,¹⁴⁶ that exist informally, outside the official structure, yet, were created by the regime (or some of its factions) to ensure security.

C. NATIONAL-SECURITY DECISION MAKING

Before turning to an analysis of specific patterns of the decision-making process in Iran, it is useful to start with some general observations. (i) The decision-making process in the field of national security is an essential component of civil–military relations in any state. It might be considered a “strategic” part of CMR. Ideally, national-security decision making represents a regular but carefully balanced process of input (in the form of strategy guidance and policy directives) provided by a political echelon or civilian leaders (or both), and output (in form of professional advice and expertise, as well as execution) from the national military command.¹⁴⁷ (ii) Thus, the role of the military in political processes should not necessarily be understood in terms of direct intervention, such as coups, or military regimes. Rather, much more often it takes the

¹⁴⁴ *The Military Balance* 2009, 247.

¹⁴⁵ Wilfried Buchta, “Iran’s Security Sector: An Overview,” *Geneva Centre for Democratic Control of Armed Forces, Working Paper 146* (August 2004), 13, http://www.dcaf.ch/_docs/WP146.pdf (accessed November 16, 2009).

¹⁴⁶ Amir Taheri, “Who Rules Iran?,” *Iran Press Service*, March 29, 2004, http://www.iran-press-service.com/ips/articles-2004/march/who_rules_iran_29304.shtml (accessed October 29, 2009).

¹⁴⁷ Kobi Michael, “Military Knowledge and Weak Civilian Control in the Reality of Low Intensity Conflict – The Israeli Case,” *The Israeli Studies* 12, no. 1 (April 2007), 30–31, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/israel_studies/v012/12.1michael.pdf (accessed December 2, 2009).

form of influence over policy and politics outside military's formal role.¹⁴⁸ (iii) Recognizing the military establishment as a legitimate participant in the decision-making process, it is impossible to eliminate the military influence on politics.¹⁴⁹ In other words, politicization of a military that has expanded its outreach by participating in external defense is inevitable.¹⁵⁰ Hence, the major task and responsibility of civilian leadership is to maintain military inputs and influences on the political aspects of the national-security decision-making, while ensuring they are controlled and positive. (iv) The key element of safe decision-making procedures is a diversity of inputs and contributions; all defense and security agencies must be engaged on the equal footing. (v) Any intentional or unintentional violation of balance in the course of interaction between the civilian and the military domains will likely precipitate eventual negative outcomes for national security. The most precarious potential outcome is a knowledge gap and information asymmetry in favor of the military. Such a state, described by E. Cohen as “unequal dialogue,”¹⁵¹ provides the military room for maneuvering and behaving that is considered undesirable by civilian principals (or “shirking,” in terms of P. Feaver’s informal-agency theory).¹⁵²

1. Pathologies of the Iranian Decision Making

The decision-making process in defense and security affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is only partially formalized and institutionalized. The major proceedings of the decision making are in fact self-contained in the informal web of

¹⁴⁸ Sam C. Sarkesian, “A Political Perspective on Military in Developing Areas,” in Simon W. Sheldon, ed., *The Military and Security in the Third World: Domestic and International Impacts* (Boulder, CO and Folkestone, UK: Westview Press and Wm. Dawson and Sons, Ltd, 1978), 4–5.

¹⁴⁹ Evan A. Laksmana, “Spoilers, Partners and Pawns: Military Organizational Behavior and Civil-Military Relations in Indonesia,” *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Working Paper 161* (July 1, 2008), 8, <http://www3.ntu.edu.sg/rsis/publications/WorkingPapers/WP161.pdf> (accessed December 26, 2009).

¹⁵⁰ Metin Heper and Joshua R. Itzkowitz-Shiffrinson, “Civil-Military Relations in Israel and Turkey,” *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 33, no. 2 (Winter 2005), 244.

¹⁵¹ Eliot A. Cohen, “The Unequal Dialogue: The Theory and Reality of Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force,” in Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2001), 429–458.

¹⁵² Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 60–62, 69.

empowered personalities, networks, power centers, and the relationships between them.¹⁵³ As in the entire system of power and the political field, the decision-making bears a similar hallmark: it is complex, convoluted, and opaque. As such, it is hard to predict for outsiders; most of its patterns might be established by indirect indicators only, such as activities of known formal institutions, official statements, or past events. Yet, it is intensive: tense and defined by a fragile balance of interests, permanent regroupings, and consensus building.

A function of both formal and informal institutions and mechanisms is illustrated by the design of the top echelon of the IRI national-command authority. According to the constitution the entire pool of defense forces and security agencies are directly subordinated to the supreme leader as supreme commander in chief of the armed forces. The chief executive (the president) is in charge of its routine management and practical implementation of security policies.¹⁵⁴ In that capacity, he heads the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), formally devised as the key national defense and security body.¹⁵⁵ However, in fact, the council operates within the framework set up by Khamenei, without crossing his guidelines. The extent of the political role of the SNSC secretary, who acts as a representative of the supreme leader and is in charge of day-to-day business, depends on his individual clout and personal credentials. For instance, in 2005–2007 when the council was headed by Ali Larijani, an IRGC alumnus with far-ranging political ambitions, it took a much more proactive position in foreign policy and decision making. The current SNSC head, Said Jalili, has no such outreach and is placed under the influence of the Ahmadinejad-led alumni faction.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, though the council has permanent membership, the cast of participants in each meeting varies,

¹⁵³ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 67–73.

¹⁵⁴ Buchta, “Iran’s Security Sector: An Overview,” 17–18.

¹⁵⁵ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 32.

¹⁵⁶ Buchta, “Iran’s Security Sector: An Overview,” 18.

depending on the issue in focus.¹⁵⁷ Not surprisingly, a body divided along political fault lines cannot be effective. Finally, the foreign ministry, the parliament and its committee on national security and foreign affairs play quite an unremarkable and often servile role in defense and security matters, respectively delivering only formal political expertise and oversight.¹⁵⁸

In addition, the set of formal institutions is enhanced by informal, less visible, yet influential, positions as personal advisors to the supreme leader, providing insider information and creating additional checks and balances capability vis-à-vis the military commanders, who maintain control over hard-power assets. Accordingly, Khamenei appointed Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, who commanded the corps from 1997 to 2007, as his personal military advisor. That decision was allegedly taken on a calculation of the contradictions and frictions existing between Safavi and his successor, Major General Jaafari, as well as with President Ahmadinejad himself.¹⁵⁹ Personal advisors provide another dimension in the Iranian model of decision making.

There is another element of the Iranian national command authority that has, or at least should have, an important role in the decision-making: ministry of defense, joint staff, and headquarters' of the uniformed services and branches. However, they are omitted from discussion here; their role is analyzed independently further below, in relation to patterns of civilian control and interservice rivalry.

Thus, the core pathology of the decision-making process in the defense and security fields in Iran appears to be very specific to this country. This pathology displays fragmentation, diffusion, informality, and self-containment in the inner circles' "black box." The supreme leader is a center of gravity of the decision-making, as always and elsewhere: "The current Iranian government, or any Iranian government for that matter, does not control institutions which are under direct control of the supreme leader, who

¹⁵⁷ The formal permanent members are the President, the Secretary, the Ministers of Defense, Foreign Affairs, Intelligence, Interior, Judiciary, Chief of Joint Staff, as well as two representatives of Khamenei. For details see: Buchta, "Iran's Security Sector: An Overview," 17.

¹⁵⁸ Ganji, "Main Currents in the Iranian Strategy since 9/11," 3.

¹⁵⁹ "Pasdaran – Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps," *Global Security.org*.

has his own policy-making machinery.”¹⁶⁰ That probably implies that the subordinated actors in the decision-making field willingly accept the supremacy of Khamenei. As was indicated in the first half of 2000s, “it is generally assumed, that the leaders of the security sectors’ components comply with the civilian leaderships’ wishes due to their relative lack of military autonomy, although they champion their own agendas as much as they can.”¹⁶¹ Yet, since 2005, with the election of Ahmadinejad to a first term, the situation has been steadily evolving, with the alumni (who had already secured proximity to Khamenei and through it, greater autonomy) gradually installing a *de facto* control over the security institutions that were supposed to be equal participants in the decision-making process.

2. Decision-Making Input

In general, the decision-making process, like the entire system of power, is formally centered on the personality of the supreme leader, who is supposed to provide major inputs, proceeding from the politico-ideological and religious norms and values established by the Islamic revolution. These inputs should be interpreted as broad strategic guidance. Often vague, that guidance might be delivered, for instance, during broadcasted Friday prayer sermons. Such kind of input leaves a wide field of interpretation by major actors in the decision-making process. As far as more concrete situations are concerned, the political views of Khamenei,¹⁶² which are consistently anti-American and anti-Western, significantly influence the behavior of decision-making participants. The supreme leader might maneuver in certain cases, restraining the hawks and favoring moderate factions. However, the general direction was set up a long time ago, since Khamenei assumed the position that gives him so much power.¹⁶³

This creates a potentially precarious situation, in which the politico-ideological visions of the person in charge are resonant with the output of the equally ideological

¹⁶⁰ Ganji, “Main Currents in the Iranian Strategy since 9/11,” 3.

¹⁶¹ Buchta, “Iran’s Security Sector: An Overview,” 19.

¹⁶² Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 47.

¹⁶³ Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 247.

security establishment, neither challenged by a parallel contribution of alternative institutional structures. In such conditions, aggravated by lack of professionalism, the incentives for the privileged side to shirk multiply progressively. In other words, “the existence of multiple centers of power combined with the existence of informal rules known only to insiders, which enable certain security institutions to exercise their influence, account for the opaqueness of decision-making process in this field.”¹⁶⁴

Furthermore, both civilian leaders and military commanders, operating in inner-circle clusters and a politico-ideological grid system arising from a single school of thought, are risking a slide towards self-isolated dialogues on security that might generate a dangerous echo effect and eventually lead to equally dangerous decisions.

3. Decision-Making Output

All the above factors affecting the Iranian decision-making process are of crucial importance, since they can help in understanding and assessing a growing outreach of the IRGC. The features of the decision-making provide the corps’ alumni with room to maneuver for advantage, given the degree of influence they exert through their privileged relationship with Khamenei, their administrative resources, and the uncontrolled fortunes at their disposal. These advantages make them more assertive psychologically than any other actor. They are further multiplied by operational autonomy:

The Guards’ level of influence in national decision-making is difficult to assess, but their intelligence activities would seem to give them an edge over civilian institutions and clerical interests on specific issues. It would appear that the IRGC’s autonomy in some areas, such as Lebanon and Iraq, is both unchallenged and integral part of Iran’s policies.¹⁶⁵

This autonomy, presumably granted by Khamenei (since no one else is in a position to do so), is transferred to the most strategically and ideologically sensitive domains of Iranian policy, such as the nuclear program and the Middle East. In fact, this autonomy translates into lack of transparency (under the natural excuse of secrecy) and

¹⁶⁴ Buchta, “Iran’s Security Sector: An Overview,” 17.

¹⁶⁵ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 60–61.

accountability. Eventually, this not only deforms the input–output equation, it creates a circuit, placing the IRGC in many cases as an input generator, instead of output producer. The mere fact of Brigadier General Hossein Kazemi-Qumi’s nomination (a high-ranking corps officer with a *Qods* background) as the ambassador to Baghdad—a man who allegedly was involved in coordination of the Iraqi Shiite insurgency—provides an example of mixing policy input and security output.¹⁶⁶ In narrower terms, it illustrates a subduing of the ministry of foreign affairs as a legitimate actor in national-security affairs, by the IRGC, which presumably was selected as a lead agency on Iraq after the U.S. invasion because of its capabilities, and skillful manipulation by the supreme leader and his establishment’s threat perceptions.

The guards’ activity in the decision-making process is both ideologically and rationally driven. In fact, both tracks often merge, as in the case of the Middle East policy in which anti-American and anti-Israeli *idées-fixes* are embedded into pragmatic desires and concerns, or vice versa. The “principlist” faction dominated by the IRGC alumni regards the active engagement of the corps in foreign policy matters as a logical extension of its constitutional role to defend the revolution from internal threats. At the same time, it perceives associated political opportunities in the domestic arena:

The IRGC, whose leadership is dominated by principlists, has tended to favor Ahmadinejad’s approach to the Middle East, focusing on its own exemplary role in resistance and as a vanguard in exporting the revolution in the Islamic world through the success of its *Qods* Force in Lebanon and Iraq. The emphasis on security (as opposed to diplomacy) in Iran’s current approach to the Middle East works to the IRGC’s advantage and may give the Guards greater weight in policy debates. The IRGC would presumably benefit from this increased visibility by gaining more resources and increasing its prestige.¹⁶⁷

A glimpse of IRGC operational autonomy that trumps formally superior echelons in the chain of command and illustrates both a degree of assertiveness over and negation of peer security actors might be found in the so-called *Karine-A* incident of 2002, when a

¹⁶⁶ Rubin, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guard—a Rogue Outfit?”

¹⁶⁷ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 86.

merchant vessel loaded with a shipment of Iranian weapons for the Lebanese *Hezbollah* militant movement was intercepted by Israel. A subsequent investigation revealed that the operation was an independent initiative by the IRGC, undertaken without notification or knowledge of the SNSC, which supposedly must be informed.¹⁶⁸

Summarizing the decision-making process in defense and security-related issues, there is evidence that the IRGC, led by both the alumni and the active service commanders, assumes the alpha-male role in Iran's decision-making. In a situation when input from civilian leadership often comes in the weak form of general religious-ideological guidance and the top ruler demonstratively distinguishes a particular one from several institutionalized and legal actors in the national-security domain, the impact is almost inevitable. Since mid-2000s, IRI interaction with the outer world has been heavily influenced by the IRGC in its dual corporate-institutional capacity. The Byzantine environment, privileged access to Khamenei, and granted autonomy provide the guards with favorable conditions to outmaneuver and subdue or sideline its peers in the field. Products that should be delivered as military outputs (i.e., knowledge and expertise as a feedback to the civilian domain) come instead as twisted *inputs*, translated by IRGC's effort into strategic guidance articulated by the supreme leader. Thus, the input-output curve transforms into a loop, contributing to further sharpening of information asymmetry and unequal dialogue between civilian leadership (i.e., Khamenei and his informal circle) and the top military establishment (represented by the IRGC, increasingly excluding the MOIS and the army competitors).

¹⁶⁸ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 89–90.

D. CIVILIAN CONTROL

There are different mechanisms, methods, and techniques, both direct and indirect, that are used by governments and politicians to exercise civilian control over the armed forces in order to achieve a dual goal: to maintain a sufficient tool for external defense, and, at the same time, to prevent the military establishment from intervening in the political sphere.¹⁶⁹

To prevent the armed forces from such intervention, civilians can professionalize the military and institutionalize control of it. The Iranian case is different. Despite the existence of formal institutions in the domains of the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches, and electoral processes and legal foundations, the entire political system is overmatched by the *velayat-e-fakih*. The informal structures and procedures, an absence of civil society and free media, and other distinctive nondemocratic features have a major impact on the patterns of civil-military relations in Iran. The regime facilitates other tracks of control, namely: (i) intentional politicization and indoctrination of the military; (ii) intentionally convoluted command and control (C2); (iii) command echelon appointments and promotions; (iv) material dependency; (v) interservice rivalry. The first four positions are analyzed in the current section, while the fifth, due to its importance, will be a subject of the focused case study in Chapter IV. The goal is to find out how effective are control measures in containing the political ambitions of any given actor in Iranian defense and security.

1. Politicization and Indoctrination

While civilian control, in theory, is devised to draw clear boundaries between military and political spheres, in practice these distinctions often blurred, since military personnel objectively become involved in politics as participants in national-security decision making.¹⁷⁰ As indicated above, however, the IRGC has crossed most of the lines

¹⁶⁹ This dilemma, known as “civil-military problematique,” was elaborated by P.D. Feaver. For details see, Peter D. Feaver, “The Civil-Military Problematic: Huntington, Janowitz and the Question of Civilian Control,” *Armed Forces and Society* 23, no. 2 (1996), 149–178.

¹⁷⁰ Kobi Michael, “Military Knowledge and Weak Civilian Control in the Reality of Low Intensity Conflict – The Israeli Case,” 39.

that separate positive contributions to the decision-making from toxic influence. This situation is inherently linked to a core element that knowingly and deliberately laid into the foundation of the corps in 1979 for its politicization. Two decades after the revolution, it started to cause a blowback.

