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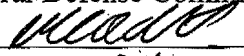
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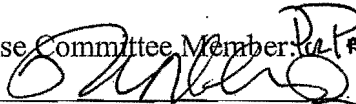
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Executive Summary

Title: Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in 2011: *Is the IRGC on the Verge of Strategic Overreach?*

Author: Major Craig M. Clarkson II, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) heavy-handed execution of both foreign and domestic policy, coupled with a distressed Iranian economy that is inextricably linked to the IRGC, are creating a backlash both within Iran and among the international community that could lead to the eventual undoing of both the IRGC and Iran's current regime.

Discussion: Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is one of the most dangerous and fascinating organizations in the world today. Over the past 32 years, through a variety of means including intimidation, coercion, extortion, terrorism, and political sabotage, the IRGC has evolved from a small group of revolutionaries into a formidable organization with remarkable political, economic, and military power. However, despite the IRGC's current position of exceptional power and influence, the IRGC may be teetering on the verge of strategic overreach.

Conclusion: A careful analysis of recent events involving the IRGC reveals signs of growing dissent and turmoil within its own ranks. Additionally, the IRGC's activities are significantly contributing to a rising swell of political dissidence in Iran, as well as mounting disorder within the ranks of the current Iranian regime. Ironically, it appears that the very mechanisms that contributed to the IRGC's rapid ascendance to power may now be sowing the seeds of its eventual demise.

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Introduction

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is one of the most dangerous and fascinating organizations in the world today. Also known as the Sepah-i Pasadaran-i Inghalab-i Islami (Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution), or simply the Pasdaran, the IRGC was once a small conglomeration of impressionable young religious idealists and militia members. Today, it is a formidable organization with remarkable political, economic, and military power, consisting of an active force of approximately 150,000 personnel, with an additional reserve component of over 300,000.¹ Born of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the IRGC has emerged over the past three decades as the preeminent power base in Iran, arguably one of the most influential political and military forces in the Middle East, and the best organized, best equipped, and most sophisticated terrorist organization in the world.

The IRGC's rapid rise to a position of remarkable power and prestige is the direct result of its primary mission of protecting the Supreme Leader and his regime, and exporting the Islamic revolution. Over the years, the IRGC has exploited its position as the regime's most trusted agent, gradually wresting control of all aspects of Iranian society through methods including: comprehensive propaganda and media manipulation efforts; the violent suppression of domestic threats to its power; the development of a highly effective intelligence apparatus; systematic tampering with elections; foreign and domestic covert military operations; the mass penetration of Iran's most influential political, diplomatic, and economic positions by both current and former IRGC members; and most recently, the takeover of much of Iran's natural resources and its most lucrative businesses. The IRGC's power and influence has risen to such extraordinary levels that many analysts and observers believe that the IRGC currently controls Iran through a variety of means ranging from formal police powers, to political and economic

influence, blackmail, extortion, violence, and intimidation. In fact, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently assessed that Iran “increasingly resembles a military dictatorship,”² referring to the rise of the IRGC’s power and influence in Iran during President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s tenure.

There is no doubt that the IRGC’s tentacles have reached into every aspect of Iranian society and national power, as both active IRGC and IRGC alumni hold the country’s most important political and economic posts, or are in positions that directly influence Iran’s most critical policy decisions, including the direction of Iran’s nuclear program.³ While much of the international community is currently fixated on President Ahmadinejad’s saber rattling, the behavior and direction of Iran is not determined by Iran’s president, nor is it determined by Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-Khamene’i: it is determined by the IRGC. The IRGC is Iran’s most influential organization, as it controls or heavily influences virtually every instrument of Iran’s national power (diplomatic, information, military, economic), and it is the silent hand behind the Islamic Republic’s most reprehensible and nefarious policy decisions. A close examination of the recent economic sanctions levied against Iran clearly demonstrates that the international community sees the IRGC both as the center of Iran’s power, and as an organization that poses a significant global threat.