Politicization is not a unique Iranian feature; it was used and is still used by many, if not most, nondemocratic regimes. This civilian control technique, described by S. Huntington as “subjective control,”¹⁷¹ essentially represents an intentional imposition of a politico-ideological “corset” on the military, especially its officer corps. By making the military a defender of the core ideological and political values that are allegedly “of the country,” the associated state regime hopes for protection from the threats arising from the internal environment.

In Iran, political indoctrination links Shiite Islam, Iranian-Persian nationalism, the glory of the revolution, the fame of war with Iraq, notions of jihad, self-sacrifice, and martyrdom, and the shadow of enduring “enemy conspiracies.” It is an inalienable part of the internal political dynamic. Political propaganda and indoctrination are systematic and systemic processes, projected at the entire community of defense and security forces and agencies. As it is explicitly stated in the Article 144 of the constitution, “The Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran must be an Islamic Army, i.e., committed to Islamic ideology and the people, and must recruit into its service individuals who have faith in the objectives of the Islamic Revolution and are devoted to the cause of realizing its goals.”¹⁷²

Politicization is aimed at two major objectives: to ensure obedience to the principle of the *velayat-e-fakih* (i.e. subordination to the regime) and to facilitate the discipline and functioning of chain of command.¹⁷³ These objectives are achieved through a web of structures and positions that surround the entire defense and security domain. One of the first foundations, created immediately after the beginning of the Iran–

¹⁷¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957), 80–82.

¹⁷² Jaafarzadeh, *The Iran Threat: President Ahmadinejad and the Coming Nuclear Crisis*, 53.

¹⁷³ Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War*, 136–143.

Iraq war to induce the Islamization and moral improvement of the armed forces, was the Ideological–Political Directorate (IPD), placed in the ministry of defense in October 1980.¹⁷⁴ The chief of the armed-forces joint staff (JS) has a deputy for cultural and defense publicity, which is manned by Brigadier General Seyyed Masoud Jazaeri (an IRGC alumnus).¹⁷⁵ In addition, each service (i.e., the *Artesh* and the *Pasdaran*) and their subordinate branches and key headquarters, as well as the MOIS and the MOI, have special clerical representatives of the supreme leader. Representatives deliver political guidance and religious-ideological indoctrination as well as ensure supervision, loyalty checks, reports and inquiries. This partly institutionalized, partly informal oversight is a *de facto* replacement of the parliamentary one. The entire military hierarchy, down to each tactical-level unit, is penetrated by clerical appointees; some sources list an estimated 270 military chaplains in the IRI defense structure.¹⁷⁶ An enforcement multiplier for the control system is the Judicial Organization of the Armed Forces.

Notably, the *Pasdaran* is not treated equally among other actors, being granted a special place and role in the process of politicization. It was initially devised as a political tool, according to the Article 150 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic that stipulates the IRGC “... is to be maintained so that it may continue in its role of guarding of the revolution and its achievements.”¹⁷⁷ The first three articles of the Statute of the IRGC (1982) expand this stipulation, stressing that the corps:

... [holds the role to] realize the divine ideology and expand the rule of God through the legislation of the Islamic Republic of Iran...[to conduct] the legal fight against enemies or movements who aim at sabotaging or dismantlement of the Islamic Republic or act against the Islamic Revolution... [to conduct] the legal fight against elements waging an armed struggle to nullify the authority of the laws of the Islamic Republic.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Jaafarzadeh, *The Iran Threat: President Ahmadinejad and the Coming Nuclear Crisis*, 54.

¹⁷⁵ “Iran to Unveil Major Defensive Projects in February,” *Fars News Agency*, January 28, 2010, <http://english.farsnews.com/8811061417> (accessed January 29, 2010).

¹⁷⁶ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 175–176.

¹⁷⁷ Alfoneh, “The Revolutionary Guards’ Role in the Iranian Politics.”

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Thus, the political role of the corps was arranged initially by the emergent post-revolutionary legal framework and was implemented and translated into practice on multiple occasions throughout of history of political conflicts in the IRI, whether by suppression of political opposition, oppression of ethnic minorities, or the emasculation and subsequent Islamization of the regular army at the immediate post-revolutionary stage. In the first half of the '80s, the guards played a major role in defeating underground opposition groups that posed major threats to the regime, contributing decisively to its consolidation and stabilization. Since the late '90s, with widening popular dissent, the IRGC has enhanced its security role, primarily through the *Basij* mobilization force, whose separate existence from the corps was only formal. This force, organized by territorial principle, is legitimized by Article 151 of the constitution, which obliges the government to provide military training “to everyone who wants to defend the revolution.”¹⁷⁹ The *Basij*, recruited through the mosques mostly by rural and urban-lower-class representatives,¹⁸⁰ provides the IRGC with an extended social outreach and an effective coercive tool. It performs a broad range of political tasks of “counter-sedition” and combating “soft revolution,” (i.e., regime change from within, an obsession of the ruling circle since the post-election unrest of 2009).¹⁸¹ In particular, the *Basij* execute crowd-control missions during public demonstrations, manage the university campuses, monitor citizens’ loyalty at the workplace and home, enforce the Islamic dress code, and, most important, are covertly placed in charge of ballot boxes.¹⁸² The political function of the force was explicitly stated by IRGC Major General Jaafari in July 2009:

¹⁷⁹ Hassan-Yari, “Iran: Defending the Islamic Revolution – The Corps of the Matter.”

¹⁸⁰ Tara Bahrapour, “Militia Adds Fear to Time of Unrest,” *The Washington Post*, June 19, 2009.

¹⁸¹ A conspiracy theory of the “soft war” waged with the Western support by the opposition in order to overthrow a regime was outlined early September 2009 by the former IRGC Deputy Commander-in-Chief Brigadier General Zolqadr. See, Robert F. Worth, “Iran Expanding Effort to Stifle the Opposition,” *The New York Times*, November 24, 2009.

¹⁸² Abdo, “Iran’s Militia Could Tip Election in Ahmadinejad’s Favor,” Houchang Hassan-Yari, “Iran: Defending the Islamic Revolution – The Corps of the Matter,” and Shaun Waterman, “3 Leaders Named in Guards Corps,” *The Washington Times*, July 15, 2009.

“*Basij* efforts should not be limited to the military dimension... This force must be prepared to neutralize the soft threat and a range of plots by the enemy on the political, economic, cultural and social levels.’¹⁸³

In 2008–2009, the IRGC apparatus has strengthened its ideological activities by embedding political brainwashing into all popular paramilitary training and cultural-education programs in its purview. It has also increased censorship of the media, including satellite TV, the Internet, and the blogosphere.¹⁸⁴ The intention is to contain the perceived attempt toward soft revolution, or, as was stated in October 2009 by the newly appointed *Basij* commander, Brigadier General Mohammad-Reza Naqdi, to control public opinion through “super media power.”¹⁸⁵ The IRGC propaganda component encompasses a broad media network of newspapers, magazines, radio stations, TV companies, books, movies, and more recently, Internet websites and blogs that are directly linked to, or indirectly controlled by the alumni and the corps.¹⁸⁶ They are engaged in routine propaganda proceedings as well as massive campaigns that develop along several major avenues: the fulfillment of the “line of the Imam” (i.e., Ayatollah Khomeini), the legacy of the sacred defense (i.e., the Iran–Iraq war), the cult of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, and a readiness to defend the country from inner and external enemies.¹⁸⁷ The corps-controlled media apparatus is essentially transformed into a strategic communication tool, which the alumni use to target wider domestic and international audiences by sending messages in the form of statements, interviews, or articles. This pattern emerged in 1999 after publication of the “*Letter of 24*,” and since has been used as a mean of manipulating the perceptions and behavior of target groups, including foreigners. For instance, it is a routine for top and even mid-level corps

¹⁸³ Hamza Hendawi, “Revolutionary Guard Tighten Hold in Iran Crisis,” *ABC News International*, July 26, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=8177161> (accessed August 18, 2009).

¹⁸⁴ Frederick Wehrey and others, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), 35–54.

¹⁸⁵ Farnaz Fassihi, “Revolutionary Guards Extends Reach to Iran’s Media,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 4, 2009.

¹⁸⁶ Fahri, “The Antinomies of Iran’s War Generation,” 106–108, 113.

¹⁸⁷ For more details see, Fahri, “The Antinomies of Iran’s War Generation,” Alfoneh, “The Revolutionary Guards’ Role in the Iranian Politics,” and Abdo, “Iran’s Militia Could Tip Election in Ahmadinejad’s Favor.”

commanders to make statements on international issues, not always directly related to Iran, and it is normal to stress anti-U.S. connotations to keep up the anti-Americanism that is one of the major foundations of Khomeinism.¹⁸⁸ Suffice it to note that other actors of the IRI defense and security pool, including the *Artesh*, though not completely restrained in making statements that are part of the official state ideology, still are less aggressive in this regard.

In sum, it is important to understand that the politicization of the *Pasdaran* eventually caused a paradoxical adverse effect. The corps was transformed from a *subject* of politicization and indoctrination into a *source*. This “secondary explosion” effect became a mixed result of both its authority, granted by Khamenei, and its self-assumed role as ideology’s guardian and enforcer. There are many clear indicators that the IRGC is “pulling the blanket” on itself. An evidence of that is the statement of Major General Jaafari that the *Pasdaran* should “counter deviation from the ideology,”¹⁸⁹ or the mere fact that the corps now trains its own clerics, while before they came from religious schools.¹⁹⁰ These and many other eloquent examples resonate with the hypothesis of M. Janowitz, who suggests that the military (paramilitary) forces in developing countries might move from tasks of simply maintaining internal order to “political patronage,” enforcing national consensus on certain post-revolutionary stages.¹⁹¹

“Follow-up indoctrination” of the entire society (i.e., ideological enforcement) by the guards stems from the politicization and Islamization of this paramilitary force by the regime in order to make it a coercive tool. Despite the fact that ideology was also equally projected at the army, the MOIS, and the MOI, the inherently political function laid at the very foundation of the corps made it possible to further privilege it vice the abovementioned actors. Such a situation objectively diminishes any role of the interservice rivalry as an effective way for civilian governments to build checks and

¹⁸⁸ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America*, 205.

¹⁸⁹ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 62.

¹⁹⁰ Slackman, “Hard-Line Force Extends Grip Over a Splintered Iran.”

¹⁹¹ For details on this issue see, Janowitz, *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing Nations*, 7–15, 45–47.

balances for the sake of a stable CMR. This consequence, presumably, was unintended, if the Iranian regime were viewed as a holistic entity. Though, seen from the perspective of political factionalism, there is also room to suggest that the supreme leader may have created such asymmetry intentionally, for his own ends—particularly to contain the influence of Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Khatami during their presidencies.¹⁹² Whatever the true reason, the history and outcomes of the politicizing of the corps represents a departure from the paradigm of Khomeini's predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini, who warned against excessive military involvement of the political process, and the behest of Mohsen Rezai, the longtime corps commander in chief, who called upon it not to intervene in politics.¹⁹³

2. Command and Control Structure, Order of Battle

The need to balance the different services of the Iranian dual military led to an emergence of the rather peculiar command-and-control (C2) system. Significantly, it has developed not only as a result of an intentional desire of the founders of the Islamic Republic, who aimed at instigating a rivalry between the uniformed services in the spirit of *divide et impera*, but was also a result of the real frictions that emerged between the *Artesh* and the *Pasdaran* during the war with Iraq. Two overlapping trends have shaped the contemporary Iran's C2 structure.

All actors of the defense and security community are subordinate and report directly to Khamenei. The singularity of the chain of command is basically not too much differ from most other states, where the military is subordinated to the top executive, who acts as supreme commander in chief. What attracts attention in the Iranian system, however, are two elements: the specific order of battle (ORBAT) and the multiple staff structures. Both uniformed services—the *Artesh* and the *Pasdaran*—have their own subservices (the ground forces, air force, and the navy). In addition, the corps maintains special-operations forces (a.k.a. the *Qods* force) and the recently regained mobilization-force component (a.k.a. the *Basij*). Each service and subordinate branch is headed by its

¹⁹² Alfoneh, "The Revolutionary Guards' Role in the Iranian Politics."

¹⁹³ Hashim, "Civil-Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 43.

own commander in chief and has an independent staff. Further, both the regular army and the corps have their own top joint staff. Finally, there is an umbrella structure of the joint staff of the armed forces (JS) that formally facilitates the joint operational control of both military arms.¹⁹⁴ In sum, there are eleven staff elements in the military domain only, not to mention, for instance the law-enforcement forces, which also maintains its own staff. In addition, some units of the *Basij* are subordinate to local (provincial) governors rather than to their staff. And above all that, the JS and most other staffs are manned by delegated IRGC officers.

Thus, military jointness is not Iran's way, and its defense forces are not "purple." Instead of manning unified, standardized joint forces, Iran affords the luxury of a complex ORBAT and C2 structure, associated with rigid division lines, duplication, and redundant bureaucracy and spending, not to mention challenges to war-fighting. Yet, through the lens of the civilian control, the interservice rivalry, and preservation of the regime's internal stability and survival, such a way appears quite rational. The intentional complexity of the defense system and its top C2 echelon sacrifices effectiveness and efficiency to political control.

Military dualism, based on the existence of a parallel, mutually balancing set of forces, is not a distinctively Iranian phenomenon. Such a pattern exists in many countries of the Third World, especially in the Middle East.¹⁹⁵ Despite obvious tradeoffs between military (operational) considerations and the political (managerial) approach, the latter is prevailing due to the regimes' survivalist logic. Dualism might affect combat but offers reasonable civilian control safeguards.

The few attempts undertaken to overcome the Iranian military dichotomy were futile, primarily because of resistance from the guards.¹⁹⁶ In 1988–1989, in the aftermath of war, President Rafsanjani tried to diminish the influence of the radical elements dominating the IRGC command and unify the C2 system by disbanding the IRGC

¹⁹⁴ Buchta, "Iran's Security Sector: An Overview," 6–10.

¹⁹⁵ Kamrava, "Military Professionalization and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East," 82–87.

¹⁹⁶ Barutciski, "Iran," 315.

ministry and creating the JS. The corps lost its own institution, which was merged with the newly created Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL). However, in 1997 Minister Abdullah Torkan, a politically neutral arms-industry specialist with close ties with Rafsanjani,¹⁹⁷ was replaced by a guards officer, and since that period the MODAFL is headed and effectively controlled by IRGC alumni. To sweeten the pill even more, the supreme leader placed Mohsen Rafiq-Dust, the IRGC minister who lost his position due to reorganization, in charge of the Foundation of Oppressed and War Disabled, which rapidly became a major channel for the influx of money, officially designated for post-war reconstruction and veterans' care, yet partially diverted to building the *Pasdaran* business empire.¹⁹⁸

As far as the MODAFL is concerned, its role, unlike in democratic or transit countries, is not focused on political and fiscal management of the military by civilian principals. Responsible for segments of the arms industry, acquisition, logistical support, international protocol relations, and training and education, it constitutes just another apparatus in the intentionally convoluted command-and-control system. Above all, since its creation it has been led by a uniformed person rather than a civilian bureaucrat or appointed politician. In charge of both the *Artesh* and the *Pasdaran*, since the late 90s it has been headed, as mentioned, by an IRGC officer.¹⁹⁹

3. Appointments and Promotions

Scholars of CMR in the developed world, and in the Middle East in particular, identify political loyalty among the officer corps as a key element of military appointments and promotions policy. For instance, B. Rubin maintains that loyalty is often placed ahead of the professional qualification of candidates as an appointment criterion.²⁰⁰ This observation is made in the Iranian case as well. Yet, there is a certain

¹⁹⁷ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran's Military Forces in Transition: Conventional Threats and Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Westport, CT and London, UK: Praeger, 1999).

¹⁹⁸ Hashim, "Civil-Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 46.

¹⁹⁹ Eisenstadt, "The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Assessment," 238.

²⁰⁰ Rubin, "The Military in Contemporary Middle East Politics," 5–7.

element in Iran's cadre policy that, time and again, stems specifically from the peculiarity of the complex and fragmented system of power.