Despite the IRGC’s current position of exceptional power and influence, the IRGC may be teetering on the verge of strategic overreach. A careful analysis of recent events involving the IRGC reveals early signs of schisms forming in its seemingly monolithic power base.⁴ Ironically, it appears that the very mechanisms that led to the IRGC’s rapid ascent to power may now be sowing the seeds of its eventual demise. The IRGC’s heavy-handed execution of both foreign and domestic policy, coupled with a distressed Iranian economy that is inextricably

linked to the IRGC and the international economic sanctions targeting it, are creating a backlash both within Iran and among the international community that could lead to the eventual undoing of both the IRGC and Iran's current regime.

A Brief History of the IRGC

The IRGC has its roots in the revolutionary guerilla groups that challenged the power and authority of Iran's Shah, Muhammed Reza Pahlavi, during the late 1960s and 1970s. Angered with Iran's political conditions and direction, groups such as Iran's clerical elite, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and Libya, financed various competing decentralized and fractious guerilla groups including the Fedayeen-e Khalq (FEK), the Mujahedin-e Kahlq (MEK), and elements of the communist Tudeh political party, in the hopes of forcing political change.⁵ These guerilla groups rose up to confront the Shah's repressive Pahlavi regime and its principle tool of intimidation, torture, and oppression, a national intelligence and security organization known as the Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar or SAVAK (National Intelligence and Security Organization). The revolutionary groups used methods spanning the gamut from robbery to bombings and assassinations in order to provoke the Shah's regime into retaliation and to mobilize the Iranian people in revolt against their oppressors.⁶ Due to a combination of the actions of the revolutionaries, the angst of the Iranian people, and a long series of political missteps and miscalculations by the regime, the Shah was forced to flee Iran in January of 1979. The formerly exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Mostafavi Moosavi Khomeini, returned to Iran in February that same year and seized power under the protection of the revolutionary guerillas that rallied around him.⁷

In the months immediately following the Shah's exile and the subsequent shift of power to Khomeini, Iran's existing governmental structure continued to crumble and devolve into chaos. As the security situation around the country deteriorated, a number of the Islamic militants formed revolutionary committees known as *komitehs* around mosques to enforce local security and their interpretation of Islamic law.⁸ The clerics around Khomeini understood the need to assert control over the various Iranian revolutionary factions, and selected several powerful *komitehs* to form the nucleus of a new organization that would unify them all.⁹ In May of 1979, Khomeini issued a decree creating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to channel the *komitehs*' energy, influence, and power, to restore order and enforce Islamic law.¹⁰ Khomeini created the IRGC to protect his regime from the threat of military coup and to export the Islamic revolution; and the Guard played a critical role in defeating many of the early threats to the revolution's survival.¹¹ Khomeini effectively organized and channeled the participation of the guerilla fighters and ideological zealots that constituted the Revolution's newly mobilized social forces.¹² The IRGC was granted the all the powers and resources necessary to accomplish its crucial tasks; the same powers and resources the IRGC would eventually leverage to extend their influence to into all aspects of Iranian society.

The Guard originally consisted of 6,000 men drawn from those who had fought against the Shah's regime, but by the middle of 1980 it had already expanded to 25,000.¹³ The Guard's early activities included restoring order in the cities and enforcing Khomeini's monopoly on power by deposing previous government and military leaders who were tied to the Shah's regime, policing Iran's populace, hunting down and killing opposition groups, and protecting government officials and facilities.¹⁴ Beholden only to Khomeini, the Supreme Leader himself, Guard leaders resisted any effort on the part of other civilian political authorities to control them,

establishing a tradition of almost complete autonomy that has continued through today.¹⁵

Cronyism was rampant from an early stage, as officers who had ties with the clergy or who were members of prominent religious families rapidly progressed through the ranks of the IRGC.

From its inception, membership in the IRGC had also been attractive to those without other connections to the religious establishment, as it provided many opportunities for rapid upward mobility for ambitious youths, even those who were less hard-line than the typical rank and file Guard volunteer.¹⁶ The swift spread of the IRGC's power and influence is not surprising in light of the many benefits of membership and the organization's unprecedented autonomy.