Not surprisingly, strategic appointments and associated promotions are made by the supreme leader, who in his capacity as supreme commander in chief has authority to appoint the commanders of both the *Artesh* and the *Pasdaran*, the head of the joint staff of the armed forces, and the commanders of the branches in their structures.²⁰¹ Furthermore, he personally appoints commanders of some key military formations subordinate either to the army or corps, such as of the capital garrison. As was envisaged since the revolution, this appointment authority provides an ultimate lever of influence on the hard-power component of the defense and security forces pool by placing the commanders, handpicked on the basis of loyalty, in charge of the "boots on the ground." Appointment power gives the supreme leader an opportunity to maintain balance between key uniformed players. For instance, Major General Jaafari, who for a decade has been the commander of the IRGC ground forces and a leading Iranian theoretician in the field of asymmetric warfare, was appointed in 2007 as an IRGC commander in chief, based on his close personal relationship with Khamenei.²⁰² However, his outgoing predecessor Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, who was in tense relations both with Jaafari and President Ahmadinejad, was simultaneously placed as a military advisor to the supreme leader.²⁰³ This move is a visible example of how the appointments instrument is used by Khamenei to check executive power and instigate intra-service rivalry among other military commanders, though they belong to the same ideological milieu.

Some appointments, such as the members of the cabinet in charge of the MODAF, MOIS, and MOI, are the responsibility of the elected president. Yet they should pass parliamentary approval process, which provides a playing ground for the different factions and eventually gives additional opportunities to the supreme leader and

²⁰¹ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 24.

²⁰² Goodman, "Iran: Informal Networks and Leadership Politics," 9.

²⁰³ "Iran: The Supreme Leader Takes Control," *Stratfor*, September 3, 2009, http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20090903_iran_supreme_leader_takes_control (accessed September 5, 2009).

the alumni, since the conservatives and the “principlists” have held a majority in the legislative body since 2004. The parliament wields some formal influence in nominations, since they are debated, and the candidates should present a four-year plan to their prospective ministries. However, the approved nominees should be eventually endorsed by Khamenei, and they act as part of the cabinet only technically, reporting directly to him.²⁰⁴ Such double procedure facilitates both a firm control over key security assets and a “virtual” democratic entourage of the ministerial nomination process.

One more effective tool of the cadre policy track of civilian control is the rotation of top commanders and delegation of officers from one service to command positions in another. However, this tool, as in most cases, is applied selectively, privileging the IRGC. First of all, the tenure of command positions for the *Artesh* and the *Pasdaran* is different. From the three regular army commanders in chief since the creation of this position in 1998, the first was in his post for two years—and two others, including the current one, for five years each. The IRGC enjoyed much more institutional stability: its first commander in chief served sixteen years (Mohsen Rezai, 1981–1997) and the second, ten years (Yahya-Rahim Safavi (1997–2007). Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani, the head of the MODAFL with guard grass roots, served that position nine years (1997–2005).²⁰⁵

Another feature of the appointment policy by the supreme leader is seconding senior officers from one service to a command position in another service or security agency. In this pattern, for instance, in September 2005 IRGC brigadier generals Zolqadr and Afshar were moved from their positions as deputy commanders in chief of the corps to deputies of the ministry of the interior.²⁰⁶ Here the *Pasdaran* also enjoys the upper hand: since the late 90s, dozens of its officers were seconded to key posts in other forces or agencies, not to mention the MODAFL and the JS. At the same time, there is no information on any single opposite appointment to the IRGC. The only exclusion is the clerics, who are appointed by the supreme leader to fill some leading positions (especially in intelligence and the judiciary) in order to ensure control and indoctrination. However,

²⁰⁴ Ganji, “Main Currents in the Iranian Strategy since 9/11,” 21.

²⁰⁵ The statistics is compiled from multiple sources, mostly the periodic.

²⁰⁶ Goodman, “Iran: Informal Networks and Leadership Politics,” 9.

even in this regard the corps is able to “suck in” the delegated appointees. One example is Hossein Taeb, a senior cleric who led the *Basij* between 2007 and 2009 and later was appointed head of the IRGC intelligence bureau. After getting his theological education, Taeb joined the corps in 1982, served in the ranks during the Iran–Iraq war, and later served in different headquarters.²⁰⁷ Being enrooted in the system, he and similar former “aliens” probably belong and owe more to the corps than to the clergy. At any rate, such a *de facto* creeping institutional expansion and gradual takeover by the corps creates a shift of equilibrium and violates the very philosophy of the interservice rivalry process, where all participants should be treated equally, though not simultaneously and not in the same way.

4. Materiel Dependency

As B. Rubin maintains, material incentives and stimuli play an important role in projecting effective civilian control on the military forces in the Mid-Eastern region. They are split into two general categories: personal and collective. The former is usually understood as informal rewards to key military figures for their loyalty and performance; the latter is budgets, acquisition, and procurement preferences by civilian leadership to the military or paramilitary services, often based on their loyalty and performance rather than operational requirements.²⁰⁸

In this regard, the Iranian case, as usual, falls into the informal political niche. As in many other countries, the parliament considers, debates, and finally approves the budget and its defense portion, and its official figures are published.²⁰⁹ Still, in reality the defense and security budget is highly obscure and dependent on the supreme leader’s will. Moreover, the official financing is paralleled by informal “black” budgets,

²⁰⁷ “New Commander of Basij Militia,” *Zamin.com*, July 14, 2008, <http://www.zamin1.com/2008/07/new-commander-of-basij-militia.html> (accessed December 1, 2009).

²⁰⁸ Rubin, “The Military in Contemporary Middle East Politics,” 4–5.

²⁰⁹ Barutciski, “Iran,” 316.

programs, and back channels,²¹⁰ providing an effective additional lever *vis-à-vis* forces and agencies. Nonetheless, the IRGC is able to overcome or circumvent its materiel dependency in three ways.

First, the developed lobbyist capabilities and access to the supreme leader and his office, as well as an influential faction in the parliament, help to facilitate favorable official budgeting, winning the battle for resources against other peers. Second, the corps controls a substantial chunk of the Iranian military–industrial complex that it established during the war with Iraq.²¹¹ Such control reduces dependency from foreign arms procurement and puts the corps in a privileged position in research, development, and acquisition in domestic military production.

Third, and probably most important, material dependency is mitigated by huge financial assets, generated by corp alumni since the early 90s, when it was granted economic opportunities through *bonyads* (i.e., reconstruction funds linked to the opening foreign trade and emerging money channels). These structures were distributed on a patronage basis to corps commanders and veterans by the supreme leader, who sought to strengthen his initially unsure position by rewarding the loyalty of ideologically likeminded security actors. Notably, funds are placed out of any transparency, control, and oversight.²¹² Their existence enormously multiplied the alumni, not only by creating personal wealth and corporate assets, but also by forging informal socio-political alliances with the influential *bazaari* (merchant bourgeoisie) class.²¹³

Since the first election of Ahmadinejad, the *Khatam Al-Anbia*, the corps' engineer branch, and its alumni-controlled subsidiaries and private companies, have been awarded over 750 government contracts in the oil and gas industry alone.²¹⁴ They are involved in multiple and diverse economic and business projects, such as construction of the capital

²¹⁰ Taheri, "Who Rules Iran?"

²¹¹ Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War*, 255.

²¹² Slackman, "Hard-Line Force Extends Grip Over a Splintered Iran."

²¹³ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 56.

²¹⁴ Slackman, "Hard-Line Force Extends Grip Over a Splintered Iran."

subway system, seaports, railways, roads, bridges, and hydroelectric dams, and developing the automotive industry, medical clinics, and agriculture projects. They also highly involved in black-market activities, generating an estimated twelve billion USD annually, part of which is further invested abroad.²¹⁵

The described economic empowerment of the corps, stemming from the political rationales of the supreme leader, clearly indicates that the policy of buying loyalty with money has an obvious tradeoff: it significantly enables freedom to maneuver for the rewarded military elite. In broad perspective, it created a strategic implication: the corps emerged as a key stakeholder in the system with major incentives to preserve the *status quo* by any means. Uncontrolled enormous financial assets, a mafia-type economy, and cronyism of an oriental type objectively make the *Pasdaran* and its alumni a counter-modernization and counter-reformist force to resist any opening of Iran towards the world, save through some controlled back channels.²¹⁶ The “bureaucratic-authoritarian model” that emerged in some countries of Latin America in the 70s, consisting of a political alliance between the national military elites and technocrats to foster modernization, would hardly work in the Iranian case.²¹⁷ At the same time, the guards’ “economic empire” creates its major soft point, being a trigger of popular dissent, area of inner competition, and visible target for international sanctions.

E. CHAPTER SUMMARY

The civil-military relations in Iran in characterized by unique elements hardly to be found in other political settings, even in the same geopolitical region. They are affected by inherent deformations in both major domains, namely the national-security decision-making and civilian control, as follows.

The whole system of power in Iran is a combination of formal (institutional) and informal (network-centric) tracks. As a result, despite the officially existing hierarchy,

²¹⁵ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 59, and Slackman, “Hard-Line Force Extends Grip Over a Splintered Iran.”

²¹⁶ Gosh, “Iran’s Quiet Coup.”

²¹⁷ For more details see, David Collier, “Overview of the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian Model,” in David Collier, ed., *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 19–32.

neither the mutually balancing executive, legislative, and judiciary institutions, nor even a single totalitarian leader whose role becomes less controlling and growingly representative, are in full charge. Rather, the system is governed by informal shifting alliances of groupings, operating under the formal umbrella of *velayat-e-fakih*. This creates a vacuum in which a willing and able actor is in a position to take control. The developments of more than thirty years of Islamic Republican history, but first of all, the distorted civil–military relations, created the conditions that propelled the *Pasdaran* to such a position.

Iranian civil–military relations, as with other segments, are also heavily contaminated by factionalism, the shadow of informal networks, and personal rivalries. Contained in a non-transparent, elitist sphere, they suffer from a lack of institutional dimension in the ministries, parliamentary committees, and national-security councils’ that should coordinate efforts and ensure civilian control, oversight, and transparency. Though formally existing, these institutions play a weak role in the CMR and lack any form of societal or media clout as well.

One particular flaw in Iran’s CMR is a self-contained, supreme-leader-centered decision-making process in the field of national security, which leads to the growing exclusion of other legitimate participants, such as the regular army and intelligence, in favor of the IRGC. This, in turn, creates information asymmetry, doctrinal dominance, space for shirking, and excessive influence on the decision-making.

The civilian control track contains numerous loopholes as well. The applied methods and techniques, such as politicization through indoctrination, a complex C2 architecture, material dependency, and leverage by appointments, did not prove effective *vis-à-vis* the corps. Moreover, the intentional politicizing and excessive rewarding caused a blowback. It converted the guards from a *political* force (as appropriate to a military establishment that engages in elaboration and execution of national-security policy) into a *politicized* force (i.e., the privileged stakeholder in the system). As it was noted,

Perhaps the time has come for soldiers to become bureaucrats. So generals earn doctorates, take off their uniforms and run for president. From the point of view of some commanders, the new IRGC is returning to its previous three-sided form: to preserve the system, to revitalize and

promote Islamism as an ideology, and to defend Islam as a system against partisan politicians and professional intellectuals.²¹⁸

The malfunctioning engines make the whole notion of civilian control in Iran hollow. One of the most important engines, interservice rivalry, was omitted in the above analysis. However, it is the subject of the next chapter.

²¹⁸ Ganji, “Civil-Military Relations, State Strategies and Presidential Elections in Iran,” 21.

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IV. FAR UNEVEN RIVALRY: CORPS UP, ARMY DOWN

A. INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter on Iranian civil–military relations (CMR) did not address the issue of interservice rivalry; this is the focus of the current chapter.²¹⁹ As elaborated in the introduction, some CMR theories hold that interservice rivalry is an important tool that civilian (political) leadership uses *vis-à-vis* the national military forces to meet three major objectives: to contain the latter within the professional domain; to create a system of checks and balances; and to maintain effective leverage of influence.²²⁰ Those objectives may be achieved as follows.

Containment of the excessive energy and ambitions of the military establishment is achieved by diverting them from the political domain to the internal (professional) sphere, as well as by inciting or fueling competitive rivalry between the military services over their roles, missions, doctrines, and resource distribution (e.g., financing and arms acquisition and procurement). A system of cross checks is facilitated by assuring friction between the services to prevent excessive empowerment of any of them. The idea is to exploit their differences (be they bureaucratic, operational, technological, or cultural), and encourage mutual competition to control and build balance of power. A lever of influence over the military establishment is guaranteed by civilian principals acting as a neutral, impartial, and superior side, able to manage the military through existing institutional frameworks and channels.

Obviously, the patterns of interservice rivalry technique in different settings will be diverse. They are determined by many factors, such as geopolitical location, geo-cultural environment, historically shaped ways of war, the nature of the political system,

²¹⁹ In broader terms, interservice rivalry might be applied not only to the military services, but also to all agencies operating in the national-security domain, thus making the process an “interagency rivalry.” However, for the sake of simplicity, the IRGC and the Iranian army are treated in this thesis as services, or more precisely, “supra-services,” since each includes several components (branches). The chapter reviews the complex of relations between the *Pasdaran* and the *Artesh* predominantly, though rivalry between the IRGC and the MOIS is also touched upon.

²²⁰ Huntington, “Interservice Competition and the Political Roles of the Armed Services,” 40–52.

and technological factors. Despite its negative connotation, rivalry is not necessarily adverse. On the contrary, it may be quite an effective technique, or even a strategy, for imposing a checking restraint on the real or potential political ambitions of the military. Also, it may serve as a driver of innovation and efficiency in the defense system.²²¹ Yet, on the other hand, interservice rivalry might affect the core function of the armed forces: its war-fighting effectiveness.²²² These tradeoffs are a matter of calculation for a political authority choosing its preferences. The study of the Mid-Eastern region, for instance, indicates that local regimes, concerned with survival, often opt for policy-driven rationales over considerations of a purely military nature. In this way, they extend the notion of interservice rivalry, creating, in one form or another, parallel military forces (examples are Iraq under Hussein, Syria, and Saudi Arabia).²²³

However, the Iranian case is distinct from the above and all other known cases of the modern military dualism, in which parallel forces are essentially just elite armed components, selectively recruited and rewarded on the basis of loyalty and placed under direct control of the ruler to counterbalance the bulk of the military. Conventional wisdom still portrays the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a counterweight to the Iran's regular army. The fact, however, is that while interservice rivalry *as a CMR technique applied by the civilians* was true a time ago, it is not now. The study of the *Pasdaran* phenomenon offers, most of all, insights into the perversion of the fundamental philosophy of interservice rivalry.

The key idea of this chapter is that interservice rivalry in Iran is so asymmetrical and one-sided that its purpose is essentially defeated. By making the rivalry track a mere formality the supreme leader and his group, who were permanently privileging the corps, have disabled the major checks and balances of civilian control. Intentionally or not, they made interservice rivalry in Iran's military domain almost hollow: it only exists *as such*, but not as a policy tool of the civilian government. That leaves other factions in the

²²¹ Eric Ash, "Purple Virtues: Curing Unhealthy Interservice Rivalry." *Air War College, Air University* (April 1999), 51, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/awc/99-050.pdf> (accessed January 22, 2010).

²²² *Ibid*, 1–9.

²²³ Kamrava, "Military Professionalization and Civil–Military Relations in the Middle East," 82–87.

regime (and the whole country) to face the emerging outcome: the ascendancy of the guards to an almost unmatched degree of political power in the Iran of today.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section addresses the issue of services' identities and institutional cultures as sources of difference and rivalry between them. The second section traces the origins and nature of rivalry between the IRGC and its competitors throughout different periods of time. To assess the specifics, this piece examines some empirical evidence of rivalry between Iran's two military entities in the time between the Iran–Iraq war and 2009, as well as attempts of the regime to use this rivalry as leverage. The third section analyzes the rise and the prevalence of the corps in the specific fields of rivalry. Those fields are national-security strategy and foreign policy, information (intelligence), war-fighting doctrines and force structures, and defense budgets. And the last section addresses the societal aspects of the rivalry. It reviews the disparate social statuses and outreach of the corps and the army, which also have an impact on the issue in question.