By early 1980, Khomeini's regime was busy ushering in a new era of repression and terror, and the wave of enthusiasm for Iran's new political order was beginning to wane.¹⁷ Iraq's invasion of Iran in September of 1980 was a godsend for Khomeini, his allied hard-liners, and the IRGC.¹⁸ It galvanized the Iranian population in a spirit of nationalism around "a war waged for the triumph of ideas with Ba'athist secular pan-Arabism contesting Iran's Islamic fundamentalism."¹⁹ The political purges during and after the Revolution had severely weakened Iran's regular armed forces, and they were ill prepared to lead the Iranian side of the fight. Despite those purges, the regime did not trust the Iranian Army, as they were largely viewed by the new establishment as an illegitimate tool of U.S. interests.²⁰ As a result, Iran's regular military was "pushed aside by the IRGC in organizing, training, and deploying the hundreds of thousands of volunteers that rallied to defend their country."²¹

The IRGC recruited unmarried ethnic Persians from the lower and middle class. Training was short, militarily inadequate, and predominantly focused on religious rhetoric and the ideals of martyrdom. By 1981, the IRGC had grown to 50,000 members, by 1983, 100,000, and by 1985 the organization had flourished to an impressive 250,000.²² In addition to growing its cadre

of regular Guard forces, the IRGC also trained a volunteer militia known as the Basij Mustazafin (Mobilization of the Oppressed), or simply Basij. The Basij typically attended training for only two weeks, and the training was almost exclusively focused on religious extremism and martyrdom. The Basij reached its peak in 1985, with a strength of approximately 600,000 men.²³ The IRGC primarily used the Basij throughout the conflict as unarmed human waves sent headlong into Iraqi minefields and obstacle belts to clear the path for Iran's regular military and IRGC ground forces. Leveraging the many sacrifices of the Basij, the IRGC greatly enhanced its influence and authority throughout the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war. Today the IRGC continues to exploit the myths, legends, and hyperbole of their travails during the "sacred defense" as part of their systematic efforts to bolster the organization's credibility amongst Iranians.

Since their founding the IRGC has been the principle actor in all of Iran's overt and covert military activities both domestically and internationally. The IRGC's naval forces conducted some of the better known overt activities including Iran's mining of the straits of Hormuz and subsequent military confrontations with the U.S. Navy in 1986 and 1987, and later, the kidnapping of British sailors from Iraqi waters in 2007. In addition, the IRGC has funded, trained, and logistically supported numerous proxy wars and destabilizing international activities, primarily through their Office of Liberation Movements (OLM), which looks for terrorist groups around the world to serve as the seedlings for the Islamic revolution.²⁴ Iran has a nine-digit line item annual budget for terrorist activities that the IRGC uses to support, and at times direct groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon (\$120M), Hamas in Gaza (\$30M), the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (\$2M), Shia radicals in Iraq and Afghanistan (\$30M), Islamists in Turkey, Egypt, and Bosnia, and more recently, organizations with terrorist ties in Nigeria, Venezuela, and Sudan.²⁵

In addition to the OLM, in 1990, the IRGC established the Al Qods (Jerusalem) Force as, in Steven Ward's words, "an elite unit that conducts clandestine operations outside Iran; providing training, financial, and other support to Islamic militant groups; and collects strategic and military intelligence against Iran's enemies, especially the United States."²⁶ Over the years, the IRGC has substantially contributed to the level of instability that persists in the Middle East today. From their involvement in the bombings of the Marine Barracks in Beirut and Khobar tower in Saudi Arabia, to the support of Shi'ite militias in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Iran's disreputable yet highly influential position in the world is the direct result of clandestine and overt terrorist activities either directly carried out, or supported by the IRGC's Office of Liberation Movements and Qods Force.