B. ASYMMETRIC IDENTITIES: SOLDIERS VS. WARRIORS

Along with professional cultures and interests, a service identity, ethos, and pride are major internal distinctive features in most of the militaries of the world. The differences between them represent an important engine of rivalry. The field of service culture and identity is broad and multifaceted, ranging from the ways any given service performs its tasks and missions to its old traditions. “The military services have acquired personalities of their own that are shaped by their experiences and which, in turn, shape their behavior.”²²⁴ Once established, this culture is passed from one generation to the next. The Iranian case is no exception. Moreover, the disparity between the institutional identities and cultures of the *Pasdaran* and the *Artesh* represents an obvious confirmation of it. This disparity also helps to understand why the rivalry between the IRGC and the Iranian army became so uneven and asymmetrical.

²²⁴ Allard, *Command, Control, and the Common Defense*, 12.

The army's institutional identity was founded in the first half of the 20th century and further developed under the rule of the last shah.²²⁵ From the late 1960s until the late 1970s, it was in the zenith of its might as a hierarchically organized, well financed, modernly equipped, loyal, and obedient military force with deep service traditions, pride, and high social status.²²⁶ The revolution turned all it upside down—the army was betrayed, demoralized, distrusted, and all but decapitated through bloody purges. Its social status was severely diminished by a monarchical stigma and its institutional identity was damaged by Islamization and the rapid promotion of junior officers to top command positions. However, it still was able to retain its spirit of nationalism, professional culture, and technical expertise, as was particularly demonstrated by its conduct in war.²²⁷ The army accepted the new regime in a shift of loyalty from the shah to the Islamic Republic. That implied subordination to civilian power, developed by professional military education, following the chain-of-command, and a policy of non-interference into politics, as is common to regular military forces.²²⁸

Conversely, *Pasdaran's* identity and ethos were created and shaped by the revolution. From the beginning, it was inherently an irregular force, since its core consisted of six relatively small urban guerrilla groups merged in 1979.²²⁹ Corps personnel were recruited through improvised vetting, mostly from young people aged 17–28, from poor families and without military experience, save previous conscript service.²³⁰ At its early stage, the IRGC was guided or restrained not by manuals, rules, standard operating procedures, and a professional ethos, but rather by charismatic leaders, anti-establishment energy, religious zeal, and internal group dynamics.

²²⁵ Buchta, "Iran's Security Sector: An Overview," 7, and Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 125–150.

²²⁶ Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 195–210.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 303–304.

²²⁸ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations*, 2–3.

²²⁹ Goodman, "Iran: Informal Networks and Leadership Politics," 1.

²³⁰ Hashim, "Civil–Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 38.

The war of 1980–1988 led to professionalization and shaped an *esprit de corps* for the IRGC.²³¹ Contrary to the expectation that a draft-based military force is “civilianized” by a huge influx of uniformed citizens, this never happened with the *Pasdaran*. Instead, it became militarized, and was able to further retain and enhance this status due to the nature of the regime, the political system, an ever-complex security environment, cultural settings, and other factors. In fact, the IRGC underwent “reverse professionalization.” The war-generation *Pasdaran* members were largely students from civilian universities and schools, who often had to terminate their education. For instance, today’s two high-level corps alumni representatives, Major General H. Firouzabadi (head of the joint staff) and Major General M. Najar (head of ministry of defense, or MODAFL) are, respectively, a physician and a mechanical engineer by educational background.²³² Such people—who had altered their life by participation in a revolution that overthrew a feared monarchy, survived the long and bloody war with Iraq, and participated in conflict in Lebanon and other overseas missions—by definition should have less piety towards a state or political regime. Their internal group dynamic was influenced by informality and revolutionary psychology, in stark distinction from the army’s hierarchy, manuals, codes, and structuralized and rigid procedures. *Pasdaran* personnel did not have the “self-imposed professional standards,” defined by M. Janowitz as a prerequisite of controlled organizational military behavior.²³³ Consequently, their vision and ethos is of *warriors*, rather than of the soldiers who constitute a regular military.

At any rate, the war led the corps to attain two important factors: group cohesion and some degree of the technical expertise needed for an independent, military-type institutional identity.²³⁴ Soon after the war, the corps adopted a command hierarchy, permanent structures, military ranks, uniforms, a promotion system, and other

²³¹ Buchta, “Iran’s Security Sector: An Overview,” 9.

²³² Eisenstadt, “The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Assessment,” 239, and Buchta, “Iran’s Security Sector: An Overview,” 10–11.

²³³ Janowitz, *Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait*, 420.

²³⁴ Janowitz, *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing Nations*, 22.

organizational features.²³⁵ By the mid-90s the IRGC appeared very much like a regular military force, formally integrated into the unified chain of command together with the *Artesh*. However, the process of change did not lead to an emergence of traditional military culture or alter the already existing identity and ethos of the guards. Neither did it lead to its containment in the initial, narrowly defined, internal security domain, though enhanced by an external defense mission by the war. The answer why it did not happen is found in a key feature of the IRGC: the political role built into its mission at inception.

This mission is explicitly expressed by Article 150 of the IRI constitution, defining the IRGC as a protector of the revolution and its achievements.²³⁶ The status of “guardians of the revolution,” granted by its leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, remains a major force multiplier for the *Pasdaran*, contributing to the development of a sense of choosiness among corps members. The special mission of the corps is sustained despite generational change. Currently, cadets and junior officers, who are trained at Imam Hossein University, the guards’ high school, receive a professional military education, compatible in its quality with other third-world countries.²³⁷ However, the uninterrupted cycle of politico-ideological indoctrination that is embedded into guard training facilitates continuity of identity and transfer of the revolutionary spirit to a new generation.

Certain approach in civil–military relations theory maintains that paramilitary forces at the post-revolution stage become, sooner or later, an indivisible entity serving the state—a sort of official bureaucracy.²³⁸ However, both the core political function and the entire influence of the *Pasdaran* trump this argument, at least partly. Iranian internal politics led to the fact, that after the late 80s, and especially since the late 90s, the corps was empowered by the supreme leader in exchange for loyalty. However, IRGC loyalty had a personal focus that replaced the former assumption of loyalty and subordination to

²³⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman, “Iran’s Developing Military Capabilities,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (2004), 37, <http://csis.org/publication/irans-developing-military-capabilities> (accessed November 19, 2009), and Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 304–305.

²³⁶ Hassan-Yari, “Iran: Defending the Islamic Revolution – The Corps of the Matter.”

²³⁷ Reza Shafa, “Iran: Brig. Gen. Ali Hosseinitash back in the IRGC Imam Hossein University,” *The National Council of Resistance of Iran*, December 13, 2007, <http://www.ncr-iran.org/content/view/4497/153/> (accessed December 17, 2009).

²³⁸ Janowitz, *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing Nations*, 15.

the civilian establishment that was formerly a non-negotiable tradition of the regular army. Revolutionary logic and the prevalence of the politico-ideological paradigm (implanted into the *Pasdaran*'s institutional psyche from outside and then self-developed through three decades), has inevitably led to intervention in politics. The IRGC increasingly thinks itself not just a servant of the existing system, but rather as a *guarantor* and a stakeholder.

C. ORIGINS AND NATURE OF RIVALRY

The rivalry between the *Pasdaran* and the *Artesh* had a bad start. The corps was directly involved in the post-revolutionary purges of the regular military, which came in two waves: in 1979–1981 against the perceived pro-shah elements and in 1982–1983 against clandestine pro-communist cells in the army.²³⁹ In this process the Iranian officer corps by 1986 lost up to 17,000 officers, or forty-five percent of the entire establishment,²⁴⁰ due to executions, extrajudicial killings, imprisonment, forced retirement, and exile. The remaining elements were treated with suspicion and suffered from stigma for a long time.

The obvious goals of the Khomeinists, who were the main drivers behind the campaign, were to punish, purify and Islamize an *Artesh*²⁴¹ that, in the words of Mostafa Chamran (minister of defense from 1980–1981), was created by the shah to “defend Zionism and imperialism.”²⁴² A combination of coercion and Islamization, coupled with fear of a “counterrevolutionary coup,” became a cornerstone of the civilian control philosophy of a new regime.²⁴³ That is not to say that the entire establishment was subjected to repression; rather, the command positions were filled by junior officers, especially those from religious families, or retired officers and generals with previous anti-shah credentials, such as Rear Admiral Ahmad Madani, who has been restored in service as the governor of the Khuzestan province and who tackled in this capacity an

²³⁹ Edgar O'Balance, *The Gulf War* (London, UK: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988), 109–111.

²⁴⁰ Buchta, “Iran's Security Sector: An Overview,” 7.

²⁴¹ Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 26–28.

²⁴² Jaafarzadeh, *The Iran Threat: President Ahmadinejad and the Coming Nuclear Crisis*, 53–54.

²⁴³ Hashim, “Civil–Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 37–38.

insurgency of local Arabs; Madani later served as minister of defense and ran in the first presidential elections in Iran.²⁴⁴ This and other evidence indicate that the new regime did not exclude the army totally from the system. As far as the newborn *Pasdaran* was concerned, at that stage it primarily served as a counterweight to the army and a tool of internal security. This section addresses the origins, nature and evolution of rivalry between the corps and the army.

1. Interservice Rivalry at War

It is not clear to what extent the start of war with Iraq in 1980 diminished the threshold of continuous purges. But obviously, the task of territorial defense subdued, at least for the next eight years, the political aspects of rivalry between the old and new Iranian militaries. Yet another one emerged instead, concerning war strategy and conduct.

The rivalry between the army and the IRGC over strategy was a continuation of the political conflict between different factions of the regime, in which the secular wing of President Bani-Sadr relied on the regular military, and the clerical wing, on the corps.²⁴⁵ Such a rift badly affected the conduct of operations. The reflection of it was a unilateral decision by the President, who desperately needed good news from the front to repair his image, committed the regular army, which sided with him politically, to an ill-prepared offensive in January 1981. That offensive ended in fiasco and huge losses for the Iranians.²⁴⁶

After President Bani-Sadr lost his political conflict with clerics and left the country in summer 1981, the Iranian war strategy started to change. As was noted, "...in 1981, Iran's military school and training system completely collapsed. Since faith and human-wave infantry were all that would be required, the clerical government replaced the existing system with ideological and pure infantry training."²⁴⁷ This pattern of

²⁴⁴ Ganji, "Civil-Military Relations, State Strategies and Presidential Elections in Iran," 2.

²⁴⁵ Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 253–254.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 172–173.

²⁴⁷ Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War: The Iran-Iraq War* (London: Westview Press, 1990), 42.

warfare was advocated by an IRGC that lacked military professionalism, but not religious fervor and zeal. Notwithstanding, the even poorer performance of the Iraqi side made it possible for Iran not only to contain the enemy, but to push it out from the occupied clusters of Iranian territory. By summer 1982, Iranian troops had restored control over the border with Iraq. However, the clerical regime that had defeated its secular opponents was still concerned with the consolidation of its unstable domestic positions; challenged by the opposition urban guerrillas, they turned down an Iraqi offer of cease-fire, declaring a “war until victory over the aggressor.” At that stage, the role of the guards over the army command in determining war strategy and the conduct of military operations rose significantly, further exacerbating the already present tensions between the two services.²⁴⁸

The years 1982–1985 saw a chain of unsuccessful attempts to break through Iraqi defenses and transfer the war into enemy territory. The cost of these futile efforts for the Iranian side was dozens thousands of deaths. One major reason for such an outcome, beyond a flawed overall strategy and adverse international environment, was the constant operational and political friction between the *Artesh* and the *Pasdaran*, and their competition for resources, which were scarce due to an arms embargo. Finally, in February 1986, the Iranians were able to achieve their first major success, capturing part of the Iraqi territory at the Fao Peninsula. This success, attributed to the unconventional tactics employed by the guards—at least in its own interpretation—led to far-reaching strategic outcomes. The political leadership became more convinced of the feasibility of its desire to totally defeat Iraq and install an Islamic regime, and thus declared the next year a “year of victory.”²⁴⁹ The guard commanders, gaining clout, were behind the decision to turn to a “total war” strategy. The objections of the top army commanders against substituting tactical planning with ideology and fanaticism were not taken into account, generating a serious crisis in the command echelon. This crisis culminated in the relief of duty of Colonel A.-S. Shirazi, the army’s commander; however, his replacement

²⁴⁸ Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 256–259.

²⁴⁹ Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 171–172.

by Colonel H. Hassani-Saadi, a Khomeini loyalist, did not remove tensions.²⁵⁰ The guards took the upper hand, and were granted the authority to get all human and material resources needed for implementation of the new strategy of choice, whose essence was coined by the guard commander Mohsen Rezai:

So far in the imposed war only two percent of the country's popular forces and 12 percent of its economic forces have been utilized... It is sufficient for us to bring into the battlefield four times more infantry forces with light weapons than the Iraqis [to win]... We are on the threshold of a full-scale people's war, and this is the only path.²⁵¹

The “year of victory” turned into a disaster in 1987, when the Iranian losses sustained in the chain of human-wave assaults that were the guards’ trademark mounted to its highest point.²⁵² The official statistics of the loss structure reveals that of 188,015 Iranians killed during the war, the combined IRGC and the *Basij* forces lost sixty-four percent, while the army and LEF only twenty-three and two-point-eight percent respectively (the rest were presumably civilians).²⁵³ This failure was further aggravated by the opening of a second front in the Gulf, which emerged due to Iranian attacks against international shipping, unilaterally increased by the guards despite objections from the regular military. Maritime guerrilla warfare, waged since early 1987 by a newly created naval branch of the corps (IRGN), brought Iran to the verge of a large military confrontation with the U.S.²⁵⁴ In April 1988, one of the incidents, in which a USN warship was damaged by a sea mine planted by the guards, led to a U.S. retaliatory attack (operation *Praying Mantis*) against the assets of the regular Iranian navy (IRIN), some of which were destroyed or damaged.²⁵⁵ This episode brought conflict between the

²⁵⁰ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security 1984-87: Strategic Implications and Policy Options* (London, UK: Jane's Publishing Company Limited, 1987), 105.

²⁵¹ Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*, 172.

²⁵² Hashim, “Civil–Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 43.

²⁵³ The numbers are from Fahri, “The Antinomies of Iran’s War Generation,” 117. The official statistics differ from the most other estimates, which hold that Iran’s human loss in war is much higher.

²⁵⁴ Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 282–289.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

ideologically driven guard command and the regular military, who understood the danger of war confrontation with the States, to the extent that the IRIN reportedly swept the sea mines planted by the IRGN.²⁵⁶

The growing influence of the corps on strategy and negative outcomes it reaped generated criticism of human-wave tactics from the more pragmatic factions of the regime (headed by the parliamentary speaker Hashemi-Rafsanjani, who was placed as the supreme commander in chief of the armed forces in 1988). The pragmatists feared the rise of popular discontent with the protracted war and human losses and tried to check the belligerent posture of the guards and break a war deadlock.²⁵⁷ Eventually, they were able to persuade Ayatollah Khomeini to accept a cease-fire.

The war clearly indicated deep disagreement and mutual mistrust between Iran's two militaries over strategy and tactics, linked to politico-ideological rifts in the elites. It further aggravated the already existing cleavages produced by the purges of the army's officer corps. In addition to fighting the common enemy, both the *Pasdaran* and the *Artesh* were engaged in mutual interservice conflict. It demonstrates that at least two decades ago the rivalry was real. Moreover, the regime used it both as leverage and instrument of mutual balancing between two forces.

2. Missed Opportunity One: Post-War Damage Control

Armies returning home from war, especially when unsuccessful, historically represented a threat to regimes. In the case of Iran, such a threat was posed not by the regular military, cleared from the pro-monarchy stigma by its fight, but rather by a corps that had gained battlefield experience, political influence through participation in strategic decision making, and ideological radicalization.²⁵⁸ The end of the war was followed soon by the death of Khomeini, creating a *de facto* dualism in the power system, where Ayatollah Khamenei, nominated as new supreme leader but weakly empowered and lacking his predecessor's credentials, was confronted by Hashemi-Rafsanjani, who

²⁵⁶ Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, 134.

²⁵⁷ Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War*, 252–253.

²⁵⁸ Hashim, "Civil–Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 39–40.

was elected as president in 1989. The latter, aware of the potential danger presented by the guards, has clearly shown his favor towards the army. But even before, in October 1988, at a meeting of top military commanders, he stressed the need for professionalization of the *Pasdaran* and better coordination with the army: “The IRGC now is not as it was in the early days... if we are to rely on the IRGC as an armed force, if the regime is to serve God, the IRGC must not think that when it is attacked it can fight with Molotov cocktails.”²⁵⁹ From his side, the corps’ commander, Rezai, in an unusual move, had to publicly admit mistakes in the corps’ conduct of war, a humiliation in Iranian culture.