Even more alarming than their support for international terrorism, is the IRGC's influence over Iran's WMD programs, as well as its control of Iran's long-range ballistic missiles.²⁷ Iran's largest covert nuclear refinement facility is located on a major IRGC base near the Iranian city of Qom. Since the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Iran has failed to equip or modernize its regular military properly, choosing instead to fund and develop the asymmetric capabilities of the IRGC.²⁸ A nuclear weapon in the hands of the Qods Force or the threat of such a scenario certainly concerns many defense officials throughout the international community deeply. It is this asymmetric threat that Iran will continue to leverage most heavily to assert itself on the world stage and to influence the direction of international affairs in the future. The IRGC undoubtedly views possession of a nuclear weapon as a highly effective deterrent to a possible invasion in response to the IRGC's asymmetric activities.²⁹

Although Ayatollah Khomeini, wary of military interference in politics and policy decisions, forbade the IRGC from engaging in the politics and economy of Iran, the IRGC began

infiltrating both the political and economic systems after his death. The IRGC's economic activities began during President Rafsanjani's tenure in the early 1990s, when he directed Iran's government organizations to participate in business ventures in an effort to generate income in the hopes that the organizations would require less revenue from the central government. In recent years, the IRGC has expanded beyond influencing (and at times controlling) Iran's politics and military operations, by taking control of large swaths of Iran's economy. The IRGC's economic power has grown steadily since 2005 under President Ahmadinejad's administration, which has granted the IRGC multiple no-bid contracts in the most lucrative areas, such as oil and natural gas extraction, and large-scale infrastructure development.³⁰ "Strategic industries and commercial services ranging from dam and pipeline construction to automobile manufacturing and laser eye surgery have fallen under [the IRGC's] sway, along with a number of illicit smuggling and black-market enterprises."³¹ Moreover, former IRGC commanders now administer two of Iran's largest *bonyads* (quasi-state run charitable foundations).³²

First established under the Shah, Iran's *bonyads* originally existed to provide support to poor Iranians, but in addition, they eventually evolved to serve as a system of patronage for Iran's elite.³³ Under president Rafsanjani, the "*bonyads* controlled and disbursed billions of dollars and greatly enriched those associated with them, using their own wealth to gain patronage, invest in a wide array of business interests, and generally advance their own power and influence."³⁴ Over the years, Iran's *bonyads* have acquired immense wealth, with some of the largest amassing fortunes in excess of \$15 billion, and they remain unaccountable to anyone except the Supreme Leader.³⁵ Today Iran's largest *bonyads* invest close to 50% of their revenue into multiple subsidiaries that span the entire gamut of economic ventures from agriculture to massive international construction projects, many of which are tied to IRGC operations.³⁶ Recent

estimates of the IRGC's market share are as high as two-thirds of Iran's Gross Domestic Product; the IRGC is now a menacing "business conglomerate with guns."³⁷

The IRGC's encroachment on Iran's political system began in earnest during Seyed Mohammad Khatami's tenure as Iran's president (August 1997 - August 2005).³⁸ Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Khamene'i, initiated a shift in policy allowing the IRGC to participate in politics, out of a fear of President Khatami's reformist agenda. Khamene'i believed that the IRGC would be able to serve as an effective bulwark, capable of securing his position as the Ayatollah and ensuring the Islamic Republic did not shift towards a more "modern" Islamic system.³⁹ While this intrusion into Iran's politics served to bolster the IRGC's power and influence, it also served to reveal the fractious nature of the IRGC as an organization. Infighting between IRGC factions with ideological differences (authoritarian, populist, and anti-clerical) generally defined the Khatami era.⁴⁰ However, since 2005, President Ahmadinejad has steadily inserted ex-IRGC compatriots that share his outlook into key positions of power, and now nearly half of his cabinet is composed of IRGC veterans.⁴¹