Overall, the first half of the 90s was the only period in recent Iranian history when the regular military was almost on an equal footing with the guards. The disbandment of the IRGC ministry and detachment of the *Basij* force from the guards, mentioned earlier, were correlated with attempts to enforce operational jointness, vigorously lobbied for by an army that took into account lessons from the war.²⁶⁰

Indicators of Hashemi-Rafsanjani’s favor towards the army are seen in the weapons-procurement programs of that period. The acute need for rearmament and modernization in an environment of scarce resources, resulting from the international isolation of Iran, generated a competition between the army and the corps over “toys,” and made the weapons program a carrot at the disposal of the government.²⁶¹ The major arms-supply contracts of the late 80s–mid-90s between Iran and the USSR/Russia, such as *Kilo*-class submarines, SA-5 surface-to-air missiles, SU-24 and MIG-29 jet fighters, T-72 main battle tanks, and BMP-2 infantry-fighting vehicles,²⁶² were diverted in the army’s favor, while the IRGC was limited to Iraqi war trophies and low-tech weapons supplied by China and North Korea. This procurement pattern illustrates how the

²⁵⁹ Hashim, “Civil–Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 41.

²⁶⁰ Steven R. Ward, “The Continuing Evolution of Iran’s Military Doctrine,” *Middle East Journal* 59, no. 4 (Autumn 2005), 560–561.

²⁶¹ Hashim, “Civil–Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 42.

²⁶² For numbers see, Michael Barutciski, “Iran,” 316, and *The Military Balance 2009*, 245–247.

government used its opportunities in applying leverage of rivalry in order to keep both forces under control by dividing them on the materiel ground.

Yet, Hashemi-Rafsanjani, while able to limit the immediate post-war challenge posed by the corps through more favor towards the army and its attempts to introduce jointness, did not, in his two consecutive terms as president, eliminate the rising political ambitions of the corps elite, who forged privileged relations with the supreme leader—who in turn sought support in his rows with the influential president. This first real opportunity to put a restraint on the guards was not used.

3. Missed Opportunity Two: Purge of the Intelligence Ministry

The second missed opportunity was during the tenure of the reformist president M. Khatami (1997–2005), who was able through indirect pressure to displace Mohammed Rezai, who led the corps for sixteen years.²⁶³ The latter had to obey, and moreover, called on the subordinated personnel to respect the decision of the political leadership and not intervene in politics.²⁶⁴ Yet, the powers-that-be allowed the supreme leader overcome this move by appointing Rezai's protégée, Major General Safavi, as corps commander.

However, Khatami's main effort was distracted by a conflict with the ministry of intelligence and security (MOIS). The MOIS, institutionalized later than the IRGC, in August 1984, initially challenged the corps in the field of national intelligence estimate.²⁶⁵ The latter was forced to cede part of its intelligence-gathering activities to a new ministry.²⁶⁶ By a national law, the MOIS, which was controlled by appointed clergy from trusted theological schools, received responsibility to coordinate and direct all intelligence activities conducted by the IRGC's bureau of security and intelligence, as well as military intelligence (the J2 department by the joint staff) and the intelligence and

²⁶³ Buchta, "Iran's Security Sector: An Overview," 9.

²⁶⁴ Hashim, "Civil–Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 44.

²⁶⁵ Buchta, "Iran's Security Sector: An Overview," 13.

²⁶⁶ Frederick Kagan, "Security Structures of Iran," *Iran Tracker*, February 20, 2009, <http://www.irantracker.org/basics/security-structures-iran> (accessed December 12, 2009).

security branches of the *Basij*—the LEF/MOI and the general prosecutor’s office²⁶⁷ being formally not accountable to anyone, except the supreme leader.

Both the MOIS and the IRGC were also engaged in a covert campaign of neutralizing the Iranian opposition in exile, which program by the mid-90s was transferred into the country itself. The campaign, claiming the lives of over eighty dissidents, came to light in 1997 and resulted in a protracted crisis, which eventually gave Khatami an opportunity to replace the top hardliner elements in the MOIS staff with more moderate men.²⁶⁸ By the time the issue was resolved in 2000, the corps had already stepped into the intelligence and security vacuum that emerged with the MOIS disarray.²⁶⁹ Moreover, the guards clearly used the moment to declare its political ambitions in the *Letter 24* manifesto. Thus, while busy engaged in the apparatus struggle, the reformist wing of the Iran’s leadership missed both the emerging center of gravity and the long-term strategic perspective, unwillingly reducing an important checking power of the MOIS *vis-à-vis* the corps.

Khatami’s government paid little attention to the army, missing an opportunity to create an alternative checks-and-balances mechanism by empowering the *Artesh* vice the *Pasdaran*. Analysis of the events of that period illustrates that the political leadership embraced the army, which continued to keep a low profile, only in periods of international crisis. In October 1998, after the slaughter of the Iranian diplomats by the *Taliban* militia in Herat, when Iran was on the verge of a military invasion of Afghanistan, the government endorsed the creation of a commander in chief of the army, to equalize it with the IRGC (which had maintained its own commander in chief since 1981).²⁷⁰ In a similar pattern, a rare public statement in summer 2002, when it became clear that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was imminent, the army’s commander in chief, Major General Mohammad Salimi, provided assurances that his forces were monitoring and

²⁶⁷ Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*, 166.

²⁶⁸ Buchta, “Iran’s Security Sector: An Overview,” 14–15.

²⁶⁹ Kagan, “Security Structures of Iran.”

²⁷⁰ Eisenstadt, “The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Assessment,” 240.

preparing to counter any American threat.²⁷¹ The neglect of the army by Khatami looks even less logical, because he was viewed as a nationalist, and as such would likely gain support from the *Artesh*, which, despite Islamization, still remained a more secular force with an enrooted nationalist tradition.²⁷² Whatever the reason, the reformist President not only missed an opportunity to restore the equilibrium of interservice rivalry and convert it into an advantage for the civilian government. But he even caused an unintended backlash, unwillingly contributing to the empowerment of the corps.

4. Rivalry Redux

Since the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005, with the corps ascending and the army continuing to keep a low profile, any visible indicators of interservice rivalry disappeared from the surface for a long time. Not the rivalry itself, though. In an unusual development, in early 2009 the army command voiced its criticism of the corps. On February 8, 2009, Major General Ataollah Salehi, the army commander in chief, published an article to express the corporate dissatisfaction with the fact that the IRGC command through the controlled media portrayed the corps as the only force that fought in the war with Iraq, at the same time diminishing the army's role.²⁷³ The article was signed by top military commanders; sending a shockwave prior to June elections. Although at the period of elections and associated instability the army kept silence, the dispute resumed after Major General Jaafari, the corps' commander in chief, gave a TV interview in which, again, the army's credit was diminished. This move triggered a set of counter-interviews and articles by the top army generals, who beyond being snubbed, were particularly disturbed by the overtly aggressive expansion of the corps, starting after

²⁷¹ Ganji, "Main Currents in the Iranian Strategy since 9/11," 9.

²⁷² Hashim, "Civil-Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 47.

²⁷³ "Iran: The Military will Stand with the Iranian People," Enduring America.com, December 11, 2009, <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/12/11/iran-the-military-will-stand-with-the-iranian-people/> (accessed December 20, 2009).

the reelection of Ahmadinejad.²⁷⁴ Major General Hassan Saadi, the deputy commander of the army, described the IRGC claims for sole credentials as the “height of unfairness,” adding:

We must ask: who went to the war front in the first days, and offered the first martyrs? At that time the IRGC did not yet have a single platoon; in fact, it had not yet been properly formed. It was the land forces of the regular army that stood against the aggression of the Baathist regime...²⁷⁵

This statement was supported by Brigadier General Hassan Shah-Safi, the commander of the regular air force, who stressed the role of the service as being defense against external threats, implicitly referring to the internal, oppressive function of the corps. In an even more overt statement in September 2009, Brigadier General Gholam-Ali Rashid, deputy chief of staff of the army, complained about uneven budgeting and payment, stressing that disparity between the two services and application of double standards undermined morale.²⁷⁶

While there is no clear indication that these developments were directly linked to the political crisis of 2009 and consequent second stage of the guards’ institutional expansion, the media exchange between the army and the corps represents striking evidence that the Iranian army still remains a potential player, though still a tacit one. However, the role of the regime behind this episode is unclear. There is a probability that some factions within the regime are reconsidering the army’s role in containing too much empowered corps.

D. RISE OF THE CORPS IN THE FIELDS OF RIVALRY

The rivalry between the IRGC and the army pierces the interrelated fields of national security strategy, defense policy, operational doctrines, force structures, responsibilities, and budget allocation. It is reflected in the emerging corps’ intelligence monopoly and resultant information asymmetry, though in this field it competes with the

²⁷⁴ Taheri, “The Monster and Cinderella.”

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

MOIS rather than with the regular military. There is also the field of foreign policy, where the IRGC is not supposed to operate at all; however, not only does it penetrate there, but it often sidelines legitimate players, such as the ministry of foreign affairs or the supreme national-security council. This section explains patterns of the rise of the corps' influence in the abovementioned fields due to absence of sufficient rivalry and equally powerful competitors.

1. National Security Strategy and Foreign Policy

Theoretically, the military establishment participates in the development of national-security strategy in a form of expertise (professional advice) provided to civilian leadership within the generic framework set up by the latter. When the strategy translates into practical policy, the military participates in its implementation together with other competent government agencies, under the clear guidance and directive control of the supreme civilian echelon.²⁷⁷ Notwithstanding autonomy and compartmentalization, inevitable in such activity, the military still remains accountable for its actions. The involvement of different services and branches of the military, as well as of other government agencies that formulate and implement national-security strategy and policy, is an effective policy tool at the disposal of civilian leaders to control and, if necessary, correct the process and its actors. The competitive mode is a key to a successful course of action, while the unavoidable friction between the actors, generated by such competition, should be treated as mere collateral damage. In Iran, this paradigm is distorted by the centrality of the IRGC in the national-security domain.

The root causes of the abnormal influence that the corps exerts on Iranian security, defense, and foreign policy can be traced back in the credo of its founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, who envisaged the “exportation of the Islamic Revolution” beyond Iran's borders. Consequently, Article 154 of the constitution defined, though vaguely, the corps as a force aimed at the “happiness of mankind” and “protection of human rights”

²⁷⁷ Kobi Michael, “Military Knowledge and Weak Civilian Control in the Reality of Low Intensity Conflict – The Israeli Case,” 31.

[sic!].²⁷⁸ This is just a reflection of the conceptual visions that in three decades transformed what at a first glance appeared as an ordinary paramilitary group created for internal order into an influential, regional-security spoiler with a worldwide reach.²⁷⁹

Since the early period of the Islamic Republic, the IRGC has been involved in missions abroad, for example in Lebanon (from the mid-80s), Sudan (in the early 90s) and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (mid-90s),²⁸⁰ gradually developing a professional culture and evolving from a revolutionary, “romantic” volunteer force towards a classical covert intelligence and subversion organization, what did not diminish its radicalism.²⁸¹ Suffice it to note in this regard that the regular military was never deployed for external missions, with the rare exception of the few naval assets sent to Somalia in 2009 to combat piracy.²⁸²

The growing involvement of the IRGC in foreign affairs that reflected the domestic conflicts within the Iranian elite caused a serious blowback. In 1986 Mehdi Hashemi, a senior guards officer who led the Office of Liberation Movements, publicly revealed information on the clandestine contacts between Iran and the U.S., triggering a political crisis known as the “Iran–Contra affair.”²⁸³ This episode illustrated the ability of radical elements from the corps, driven by ideology interpretations, not only to circumvent the SNSC and the foreign ministry, who are supposed to be leading agencies in foreign-policy matters, but also to act contrary to the will of political leadership (or, at least, some of its factions). Another display of a dangerous combination of new operational autonomy and radical indoctrination took place in 1991, when the extremist

²⁷⁸ Hassan-Yari, “Iran: Defending the Islamic Revolution—The Corps of the Matter.”

²⁷⁹ “The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps: Military and Political Influence in Today’s Iran,” *Brookings Institution* (November 2008), <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2008/1113.aspx> (accessed December 17, 2009).

²⁸⁰ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America*, 256.

²⁸¹ Rubin, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guard—a Rogue Outfit?”

²⁸² “Iran Commandos Sent to Arrest Somali Pirates,” *Payvand.com*, November 16, 2009, <http://www.payvand.com/news/09/nov/1169.html> (accessed November 23, 2009).

²⁸³ Ganji, “Civil–Military Relations, State Strategies and Presidential Elections in Iran,” 3.

elements from the corps' naval branch reportedly tried to fire an anti-ship missile at U.S. forces participating in the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation.²⁸⁴

After first election of M. Ahmadinejad, the involvement of the corps as a whole, or as alumni, into the elaboration and implementation of policy, grew exponentially. This might be proved by the flurry of statements and comments that IRGC senior commanders issued on different aspects of political and security developments in the Gulf, the Middle East, and even elsewhere in the world, at a time when officials from other agencies preferred to restrain themselves or use more diplomatic discourse. For example, in 2007 the newspaper *Keyhan*, the corps-controlled mouthpiece, incited a diplomatic controversy by claimed Bahrain as a territory that “historically belonged” to Iran.²⁸⁵ In another instance, in summer 2009 Major General Firuzabadi, a chief of the joint staff but a guard alumnus, meddled into the internal affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, threatening “consequences” due the visit of the Israeli president to that country.²⁸⁶ However irrational and ideologically driven this kind of statement appears, in reality they are based on political calculations, such as the threat to strike Israeli nuclear facilities issued on July 2009 by the IRGC commander Jaafari, in an apparent attempt to divert public attention from the electoral crisis to external irritators.²⁸⁷ By the same reason, despite its politico-ideological background, the IRGC never criticized China and Russia, both Iran's partners, for atrocities against Uighur and Chechen Muslims.²⁸⁸

Yet, the real challenge has been the practical implementation of the corps' version of a security policy, performed by the IRGC itself, as might be illustrated in the case of Iraq. Iran started to penetrate the Iraqi political playground even prior to the U.S. invasion in 2003 and has emerged as a key spoiler through its multifaceted support of the

²⁸⁴ Alfoneh, “The Revolutionary Guards’ Role in the Iranian Politics.”

²⁸⁵ Goodman, “Iran: Informal Networks and Leadership Politics,” 17.

²⁸⁶ “Iran Blamed for Meddling in Azerbaijan’s Affairs (Object to Israeli President Peres’ Visit,” Free Republic.com, June 17, 2009, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/2274160/posts> (accessed September 14, 2009).

²⁸⁷ “Crisis as Opportunity for the IRGC,” *Stratfor*, July 27, 2009, http://www.stratfor.com/memberships/142920/geopolitical_diary/20090726_geopolitical_diary_crisis_opportunity_ircg (accessed October 17, 2009).

²⁸⁸ Slackman, “Hard-Line Force Extends Grip Over a Splintered Iran.”

Shiite insurgency as early as in 2006. The IRGC, or more precisely its *Qods* force (IRGQF), emerged as a lead agency in Iraq,²⁸⁹ responsible not only for strategy and policy implementation, but, even more importantly, for its generation, subduing in this business all other possible players, from the MOIS to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which in particular was clearly illustrated by the background of the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad. That said, it should not mean that such an important issue as Iraq was left completely to the will of the guard command. Rather, in this case the supreme leader applied an *intra-service* rivalry technique instead of an interservice, by his clear preferentialism towards the *Qods* force. Technically an organic part of the IRGC, the IRGQF, nonetheless, reports directly to and is accountable only to Khamenei, bypassing the formal chain of command.²⁹⁰ Moreover, the IRGQF commander, Brigadier General Qassem Solaimani, reportedly has close personal relations with the supreme leader.²⁹¹ Those two factors provide insight into the specifics of civilian control, as understood and executed by Iranian leadership.

Beyond Iraq, another major line of IRGC autonomous external role is related to the nuclear program of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). In June 2004, amid debates between moderate and radical elements in the IRI government over the emerging nuclear row with the West (in which the radicals eventually took the upper hand),²⁹² an IRGC unit seized eight Royal Navy personnel in Iraq.²⁹³ In March 2007, the period of active international negotiations on the nuclear issue, the IRGC, in a repeating pattern, seized fifteen Britons in the Gulf. Study of this incident suggests that while no decision-making headquarters is presumed to have been involved, the corps' operational culture, based on decentralization and political indoctrination (i.e., awareness of the general political

²⁸⁹ Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iran's Evolving Threat," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 3, 2010, 94, http://csis.org/files/publication/100121_irans_evolve_threat.pdf (accessed January 19, 2010).

²⁹⁰ Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* 69.

²⁹¹ Kagan, "Security Structures of Iran."

²⁹² Goodman, "Iran: Informal Networks and Leadership Politics," 14–15.

²⁹³ Simon Henderson, "Incident in the Shatt al-Arab Waterways: Iran's Border Sensitivities," *Policy Watch* no. 879, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 28, 2004, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=1757> (accessed September 4, 2009).

directive) allowed a local commander—who was later awarded for his conduct—to make a decision.²⁹⁴ In September 2009, the corps conducted demonstrative missile firing tests (the *Great Prophet IV* exercise) just days ahead of negotiations with the West on the nuclear issue in Vienna.²⁹⁵

All these and many other examples, such as the *Karine-A* affair referred to in Chapter III, provide grounds to suggest that the IRGC is hardly checked by any other government agency in its influence on national security and foreign policy. Though the SNSC, the MFA, and the MOIS are also involved in the process, the corps, utilizing its informal channels to the supreme leader, is not matched, checked, or counterbalanced. As for the army, it is virtually excluded from the process. Thus, ISR in the field of Iran's grand strategy growingly resembles a one-man show. Operating in the niche, being hardly controlled or accountable, driven by a radical ideological indoctrination, and handling all regional proxy forces, the IRGC has transformed itself into a key player in national security and foreign policy,²⁹⁶ contributing to the increasingly militarized international behavior of Iran.

2. Information Domain

Information asymmetry between the defense establishments and their civilian superiors (i.e., dissimilar knowledge in the professional field) is a natural factor of interaction between the military and civilian domains in the process of elaboration and implementation of the national-security strategy. This particularly happens due to the closed nature of the military system and organizational bias.²⁹⁷ This knowledge gap

²⁹⁴ For details see, "Iran's Naval Forces: From Guerrilla Warfare to a Modern Naval Strategy," *Federation of American Scientists* (Fall 2009), 20, <http://fas.org/irp/agency/oni/iran-navy.pdf> (accessed January 11, 2009) and David B. Crist, "Gulf of Conflict: A History of the U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Focus#95 (January 2009), 25–26, <http://thewashingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus95.pdf> (accessed December 25, 2009).

²⁹⁵ "Iran: The Latest Round of Missile Tests," *Stratfor*, September 28, 2009, http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20090928_iran_latest_round_missile_tests (accessed November 13, 2009).

²⁹⁶ Hassan-Yari, "Iran: Defending the Islamic Revolution – The Corps of the Matter."

²⁹⁷ Uri Bar-Joseph, "Military Intelligence as the National Intelligence Estimator—The Case of Israel," *Armed Forces and Society Online First* (May 29, 2009), 2–5, 15, <http://afs.sagepub.com/cgi/rapidpdf/0095327X08330934v1> (accessed January 3, 2010).

results from what was characterized by Elliot Cohen as an “unequal dialogue” that, however, eventually proceeds in favor of the political echelon, whose superiority is guaranteed by the checks created by the existing legal system.²⁹⁸ This asymmetry is usually corrected and mitigated through the diversification of the sources of information used for the mentioned ends, while the instigated competition between different national intelligence agencies adds to the quality of their product. This practice was also applied in the Iranian setting, where the pool of intelligence services was coordinated by the MOIS. However, this situation has been changed under pressure from the IRGC.

Since the reelection of Ahmadinejad for a second term, Ayatollah Khamenei has sanctioned the centralization of at least part of the intelligence apparatus, transferring it under the auspices of the corps. It encompasses the IRGC’s intelligence bureau, the newly created IRGC cyber-defense unit, certain units of the internal-security directorate of MOIS, the intelligence cell of the supreme leader’s office, and several other covert intelligence and surveillance units.²⁹⁹ Though it appears that reorganization is aimed at increasing the domestic-intelligence role of the corps (given the emergence of Internet-monitoring capabilities in its structures and the regime’s efforts to link the opposition to “foreign forces”) one should expect that the IRGC will increase pressure on the MOIS to yield even more authority. The intelligence arm of the IRGC already places its operatives under diplomatic cover in IRI embassies abroad.³⁰⁰ Moreover, the ministry itself has been headed since August 2009 by Heydar Moslehi, a corps alumnus.

The not-so-unlikely loss of the MOIS coordinating role in the field of foreign intelligence and the subduing of it as a competitor would remove one more check and indicate the corps’ supremacy in the field of gathering and interpreting information for feeding the NSDM cycle at the top level. This is especially important in the light of the

²⁹⁸ Eliot A. Cohen, “The Unequal Dialogue: The Theory and Reality of Civil–Military Relations and the Use of Force,” in *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil–Military Gap and American National Security*, eds. Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn (Cambridge, MA: The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2001), 429–458.

²⁹⁹ Austin Knappe, “Khamenei Sanctions New Intelligence Agency,” *Long War Journal*, November 13, 2009, http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2009/11/khamenei_sanctions_new_intelli.php (accessed January 20, 2010).

³⁰⁰ Rubin, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guard—a Rogue Outfit?”

low and obscure profile of army intelligence (J2), which has liaisons both to the guards and the MOIS and participated in foiling some “counterrevolutionary plots” in the 80s.³⁰¹ These factors might indicate that intelligence is already controlled by the security apparatus rather by the military. Given the specific origins of other components of the regime (the clergy and technocrats), it is safe to expect increasing manipulation of threat perception on behalf of the alumni, who would be even less restrained in their maneuverability in capitalizing on political influence. A national-intelligence estimate will remain contained in the closed and classified chamber of a sole structure, affected by organizational bias and ideological inclinations. This will lead to even greater autonomy for the upper echelon of the guards, which will allow it to shirk in its own way. The least expected outcome, again, would be an increasing “securitization” of the Iranian foreign policy.

3. War-Fighting Doctrines and Force Structure

Military (war-fighting) doctrines are an inherent field of rivalry and friction between the uniformed services, since they operate in different ways, with different means and through different cultures.³⁰² In the case of Iran, the issue is aggravated not only by two parallel sets of ground, air, and naval forces coexisting in the same domains, but also by their disparate political status, created at the immediate post-revolutionary stage with the foundation of the corps and purges of the army.

The doctrinal rift between two services emerged as early as late 1979, soon after the revolution, when a group of senior army officers, based on their assessment of the poor performance of the newly created corps in combating the Kurdish insurgency, advanced an improvement plan to the ministry of defense. The proposal suggested the creation of a unified command (i.e., joint staff) to coordinate operations, the mechanization of corps units, and the use of army instructors to train *Pasdaran* personnel.³⁰³ However, the offer was torpedoed by the corps. In the following eight years

³⁰¹ Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War*, 230.

³⁰² See Chapter I.

³⁰³ Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War*, 228–229.

of war with Iraq, it was army professionals who continuously insisted on jointness and corps self-styled commanders who constantly sabotaged the effort. Such a behavior reflects the nature of rivalry at its early stage, where the IRGC was eager not only to maintain the gained autonomy, but to achieve supremacy over the regular military

Post-conflict Iranian military doctrine was heavily influenced by the painful experience of war, as well as clashes between the IRI and U.S. forces in the Gulf in 1987–88,³⁰⁴ and was codified in the 1992 regulations of the armed forces. Influenced by the regular military command and regaining ground under president Hashemi-Rafsanjani, the document, despite many politico-ideological connotations and modalities, appears professional, systematic and, above all, aware of the need for some civilian oversight.³⁰⁵ An example of the army's temporary doctrinal influence might be found in an article by an anonymous author in the official *Saff* military magazine (Spring 2001) that stresses the professional and technical side of warfare (e.g., firepower and mobility) while largely missing the traditional ideological entourage.³⁰⁶ For more than a decade, the army insisted on the necessity of maintaining a traditional hierarchical chain of command, coordination, interoperability and jointness with the *Pasdaran*.³⁰⁷ For instance, one of the articles in *Saff* (February 2000) directly referred to the danger of a potential interservice rivalry.³⁰⁸ However, it was able to achieve quite a few objectives, mostly on the level of logistics.³⁰⁹ The corps largely ignored the offers, and until the mid-2000s, joint exercises and training involving both services were quite rare.³¹⁰ Rivalry and clashes between the professional military and paramilitary cultures generated operational frictions, such as the

³⁰⁴ Ward, "The Continuing Evolution of Iran's Military Doctrine," 560 and Crist, "Gulf of Conflict: A History of the U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea."

³⁰⁵ Ward, "The Continuing Evolution of Iran's Military Doctrine," 560–561.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 563.

³⁰⁷ Hashim, "Civil–Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 40.

³⁰⁸ "Tehran Reviews its Naval Doctrine," *Federation of American Scientists* (March 2001), <http://www.fas.org/news/iran/2001/iran-010319.htm> (accessed December 18, 2009).

³⁰⁹ Michael Barutciski, "Iran," 315.

³¹⁰ Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iran's Evolving Threat," 86–90.

uncoordinated activities of the army and corp air forces (IRIAF and IRGAF, respectively) in the same airspace, which reportedly resulted in some cases of fratricide fire.³¹¹

The post-9/11 changes in the geostrategic environment, primarily the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, provided a strong impetus to the hardliner wing within the regime³¹² to intercept the national-security agenda in anticipation of the incoming “decisive battle” with America (see Chapter III). These changes gave the IRGC an opportunity to advance an alternative strategic conceptual vision, centered on a doctrine of asymmetric warfare. The primary source of that doctrine was traced to the tightly knit group of officers in the IRGC’s Strategic Research Center, as well as some other informally associated think tanks like the Doctrinal Analysis Center for Security without Borders.³¹³ The assertiveness of the proponents of the asymmetric strategy and their ability to manipulate perceptions of Khamenei grew proportionally as the U.S. bogged down in the Iraqi quagmire.

To one extent or another, asymmetry has been a mainstay element of the IRI’s strategy since the revolution.³¹⁴ Its philosophy can be found in the words of Ayatollah Khomeini: “Victory is not achieved by swords; it can only be achieved by blood.”³¹⁵ The IRGC apparently fought its war with Iraq under this slogan, which stressed the spiritual and moral components of warfare. However, over time the corps developed more practical approaches towards asymmetric war. Based on a combination of multiple statements and publications by the senior IRGC commanders, the corps’ asymmetric warfare doctrine might be summarized as follows: (i) strategic deterrence with high-end weapons (e.g., ballistic missiles and emerging nuclear capability); (ii) disruption of

³¹¹ Frederic Wehrey and others, *Dangerous but not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), 68, and “Iran’s New Plan for Air Defense.” *In from the Cold Blogpost*, February 16, 2009, <http://formerspookblogpost.com/2009/02/irans-new-plan-for-air-defense.html> (accessed December 6, 2009).

³¹² Ward, “The Continuing Evolution of Iran’s Military Doctrine,” 563–564.

³¹³ See, Ali Alfoneh, “Iran’s Suicide Brigades: Terrorism Resurgent.” *Middle East Quarterly* XIV, no. 1 (Winter 2007), <http://www.meforum.org/1059/irans-suicide-brigades> (accessed September 17, 2009), “The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps: Military and Political Influence in Today’s Iran,” and Anthony H. Cordesman, “Iran’s Evolving Threat,” 84.

³¹⁴ Ganji, “Civil–Military Relations, State Strategies and Presidential Elections in Iran,” 33.

³¹⁵ Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, 171.

strategic energy-supply routes (e.g., the Hormuz Strait); (iii) a “mosaic defense” based on a decentralized command and control system envisaging a great degree of autonomy for commanders, more typical of revolutionary than regular forces; (iv) and unconventional operations, proxy wars, and terrorism.³¹⁶ These components are interrelated and multiplied by ideology, especially in a culture of sacrifice and martyrdom. The doctrine emphasizes preemption: “If we do not resist America and Israel in Lebanon and Palestine, tomorrow we must engage in war with Israel and America at the frontiers of Iran” (Major General Firuzabadi, the chief of JS and an alumni).³¹⁷ As stated by the current corps commander, Jaafari, “asymmetric warfare ... is [our] strategy for dealing with significant capabilities of the enemy.”³¹⁸

Beyond strategic culture, doctrinal rivalry also affects force structure and operational posture.³¹⁹ The *Pasdaran* became the first paramilitary force in the world that has ballistic-missile units in its order of battle and it probably will eventually have nukes as well, thus controlling the most valuable national-defense asset and further strengthening its nationwide influence.³²⁰ Its organic overseas special-operations command (IRGQF) supplements the strategic-deterrence capability with an unconventional one, while the army apparently lacks both. Its ground forces are scattered at threatened points along the national-borders periphery, while the IRGC, together with the *Basij* and law-enforcement forces, are placed in the vicinity of major population centers.³²¹ Overall, the place of the regular army in the new doctrine that apparently

³¹⁶ For details see, “The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps: Military and Political Influence in Today’s Iran,” Ward, “The Continuing Evolution of Iran’s Military Doctrine,” 573–576, Crist, “Gulf of Conflict: A History of the U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea,” and Ali Alfoneh, “What Do Structural Changes in the Revolutionary Guards Mean?” *AEI Online - Middle Eastern Outlook* 7 (September 2008), <http://www.aei.org/outlook/28666> (accessed October 3, 2009).

³¹⁷ “Changed Threat Perception in Tehran,” *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, vol. 01, no. 22, October 28, 2009, 15.

³¹⁸ Simon Henderson, “Energy in Danger: Iran, Oil and the West.”

³¹⁹ Eisenstadt, “The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Assessment,” 239.

³²⁰ Frederic Wehrey and others, *Dangerous but not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, 75.

³²¹ Kagan, “Security Structures of Iran.”

dominates senior headquarters in Tehran is not clear. It appears that the regular ground forces are left with territorial defense through conventional warfare.³²²

As far as the IRIAF and the IRIN are concerned, there are certain indications that the corps was able to subdue these two branches of the regular military through its own seconded officers,³²³ or at least, find common understanding on operational issues, though this is difficult to assess precisely due to lack of information. The creation of the air defense as a “fourth branch” of the military in February 2009, in the apparent anticipation of air attack against nuclear facilities, leaves room for suggestion that it was the first real attempt to create a joint command to bring together the army’s technical expertise and corps control.³²⁴ Equally, the IRIN was able to come to an agreement about division of responsibility with the IRGN, taking over the Gulf and the Caspian Sea while the guards got the Hormuz Strait and the Indian Ocean;³²⁵ yet, the overall operational command in the area of potential conflict with the U.S. falls to the latter.³²⁶ One of the indicators of improving relations between the two services, or, perhaps, just of the vanishing of the institutional identity of the regular navy, became the first appointment of a professional naval officer as a commander in sixteen years, since that position from 1989 to 2005 was manned by guards.³²⁷

Overall, in assessing rivalry in the area of doctrinal influence, it is safe to conclude that the army lost this battle to the corps as well. In the clash of two philosophies of warfare—an instrumental approach defended by the army and the pragmatic wing of the regime versus the expressive approach pushed by the corps and the radicals—the latter group has won.³²⁸

³²² Cordesman, “Iran’s Evolving Threat,” 71.

³²³ Buchta, “Iran’s Security Sector: An Overview,” 11.

³²⁴ “Iran’s New Plan for Air Defense.”

³²⁵ Claire Taylor, “Conventional Military Capabilities,” in *The Islamic Republic of Iran: An Introduction* (London, UK: House of Commons Library, 2009), 134, <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp2009/RP09-092.pdf> (accessed December 18, 2009).

³²⁶ Crist, “Gulf of Conflict: A History of the U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea,” 25–26.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

³²⁸ On the division of the ruling establishment over the doctrinal issues see, Kagan, “Security Structures of Iran.”