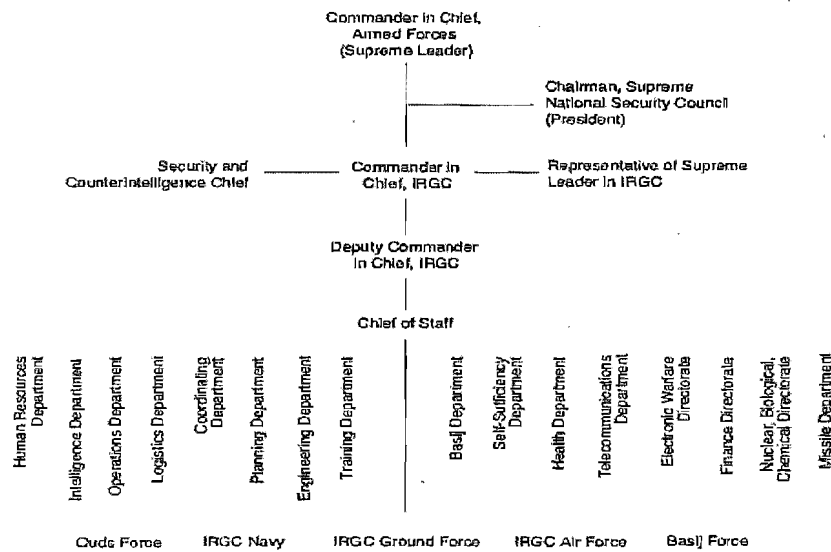
On the surface, it would seem that the IRGC's steady infiltration into Iran's politics, coupled with its new business ventures, heighten the organization's position of power. However, the IRGC's involvement in the Iranian economy and control of WMD programs has created a perilous situation for both the IRGC and the regime. The recent international sanctions enacted to curb Iran's nuclear program target the IRGC's assets specifically, but the IRGC's broad economic role means that those sanctions must inevitably affect the general population, and indeed, they have. As the grips of international economic sanctions tighten and Iran's economy crumbles, Iranian citizens are increasingly feeling the squeeze. Iran's state controlled media

cannot obscure the link between the dire state of the economy and the IRGC's illicit activities and influence on Iran's policy decisions indefinitely.

IRGC Organization

The IRGC is a highly complex and mysterious organization. Although there are formal departments, directorates, operational arms, and delineated chains of command, there are also multiple informal arrangements, relationships, and control mechanisms that have a profound impact on the direction of IRGC operations. The Commander in Chief (CINC) of the IRGC, currently Mohammed Ali Jafari, works directly for the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamene'i, who is the CINC of the Armed Forces under the Iranian constitution. The IRGC CINC controls at least 20 known departments and directorates covering a wide spectrum of activities, including: internal security and counterintelligence, office of the representative of the Supreme leader, planning, engineering, intelligence, training, telecommunications, NBC (nuclear, biological, chemical), electronic warfare, missiles, health, political and ideological, public relations, and human resources (Figure 1).⁴² Presumably, these are the departments and directorates most heavily influenced by informal arrangements and relationships due to their multiple ties with various Iranian civilian political offices. Because of these relationships, these IRGC organizations likely wield enormous power and influence over the political and economic spectrum, both domestically and internationally. Unfortunately, the exact nature of their scope and impact are extremely difficult to ascertain via open source documentation and reporting. Elements of the IRGC that can be defined with slightly more precision using open source reporting are the IRGC's five operational branches: the Qods Force, the IRGC Navy, the IRGC Air Force, IRGC Land Forces, and the Basij Force.

FIGURE 1
IRGC ORGANIZATIONAL CHART—AUGUST 2008



* Graphic taken from: AEI Research Paper No 7, Ali Alfoneh, "What do Structural Changes in the Revolutionary Guards Mean?" AEI, September 2008.

The Qods Force is the principal arm for executing Iran's international policy. Currently under the leadership of General Qassem Suleimani, they conduct unconventional warfare operations, primarily outside of Iran's borders. The Qods Force is Iran's primary agent of interface with terrorist and guerilla groups and violent non-state actors around the globe including Hezbollah, Al Qa'ida, the Taliban, Sunni and Shi'ite Islamic militant organizations. Consisting of an estimated strength of 5,000-15,000 men, these highly trained special force operatives currently work in every corner of the earth, including North America, in roles spanning from trainer, to fighter, to businessman, to under-cover diplomatic entity working in embassies. The Qods Force is divided into units specific to geographic areas, with corresponding "directorates for Iraq; Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan; Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India; Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula; Asian countries of the former Soviet Union, Western nations (Europe and North America) and North Africa (Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Sudan, and Morocco)."⁴³ They are unrivaled in their ability to initiate, coordinate, or direct "proxy conflicts using terrorist or

extremist movements or exploiting internal sectarian, ethnic, tribal, dynastic, and regional tensions.”⁴⁴ The Qods Force funnels money, weapons, and training to groups that have the potential to further an Iranian cause or goal, or to any group that is anti-American or anti-Israeli. They operate robust training camps for terrorists and extremists in Iran, and in places like Sudan and Lebanon. The Qods Force is Iran’s primary actor in Iraq, and its activities spanning from military and logistic support of Shi’ite militias to political meddling have been the principle obstacle to U.S. operations in Iraq since 2003. Likewise, the Qods Force contributes significantly to the ongoing challenges that U.S. and NATO forces are contending with in Afghanistan. Unique to the Qods Force is that their Commander has direct liaison with the Supreme Leader himself, and there can be no doubt that the Ayatollah is well apprised of all Qods Force operations. The Qods Force champions activities like terrorism, assassination, and extortion to a level that is unrivaled. They are arguably the most dangerous and destabilizing organization on the planet today.

Another dangerous arm of the IRGC is the IRGC Navy. Unlike the regular Iranian Navy, which possesses typical naval capabilities ranging from submarines to frigates, and destroyers to amphibious ships, the IRGC Navy is geared for asymmetric naval warfare with a wide variety of small fast attack boats, anti-ship and coastal defense missiles, and mines. With an active force of approximately 20,000 men, including approximately 5,000 marines, the IRGC Navy could be used to deliver conventional weapons, chemical, biological, radiation, nuclear (CBRN) weapons, and mines into ports and oil and desalination facilities.⁴⁵ The IRGC Navy has a history of activity in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. They were the primary aggressors during the U.S. – Iran naval engagements of the 1980s, and were responsible for the kidnapping of the

British sailors from Iraqi waters in 2007, an event the IRGC is suspected of using as leverage to force a prisoner exchange with the U.S. via the U.K.⁴⁶

Comparatively little information is available on the IRGC Air Force. Of significance, however, is that “the Air Force of the IRGC is believed to operate Iran’s three Shahab-3 intermediate range ballistic missiles unit (who’s true operational status remains uncertain) and may have custody of its chemical weapons and any biological weapons.”⁴⁷

The IRGC Land Forces are predominantly light infantry forces that are trained and equipped for asymmetric operations geared towards internal security.⁴⁸ End strength estimates for this component of the IRGC range from 100,000 to 120,000 personnel. In recent years, the IRGC has been preparing its land forces “to fight decentralized partisan and guerilla warfare. It has strengthened the anti-tank and anti-helicopter weaponry of IRGC battalions and stressed independent battalion-sized operations that can fight with considerable independence even if Iran loses much of the coherence in its command, control, communications, and intelligence capabilities.”⁴⁹ The Iranian regime and the IRGC understand the futility of a head-to-head conventional confrontation with well-trained and equipped western militaries, and they clearly recognize the efficiency and effectiveness of both their asymmetric military operations as well as those of other states and violent non-state actors. It should come as no surprise that the IRGC will continue to shift their defensive posture towards an almost exclusively asymmetric methodology.

The final operational arm of the IRGC is the Basij Force. The Basij is the IRGC’s “popular reserve force of about 90,000 men, with an active strength of up to 300,000 and a mobilization capacity of nearly 1,000,000 men.”⁵⁰ From their sordid, yet paradoxically proud history of blindly marching in massive human waves into minefields and devastating machine

gun fire during the Iran-Iraq war, the Basij have evolved into a well organized, highly effective organization that serves as the principle means for the Iranian regime to control its populace. Consisting of a mix of ideological zealots, former military members, and opportunists, the Basij is currently organized into an estimated 740 regional battalions, each with approximately 300-350 men.⁵¹ The IRGC regularly uses these forces to quell civil unrest, manipulate local politics, and intimidate any potential opposition to the regime. The United Nations and various human rights organizations have assembled “extensive documentation demonstrating that the Iranian government regularly utilizes the Basij to terrorize its population by intentional physical harm, leading to scores of injuries and deaths.”⁵² Additionally, the Basij are being incorporated into the IRGC’s plans for wartime regional defense structures,⁵³ presumably to be used to create an asymmetric defense-in-depth, where the Basij conducts suicide attacks to harass and impede invading forces while IRGC regulars carryout more conventional defensive operations from prepared and protected positions.