4. Defense Budget

Competition for financing and hardware has been a field of rivalry for as long as the corps has existed,³²⁹ and should not be treated separately from the struggle over war doctrines. Some patterns of this competition were described earlier. Analysis of the current defense and security budget confirms that the regular armed forces are far worse financed than the corps. For the 1388 Iranian fiscal year (March 2009–March 2010), the IRGC was allocated \$5.1bn, the defense ministry–\$4.63bn, the law-enforcement forces–\$2.07bn, the army–\$1.96bn, the joint staff–\$0.72bn, the MOIS–\$ 0.52bn, and the MOI–\$0.44bn.³³⁰ Placed in the fourth position, the army by definition is not privileged, getting twice less money than the corps, though it is more than twice larger in number of servicemen.

Furthermore, the weapons-acquisition process proceeds via the MODAFL, which is largely controlled by the alumni. The days when the army had a temporary preference in arms supplies were over with the presidency of Hashemi-Rafsanjani. Since the early 2000s, the best portion of new armament, procured abroad or locally by the military-industrial complex (already controlled by the IRGC) is at the disposal of *Pasdaran* forces. For example, its naval branch only recently received ten *Houdong*-class missile boats, built by North Korea, five C14 missile boats from China, and nearly forty new indigenously constructed IPS16-class patrol crafts.³³¹ As for the army, it still has to rely mostly on the outdated American and British armament supplied in the 60s–70s.³³² There

³²⁹ On the division of the ruling establishment over the doctrinal issues see, Kagan, “Security Structures of Iran.”

³³⁰ S. M. Zadonsky, “Characteristics of Budget of the Military Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *The Institute of the Middle East*, December 2009, [In Russian.] <http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2009/27-11-09a.htm> (accessed January 4, 2009).

³³¹ Stephen Saunders, ed., *Jane’s Fighting Ships 2009–2010*, (Coulsdon, Surrey, UK: IHS (Global) Limited, 2009): 373–376.

³³² For a detailed account see, *The Military Balance 2009*, 245–247.

are unconfirmed reports that the regular air force and navy are to get some new weapons and equipment, but it will most likely be limited and probably related more to propaganda rather than to real developments.³³³

Article 147 of the Iranian constitution, grants the armed forces an opportunity to develop certain types of economic and entrepreneurial activities in peacetime.³³⁴ While the IRGC fully utilizes such activities through its multiple outfits, the army is deprived of equal opportunities. Senior IRGC officers are also deeply integrated in business, where the distinction between a government job and personal interest is blurred. For instance, Major General Mostafa Mohammad Najjar, current minister of the interior (an alumnus), is a member of the board of several industrial manufacturing companies.³³⁵ There are no known similar examples from the army side. Another side of the army's inferiority is lower pay compared to the corps. This contributes directly into low prestige and social estimation of the former. The army draft is considered a form of serfdom, while corps service is a privilege. An indicator of the miserable financial and social status of the military is the semiofficial practice of the late 90s of receiving money (the equivalent of \$16,000) from individual citizens willing to dodge the draft.³³⁶

Overall, the issue of financing is an inherently effective leverage to influence military organizational behavior. Yet, in Iran's realities the army is essentially deprived from lobbyist capabilities that make it possible to hope for substation money allocation. On the other side, the corps enjoys top preferentiality. Accordingly, it is difficult to consider the defense budget as a leverage of civilian influence that it supposed to be in theory.

³³³ "Iran Forms First Squadron of Home-Made Saeqeh Fighter-Jets," *Iran Focus*, February 24, 2010, <http://www.iranfocus.com/en/iran-general-/iran-forms-first-squadron-of-home-made-saeqeh-fighter-jets-19795.html> (accessed February 25, 2010).

³³⁴ "The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps: Military and Political Influence in Today's Iran."

³³⁵ "Biography of Mostafa Mohammad Najjar for Post of Defense Minister," *Global Security.org* (2005), <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2005/iran-050814-irna06.htm> (accessed November 21, 2009).

³³⁶ Hashim, "Civil-Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 46.

E. SOCIETAL DIMENSION OF RIVALRY

There are several dimensions that may appear to be outside the field of interservice rivalry, but nevertheless contribute to the overall strengthening of the corps' position as "strategic force multipliers" and leave the army and other peer competitors with almost no chance of success as rivals.

The IRGC has a strong link to Iranian society. Membership, or even indirect forms of affiliation with the institution, provides prestige, career opportunities, and financial preferences. Service in the guards is viewed as a "stepping stone for successful career"³³⁷ and a "valued credential."³³⁸ Salaries, which are much better than in the army, provide substantial material stimulus.³³⁹ This is especially true for representatives of the peasant and lower urban class who constitute most of the corps ranks, as well as its *Basij* territorial force. For people from better social strata, service or other forms of close affiliation with the guards brings status.³⁴⁰ The *Basij* force has women's battalions in its structure, while females are totally excluded from service with the regular army.³⁴¹ Taking into account family members and the oriental cultural tradition of extended kinship, the overall number of people who benefit one way or another from association with the corps grows much higher.³⁴² For instance, the benefits to some categories of corps officers' family members may include university admissions or state-subsidized commodities.³⁴³ Retired veterans (*razamandegan*), as well as war martyrs' families,

³³⁷ Hendawi, "Revolutionary Guard Tighten Hold in Iran Crisis."

³³⁸ The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps: Military and Political Influence in Today's Iran."

³³⁹ Wehrey and others, *Dangerous but not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, 68.

³⁴⁰ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 53.

³⁴¹ Aryan, "Iran's Basij Force – The Mainstay of Domestic Security."

³⁴² Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 52.

³⁴³ Slackman, "Hardline Force Extends Grip over Splintered Iran."

represent another circle that strengthens the social tiers of the corps.³⁴⁴ All these categories combined to create the most reliable part of the regime's powerbase.³⁴⁵

An additional component in the social capital of the IRGC is its saga: popular narratives of "glorious performance" in revolution and war, of heroism and martyrdom, bring respect to the institution.³⁴⁶ The prestige of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as chief executive and the authority of the supreme leader's endorsement are other primary assets of the alumni. All these dimensions bring building blocks to the emerged *corporatism*³⁴⁷ of what was initially just an internal-security paramilitary. The corporatism of IRGC alumni has transformed it into elite that has breached its weak delimiters and launched an ongoing and widening offensive expansion.

Neither the regular military nor other actors are even close to such a grand status or equal multipliers. The army, contained within its narrow professional domain, is belittled by the constant attempts of the corps to monopolize war glory and by low salaries. The MOIS, run by appointed clerics, is feared and unpopular, being discredited by the extrajudicial killings of the 80s and the 90s; moreover, it lacks a public posture due to the covert nature of the job and enjoys no military fame. The same is true for the corrupt MOI. As such, they are hardly able to perform any feasible counterbalance to the corps.

F. CHAPTER SUMMARY

Interservice rivalry generally should be treated as a positive phenomenon, despite the negative connotation of the last word. Applied properly, it has proven to be an effective and efficient mechanism in managing the armed forces. In other words, "the absence of consensus—interservice rivalry—has long been seen as a tool of increased

³⁴⁴ Fahri, "The Antinomies of Iran's War Generation," in *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, 115.

³⁴⁵ Slackman, "Hard-Line Force Extends Grip Over a Splintered Iran."

³⁴⁶ For details, see Fahri, "The Antinomies of Iran's War Generation."

³⁴⁷ Hashim, "Civil–Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 40.

civilian control of the military.”³⁴⁸ However, in applying this tool, a civilian leadership should follow several rules, already touched upon in the introduction to this chapter: maintain a balance by avoiding long-term preferentiality (i.e., do not distinguish any service as a permanent beneficiary); regularly revise and reshuffle the existing order to counterweight the most powerful service by partial empowering of other services; use sticks and carrots by distributing authority, responsibilities, and materiel resources; and preserve freedom of national-security decision-making by diversifying sources of strategic advice, doctrinal expertise, and intelligence. The philosophical essence of interservice rivalry is short and simple: keep a right equilibrium.

Ali Khamenei, a center of gravity of Iran’s system of power, violated the principle of equilibrium, which was created and more or less kept by his predecessor Ayatollah Khomeini. Whether he violates it intentionally is not discussed in this thesis. What is important is the outcome. By distinguishing the IRGC as a key, if not sole, beneficiary, the supreme leader has been empowering the corps for more than two decades. Eventually, corps power reached such an extent that it can hardly be contained, due to the virtual absence of equal actors. The ignoring of the interservice rivalry track by Khamenei and his associates placed the alternative factions of the regime without levers of influence on the *Pasdaran*. Moreover, it deprived the entire system of CMR of effective balances in the form of real hard-power assets, leaving only soft (legislative and bureaucratic) checking mechanisms, supplemented by the equally soft capabilities of the SNSC, MOIS, MOI, and ministry of the judiciary. Even the MOIS, once the regime’s most trusted agent, is losing its previous roles in internal security and foreign intelligence to the IRGC. At the same time, the re-incorporation of the *Basij* force into the corps and continuing negation of such potentially able actors as the regular army make the IRGC unmatched in the number of “boots on the ground” it is able to deploy for its own purposes in case of political contingency.

It would be difficult to expect a different outcome, given the starting conditions of the rivalry between the two Iranian military services and the aggravation of this

³⁴⁸ Sharon K. Weiner, “The Politics of Resource Allocation in the Post-Cold War Pentagon,” *Security Studies* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1996), 125.

inequality through time. The *Artesh* is banned from politics and moreover had to pass a “de-politicization recycle” in the form of violent purges. Compared to the IRGC, the army is less than mediocre in its administrative resource and institutional influence: the command-and-control structures the army reports to—the MODAFL and joint staff—are controlled by the *Pasdaran*. These structures are responsible for operational control, weapons acquisition, and logistics, making the regular military dependent on the corps’ will. The army’s influence on the formulation and implementation of national-security strategy is not visible, at least since the mid-00s. It remains essentially out of politics, being subjugated by the existing system and self-restrained by its professional culture.

At inception, the *Pasdaran* was an irregular political force for the defense of the regime, by design. However, professionalization and rising competence attained through war increased the corps’ self-confidence, and paradoxically, led to the growing interference with politics that has become so obvious since 1999. This development defies Samuel Huntington’s paradigm of professionalization, which implies the increasing professional autonomy leads to concentration of the military on its own tasks, restraining its willingness and ability to intervene in politics.³⁴⁹ Autonomy granted to the IRGC by the supreme leader did not restrain the corps’ intervention into politics. Instead, self-professionalization and credentials earned in fighting, combined with an ideologically centered institutional culture, reinforced its ability and will to exert pressure on the political system, making the *Pasdaran* the only really independent actor in the defense and security community.³⁵⁰ This suggests that the findings of such theorists in civil–military relations as Samuel Finer and Morris Janowitz better explain the Iranian phenomenon than does Huntington’s paradigm. Both hold that attained professionalism enables and encourages the military to act more vigorously, and its politicization is inevitable due to increased outreach, especially in an environment of perceived external threat.³⁵¹

³⁴⁹ See Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*.

³⁵⁰ Zweiri, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps: Guardians of Revolutionary Order.”

³⁵¹ Heper and Itzkowitz-Shiffrinson, “Civil–Military Relations in Israel and Turkey,” 244.

Thus, an absence of a felt need to redirect the services' energy from the political domain (with one service "invited" into politics and another excluded) has lowered the importance of classical interservice rivalry in the eyes of the regime. Interservice rivalry became further diminished by the asymmetric, one-sided advantages granted to one competitor and the virtual exclusion of others. As a result, the whole notion of interservice rivalry technique has evolved into almost a fiction, replaced, instead, by animosity. Instead of having rivalry act as an engine of the military's functionality and control over the security sector, the Iranian regime, willingly or not, created an environment where relations between the army and corps developed in the shadow of "ambivalence, mistrust, and outright hostility."³⁵² The army lost to the corps in all possible areas: strategy influence, the information domain, doctrines, and budget distribution. More broadly, it fell to a much lower social status, incomparable with the IRGC's.

It is important to emphasize the differences between interservice rivalry in Iran and the West. In the latter, rivalry is driven primarily by professional competition. It is restrained by virtue of firm professional ethos, codes of behavior, integrity,³⁵³ and functioning institutional and legal frameworks. Rivalry in Iran is, by contrast, predatory, as illustrated by the corps' role in the bloody purges of the *Artesh*. It is a zero-sum game—not only the army, the only institution inherited by the Islamic Republic from the monarchy—but even the structures created by the regime itself—the MOIS and the MOI—are the targets of the *Pasdaran* institutional expansion. This rivalry is by definition a part of Iran's political factionalism and power struggle. It is informal rather than institutionalized. It is less bureaucratic than in Western (i.e., democratic) settings and much more personality-centered.

In conclusion, interservice rivalry in Iran is usually assumed to be a relatively routine and almost even process.³⁵⁴ However, the reality is not so. Iranian interservice rivalry is uneven and asymmetric, with only one side—the IRGC—enjoying permanent

³⁵² Eisenstadt, "The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Assessment," 238–239.

³⁵³ Ash, "Purple Virtues: Curing Unhealthy Interservice Rivalry," 45–47.

³⁵⁴ For example, see Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, 303–305.

privilege and growing status, as granted by the top civilian authorities. As for the current moment, the situation is hopeless for the army and, increasingly, other participants. It does not mean that the rivalry is completely ceased to exist. The abovementioned complaints in the media from the top army commanders against the corps prove the opposite. Yet, as such, in Iran rivalry does not play the customary role reflected in CMR theory or translated into working practice in many other countries (e.g., by the creation of effective levers, checks, and balances). Moreover, this hollow rivalry emboldens the privileged side and creates a stimulus towards maximizing gains. Violation of the equation has led to a negative impact on the entire state of civilian control and civil–military relations in Iran. It became one of the key factors that made the IRGC able to cross the “red line” and become an aggressive independent political actor. Such an outcome, regardless of the initial driving rationales, apparently was not an intended goal of the Iranian regime.

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V. CONCLUSION

A. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Survival in the face of domestic and external challenges and threats is a primary concern of many regimes in the Third World in general, and of the Middle East in particular.³⁵⁵ To ensure survival, regimes create proper security-management tools. However, it is not an unusual situation, when at some point, a regime's military or paramilitary structures overcome or sideline their creators by intervening into politics. This "Frankenstein syndrome" is particularly referred to in *The Armed Forces in Contemporary Asian Societies*: "There is an oft-forgotten truism that through their endeavors to strengthen internal stability and international status, ruling elites create modern military forces then fall prey to their own creation."³⁵⁶ Such an outcome is hardly to be intended.

The Iranian IRGC represents an eloquent example of such an outcome. The stages, patterns, and reasons of the rise of the *Pasdaran* have been described and analyzed in this thesis. A summary and re-emphasis of key findings follows.

1. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps

1. In the past three decades, the IRGC made a remarkable evolution from a ragtag paramilitary group, created by a new regime for its own security needs, to the most potent politico-military entity in Iran. This entity is a hybrid, combining the existing institution and its alumni.

2. The corps became transformed into a supra-service "on steroids," concentrating different organic components and functions: conventional, strategic deterrence, intelligence, special operations, law and ideology enforcement, territorial mobilization, logistics, construction and engineering, military industry, propaganda, and information

³⁵⁵ Rubin, "The Military in Contemporary Middle East Politics," 2.

³⁵⁶ Edward A. Olsen and Stephen Jurika Jr., eds., *The Armed Forces in Contemporary Asian Societies* (London, UK and Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), 15.

operations. It attained a corporate identity, elitist status, and a philosophy that justifies its existence, performance, and hunger for power. Its alumni control substantial administrative resources, institutional outreach, and lobbying capabilities. It possesses tools of real power and applies them in the domestic and foreign arenas.

3. The empowerment of the IRGC by the regime through the past three decades was intentional. The goal was maintaining internal security, strengthening defense capabilities, and achieving foreign-policy goals. However, at a certain stage, after the Revolutionary Guard achieved the point at which it was able to influence the regime itself (which was supposed to be the principal vis-à-vis IRGC), the process of empowerment became self-sustaining. It may be suggested that while empowerment was the desire, the outcome—the self-empowerment, growing assertiveness, and predatory behavior of the corps—was obviously not. Thus, intended actions led to unintended consequences and unexpected challenges.