The extent of the Basij’s influence on Iranian society is remarkable. The IRGC heavily utilizes the Basij to indoctrinate the Iranian populace, cultivate a loyalty to the regime, and to burnish its own institutional image.⁵⁴ The Basij administers summer camps for Iranian youths with the goal of indoctrinating young Basijis, propagating the theory of *velayat-e faghih* (rule of the supreme jurist) and the value of martyrdom, and preparing young Iranians to eventually take up arms in the regime’s homeland defense strategy.⁵⁵ Through the Lecturers’ Basij Organization (LBO), Student Basij Organization (SBO) and similar groups, the Basij has a formidable presence in Iran’s high schools and universities.⁵⁶ It influences both curricula and extracurricular activities through systematic intimidation via spying, beatings, and forced resignations and retirements.⁵⁷ The heinousness of Basij operations gained international attention during Iran’s

most recent presidential elections, as the Basij successfully shut down the Green Movement by quelling post election riots through beating and killing (official tally 27, and opposition group estimate of over 100)⁵⁸ protestors, after the Basij had allegedly assisted with the rigging of the elections. This kind of domestic terror is contributing enormously to the average Iranian's growing discontent with the current regime.

The Supreme Leader, the President, and the IRGC

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power in the summer of 2005 through a confluence of regional events, the unusual dynamics of Iranian politics, and unique circumstances ranging from President Bush's "axis of evil" speech to a large population of hard-line fundamentalists sitting on Iran's Guardian Council. He has since flabbergasted the international community with his outrageous and derisive rhetoric. However, while Ahmadinejad occupies the public stage and certainly influences the direction of Iran, he is by no means in control. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamene'i legally controls Iran, albeit increasingly under the sway of IRGC influence. He exerts this control through a variety of means, primarily through the IRGC. The relationship between Khamene'i, Ahmadinejad, and the IRGC is extremely complex, and continues to become even more so.

Since its inception, the IRGC has always enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. However, recently this autonomy has evolved to the point that some analysts question whether the IRGC's power has superseded that of its overseers. While Khamene'i directs the IRGC and appoints its leaders, he is surrounded by current and former IRGC members who serve in advisory positions and undoubtedly influence his decisions. In fact, Khamene'i's most senior and trusted advisors are IRGC stalwarts, both active and veteran.⁵⁹ Throughout his reign as the Supreme Leader, he

has relied heavily upon the IRGC to maintain his power, and has become increasingly reliant on the IRGC in recent years as his political and religious legitimacy continues to erode.⁶⁰

Ahmadinejad, a former Basij commander, has many alliances within the IRGC network. During his tenure, he has leveraged his constitutional authorities to appoint former IRGC members to some of the most prominent Iranian political positions. Additionally, the President's favoritism of the IRGC in the economic sector via the regime's regular awarding of no-bid contracts to IRGC economic entities is having a profound impact on Iran.

With each appointment and favor given, the IRGC's formal and informal power grows. Ironically, the regime appears to have trapped itself in a cycle whereby each time it uses the IRGC to further its agenda, it needs the IRGC a little bit more. The regime is moving towards a position of total dependence on the IRGC, while the IRGC continues to move towards a position of even greater autonomy, power, and influence. At what point will the regime be beholden to the IRGC, and the IRGC beholden to no one? This trend has not gone unnoticed by the Iranian people. Many Iranians are appalled that "individuals associated with the worst excesses of revolutionary justice and human rights abuses [are] being [appointed to] ministerial posts to which their records should surely disqualify them."⁶¹ The violent repression of the Green Movement has not prevented widespread resentment of the regime in general and the IRGC in particular. The short-lived uprising in Tehran on 14 February 2011 following Hosni Mubarak's fall in Egypt, despite the certainty of violent government reprisals, gives a clear indication that more Iranians stand ready to challenge the regime and the IRGC.