4. The explanation of such developments is found in the regime's lack of homogeneity and its fragmentation. The power of the *Pasdaran* rose not only from the “barrel of a gun,” but also from its ability to navigate and operate in the complex maze of Iranian power and politics. By identifying the center of gravity of the entire system—the supreme leader— and establishing special symbiotic and mutually expedient relations,³⁵⁷ the IRGC alumni were able to exploit a window of opportunity and secure decisive preferences, which it now maximizes.

5. The current degree of power and ambitions of the IRGC are potentially placing it in a position to achieve a soft takeover of the key nodes of the government and security sectors. This “slow-motion coup”³⁵⁸ is occurring in different ways, all legal. It takes place through existing institutions and procedures, through turf wars between informal centers of power, by strengthening corporate economic power, by building an information dominance, military-expertise monopoly, and strategic influence. This *de*

³⁵⁷ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 61.

³⁵⁸ James Phillips, “What is Next in Iran?,” *The Heritage Foundation* (Web Memo 2509), June 26, 2009, <http://www.heritage.org/research/iran/wm2509.cfm> (accessed September 9, 2009).

facto creeping coup is a unique example in contemporary politics and civil–military relations. The corps units are in their barracks and there are no tanks in the streets; yet, Iran steadily moves toward a form of military dictatorship.

6. The primary power asset of the corps is its alumni, a cohort formed by retired and acting personnel entrenched across the entire spectrum of Iran’s state and society. The alumni are former revolutionary students of the late ‘70s who became field military commanders in the ‘80s, and in the ‘90s turned either into uniformed bureaucrats in active service, civilian *apparatchiki*, or wealthy entrepreneurs. These veterans maintain an informal network, preserving their cohesion and comradeship and serving as the vanguard of the IRGC. The latter, as a military service, performs as their force multiplier. The hybrid of those two components transforms the corps into a *de facto* corporation. The *Pasdaran, Incorporated*, is not just a servant of the regime anymore; it is a part of it, perhaps already the most important. The phenomenon of the corporatism and elitism of the guards and its alumni is best described by its commander, Major General Jaafari, who stated that “the Revolutionary Guards differs from all military organizations of the world and we believe that in the work for the regime, especially in the Revolutionary Guards, there is no such thing as retirement.”³⁵⁹

2. Civil–Military Relations and Interservice Rivalry in Iran

1. Iranian civil–military relations suffer deeply from pathologies, which were laid at its foundation with the emergence of the post-revolutionary political order and developed at further stages. These pathologic civil–military relations mirror the specifics of the entire system of power, such as hollow institutions, fragmentation, the existence of different competing networks and centers of power, and informality.

2. The empowerment of the IRGC is a direct result of the state of the civil–military relations field. The military forces are generally reflecting the “goals, aspirations,

³⁵⁹ “Iran News Roundup November 12 – November 16, 2009.” *Iran Tracker*, November 16, 2009, <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-roundup-nov12-nov16-2009> (accessed December 1, 2009).

and organizational effectiveness of the elites who manage them.”³⁶⁰ The allocation to the corps of a political role by the post-revolutionary regime was a starting point for all future developments.

3. Some degree of political influence for any military force in general is inevitable. Since military establishments represent “complex political communities,” they are structurally adapted to such a role by virtue of a profession concerned with external defense.³⁶¹ Such a modest and self-restrained political function, in general, is considered positive. However, the evolution from a political to a *politicized* military force represents a great peril for a regime.³⁶² A political force is just an object of politics—a tool, controlled and used by civilian governmental institutions. As such, it intervenes into politics by regime’s sanction. However, at a certain stage, a force excessively politicized in the spirit of subjective civilian control starts to determine political preferences and even intervene *itself* as a subject of politics. In 1980, the *Pasdaran* was created as a political force in defense of the system; by 2010, the double-edged sword of intended politicization transformed it into one of the system’s major stakeholders. For the first time in modern Iranian history, a military force was able to challenge the supreme authority.

4. By unilateral empowerment of the *Pasdaran* in multiple ways, the regime violated a major paradigm of interservice rivalry, based on the creation of mutual checks and balances in the form of competing services. The degree of organizational integrity matters, because cohesive forces tend to intervene more into politics, as opposed to those divided, led by multiple and competitive commands.³⁶³ Allowing the corps to subdue the regular army, and more recently, even the ministry of intelligence, the regime deprived itself of the possibility of balancing, building checks, and using levers of influence and

³⁶⁰ Janowitz, *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing Nations*, 7.

³⁶¹ Laksmana, “Spoilers, Partners and Pawns: Military Organizational Behavior and Civil-Military Relations in Indonesia,” 4.

³⁶² Hashim, “Civil-Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 51.

³⁶³ Constantine P. Danopoulos, “Civilian Supremacy in Changing Societies: Comparative Perspectives,” in Constantine P. Danopoulos, ed., *Civilian Rule in the Developing World: Democracy on the March?* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 17, and Olsen and Jurika Jr., eds., *The Armed Forces in Contemporary Asian Societies*, 18.

control over the forces. This institutional expansion and merging has essentially placing all but one segment of the security sector under full or partial control of the IRGC, leaving the government with only legalistic and bureaucratic checks to “divide and rule.”

5. Most likely, such development was caused initially by a feeling, in the regime quarter, that the regular military, subjected to purges, Islamization, and war, has not represented an immediate danger. Consequently, the value of rivalry as a management technique was reduced significantly: “Due to neutralization of the army as a potential dangerous counter-force and due to the loyalty of the IRGC leadership to the safeguarding of the system’s survival including its theocratic ideology, which is the *raison d’être* of the IRGC, the civilian ruler reign uncontested.”³⁶⁴

6. However, negation of rivalry as a fair form of competition caused a “domino effect,” eventually reducing the entire notion of civilian control to irrelevance. Using the corps as a multipurpose tool, like a “Swiss army knife,” from supervising the nuclear program to counter-drugs operations and disaster relief, the regime has built a dependency. Generally, dependency on the military establishment for maintaining internal order or managing external threats objectively leads to less control of the civilian leadership over the military, and the growing interference of the latter into politics.³⁶⁵ The resulting dependence of the Iranian regime on the guards’ protection softened the former and further empowered the latter.

7. The Western paradigms of interservice rivalry are not fully applicable to the case in study. Interservice rivalry in Iran is an objective reality; it exists, despite the obvious dissimilarity and disparity between the involved services. However, it differs from Western notions by a key factor: politicization of the military forces, which does not occur in democratic political settings. Furthermore, the rivalry between the Iranian military services is predatory, sometimes even violent. It is less institutionalized and normative, more informal and personal. It differs even from surrounding regional

³⁶⁴ Buchta, “Iran’s Security Sector: An Overview,” 20.

³⁶⁵ Karen Guttieri, “Professional Military Education in Democracies,” in Thomas S. Bruneau, and Scott D. Tollefson, eds., *Who Guards the Guardians and How? Democratic Civil-Military Relations* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), 236–237.

parameters, as indicated in the *Armed Forces in the Middle East: Politics and Strategy*.³⁶⁶ Of the six common denominators of civilian control over the military and interservice rivalry in the Middle East (military dichotomy; promotion and assignment on the basis of loyalty rather than professionalism; frequent command-cadres rotation; discouragement of initiative; preference towards an elite segment, such as a selected tribe or clan; and periodical purges), only the first three are applicable in the case of the *Pasdaran* (the last point is applicable to the *Artesh*). This suggests that political, historical, cultural, and other variables are important in each unique case. Consequently, civil–military relations should particularly emphasize a study of military tradition and put it into historical perspective—especially when a military force has participated in revolution or a struggle for liberation—to explain how and why legacy factor cause intervention or non-intervention into politics in each specific case.³⁶⁷ The same is true of an external-threat environment as a variable influencing military intervention into politics.

B. QUO VADIS?

The events of 2009 indicated the departure from an outdated vision of the IRGC, from its being perceived as a tool at the disposal of the IRI’s clerical regime towards an understanding of the IRGC phenomenon as a *strategic factor*. As it was put by Rasool Nafisi, an Iranian expert at the RAND Corporation, “it is not a theocracy anymore. It is a regular military security government with a facade of a Shiite clerical system.”³⁶⁸ Amir Taheri, a prominent media analyst, echoes the previous statement: “What they want [the revolutionary guard] is a ‘Turkish’ model in which the IRGC is acknowledged as the backbone of the regime with a veto over major decisions, a version of the ‘walayat al-faqih’ (custodianship of the cleric) in which boots replace the mullah’s flip-flops.”³⁶⁹ The statement of U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in February 2010 on the

³⁶⁶ Rubin, “The Military in Contemporary Middle East Politics.”

³⁶⁷ Olsen and Jurika Jr., eds., *The Armed Forces in Contemporary Asian Societies*, 2–3.

³⁶⁸ Slackman, “Hard-Line Force Extends Grip over a Splintered Iran.”

³⁶⁹ Taheri, “The Monster and Cinderella.”

emerging “military dictatorship” in Iran³⁷⁰ indicates that the vision of the research community and media is shared by the U.S. government.

Obviously, since the 2009 election crisis, Iran is much more unstable, and the regime appears less monolithic. The political landscape is fragmented. Factional struggle between different elitist circles, divided over opposite visions of the future of the country, ways of modernization, and relations with the world, is exacerbated. Iranian politics is undergoing generational change. The political controversies that have emerged in this regard are grouped along two proposed courses of action: controlled change and the status quo.³⁷¹

The ongoing protracted crisis will likely evolve into a tenser phase; the question is not “if,” but rather “when.” The trigger event might be random, such as the death of the supreme leader, external conflict, or an opposition street protest transformed into a mass uprising. Closer to the presidential elections of 2013, the political situation and related activities of factional elites might reach the boiling point; the wildcard of the Iranian nuclear row with the world should be taken into account as well.

The issue of succession remains a key factor in the foreseeable future. It is a wildcard, since the death or incapacity of the supreme leader might occur any time. This major event would remove the formal issue of the corps’ personal loyalty to Khamenei as a last obstacle to ultimate power. The succession might be a tipping point at which the authoritative leader would be replaced by a figurehead manipulated by the alumni. It is not an easy task to model the behavior of the IRGC in the described environment, especially under pressure and stress. It is not impossible to exclude that it would not be performing as a homogenous actor. All armed forces reflect the divisions in their societies, and the *Pasdaran* is no exception. Its crosscutting cleavages are relevant from the standpoint of two categories: the junior ranks and officers, on one side, and the upper command echelon and the alumni on the other.

³⁷⁰ Patrick Goodenough, “Hillary Clinton Views Previous Iranian Governments as ‘Democratically Elected’,” CNSNews.com, February 16, 2010, <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/61376> (accessed February 17, 2010).

³⁷¹ Slackman, “Hard-Line Force Extends Grip Over a Splintered Iran.”

The IRGC's upper echelon (i.e., the acting command and alumni) is most likely divided along politico-ideological fault lines, like the whole establishment.³⁷² The oligarchic wing that is involved in economic activities is presumably interested in stable domestic conditions and the external environment. A certain part of the IRGC "fat cats" might gravitate towards the pragmatist camp associated with former president Hashemi-Rafsanjani. This segment might be interested in "authoritarian modernization." To achieve that goal, it might forge an alliance with the technocratic class, due to its own managerial insufficiency in the field of economics.³⁷³ This potential development would indicate an attempt to copycat the bureaucratic-authoritarian model that was implemented by Latin American militaries and technocrats in the 60s–70s.³⁷⁴

However, the most influential and hardcore "principlist" faction, associated with Ahmadinejad, might be interested less in the above scenario than in maintaining the status quo. Paradoxically, in order to keep it, this group may try to switch the domestic crisis into an external mode through an intended destabilization.³⁷⁵ A same logic led Ayatollah Khomeini in 1980 to claim the war with Iraq as a "God-given event" to unite the nation.³⁷⁶ Security and foreign strategies and policies would be a continuation of domestic political processes. The corps' strategic influence, information near-dominance, and war-fighting doctrinal monopoly, enhanced by its autonomy, zeal, and virtual absence of control, are creating the preconditions for a potential redux of the "cult of the offensive." This phenomenon was described by Jack Snyder in his analysis of the non-controlled organizational behavior of the military establishment, separated from, but still influencing, its supreme commander in chief, who was persuaded to make the final

³⁷² Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 62–63.

³⁷³ Hashim, "Civil-Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 43.

³⁷⁴ For details see, David Collier, "Overview of the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian Model," 19–32.

³⁷⁵ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 121–122.

³⁷⁶ Michael Slackman, "Iran's Factional Disputes Grow Increasingly Bitter," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2009.

decision of pushing the European continent into war.³⁷⁷ In case internal crisis in Iran really threatened the existence of the regime, incentives, in the radical quarters of the IRGC, to convert it into an external conflict will likely rise exponentially.

As far as the corps' junior strata (representing the new generation) is concerned, there is much less benefit from membership in the IRGC.³⁷⁸ The problems of internal division and potential dissent are especially salient for the *Basij* force, recently returned into the corps' order of battle. As a territorial militia, recruited mostly from impoverished, part-time militiamen, with their regional, local, and ethnic affiliations, the *Basij* gives the IRGC a real social dimension. However, it represents, as such, the corps' Achilles heel, just in the shah's army's action of 1979, when the crackdown on street protesters alienated the junior ranks and eventually caused them to change their loyalty and defect to the revolutionary side.

The role of the Iranian regular army in future developments is hard to calculate, due to its low and obscure position, particularly observed during the 2009 crisis, when it did not issue a single statement on developing events. There is only a slim chance that Khamenei would decide to counterbalance the radical wing of the guards by the temporary empowering of the army. For such purposes, he would rather use the IRGC alumni's top members, like A. Larijani, Y.-R. Safavi, or M. Rezai.³⁷⁹ Yet, media-recorded exchanges between army commanders and the IRGC on the interpretation of the war with Iraq indicate that their mutual hostility is well and alive. Nevertheless, any external crisis would likely make the regular military concentrate entirely on defense tasks, as in 1980.

Overall, the future developments in Iran and the destiny of the regime are strongly depending on the evolution of civil–military relations.³⁸⁰ And the IRGC is in a very focus of these relations.

³⁷⁷ For details see, Jack Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984," *International Security*, Vol. 9, 1(Summer 1984), 108–146.

³⁷⁸ Thaler and others, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, xv–xvi.

³⁷⁹ "Iran: The Supreme Leader Takes Control."

³⁸⁰ Certainly, there are also many other important variables that determine the Iranian dynamics.

C. FINAL THOUGHTS

The notes below should not be considered as policy recommendations, addressed to any specific side (be it policymakers or analysts), but rather as a food for thought in dealing with Iran.

- The IRGC should be treated as a factor of strategic significance. It is not an omnipotent actor in the Iranian theatre, but perhaps the ultimate one. The IRGC will be a center of gravity of any future developments in Iran.
- The *Pasdaran, Incorporated* has two soft points: its economic empire and the *Basij* militia. The former, associated with corruption and foreign investments, represents a good target for international sanctions, criminal prosecution, and other forms of pressure. The latter introduces a social dimension that might play a paramount role in case of deepening political and socioeconomic crisis.
- In case of the replacement of the current supreme leader by a more *pro forma* figure controlled or manipulated by the corps, the main political and information effort should be aimed at delegitimizing the IRGC as a *de facto* ruling entity. As such, it should be displayed as responsible for most of the existing or emerging problems in Iran.
- Any political force other than the current regime in Iran will have to correct the asymmetry in civil–military relations by empowering other actors in the security sector—first of all, by bringing the regular army back and making interservice rivalry *real*. This would be an only way to restrain the IRGC as an institution.
- The political divisions within the corps establishment, the growing generational gap between older commanders and the younger ranks,³⁸¹ and the rift between the IRGC and the army should be targeted by driving a wedge.

³⁸¹ Wehrey and others, *Dangerous but not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, 69.

- The challenge that the IRGC represents for future security-sector reform in case of potential regime change from within, should not be underestimated by any political force that will replace it.
- The *Pasdaran* phenomenon needs to be further researched and studied.

Overall, the Iranian revolutionary guards have almost evolved into praetorian guards, or, to extend the historical analogy, to the janissaries at their last and least glorious stage. When these military forces were at the zenith of their political power, both the Roman and the Ottoman empires had started to slide irreversibly towards decay. It is impossible to exclude that by creating the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the Iranian regime implanted its own self-destructing code, which now is activated. The past is prologue.

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