Fallout from IRGC International and Domestic Operations

Iran's effective use of the Qods Force has undercut its position in the world, particularly in the West and in the Middle East. The current situation in Iraq illustrates this point. Though initially proving highly successful in frustrating U.S. efforts in Iraq, the militarization of Iranian influence has become counterproductive.⁶² Iraqis' negative attitudes towards Iran continue to grow as a result of Iranian sponsored violence.⁶³ The January 2009 elections in Iraq demonstrated a "decline of the fortunes of most pro-Iranian factions, particularly the Islamic Security Council of Iraq"⁶⁴ party. Tehran's concern about growing Iraqi resentment of activities may explain recent reports of a reduction in Qods Force activity in Iraq. The other primary reason for their reduced presence is the growing domestic unrest in Iran.

Although the Qods Force Commander, General Qassem Suleimani was heavily engaged in Iraq in 2008, by March of 2010 he was back in Iran focused on handling the internal dissent that resulted from the election fraud of 2009.⁶⁵ General David H. Patraeus, Commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and Commander of U.S. Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A), "when speaking to the Institute for the Study of War in Washington, said the unrest following the 'hijacked elections' in Iran last year has forced Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i to rely on the IRGC and its Qods Force internally as well as externally."⁶⁶ A conspicuous lack of recent open source reporting on IRGC activities beyond weapons shipments outside of Iran during the past six months supports the belief that the IRGC is increasing its focus on internal issues.⁶⁷ There is also a direct correlation between the level of Iranian domestic unrest and Ahmadinejad's wild accusations and sensational bravado. With an increase in domestic problems stemming from a distressed economy and rampant frustration with human rights abuses, the Iranian regime needs to enhance the perception of a threat posed by "the Great Satan" (the U.S.)

and the West, in order to focus Iranians' attention abroad and distract them from the regime's ineptitude.⁶⁸

With each act or threat of international aggression, the regime moves closer to international ostracism. Iran is rapidly losing the support of China and Russia. The expanding IRGC activity in Nigeria and Venezuela indicates that the regime is in desperate need of new friends.⁶⁹ Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons is necessary due to its steady momentum towards almost exclusively asymmetric strategies and its lack of international support. The regime and the IRGC must believe that they need a nuclear weapon to serve as a deterrent to invasion in response to both domestic and international IRGC operations. Many of the latest opportunities and resources for IRGC operations are being generated by their recent economic expansion. Ironically, while this economic expansion is contributing greatly to the IRGC's rise in power, influence, and capabilities, it is precisely this expansion that makes the IRGC and the Iranian regime more vulnerable than they have ever been. The pressure of pre-existing civil unrest stemming from brutal IRGC tactics of political repression is beginning to merge with new economic pressures being applied by the international community in response to the IRGC's involvement in terrorist operations and its role in the development of nuclear weapons.

The current domestic turmoil facing Iran in terms of economic hardship and political unrest is very real and increasingly exacerbated by the actions of the IRGC. The economic surpluses that Iran enjoyed from the oil price spikes of July 2007 to July 2008, allowed the regime to finance populist economic policies and mask the dire state of the Iranian economy.⁷⁰ The subsequent drop in those prices, followed by recent economic sanctions imposed due to Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, are putting significant strain on Iran's economy. Iran's current unemployment rate estimates are at 25% for the population and 29% and rising for

Iranian youth, while inflation is rapidly approaching 30%.⁷¹ Layoffs are becoming a more regular occurrence, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for Iranians to obtain goods and materials.⁷² Additionally, in December 2010, Iran's economic woes forced Ahmadinejad's government to cut \$100B worth of its long standing food and fuel subsidies, driving gas prices up 75%, diesel up 2000%, and the price of bread up 400%.⁷³ In anticipation of public outcry immediately following Ahmadinejad's announcement, the IRGC hit the streets in mass to stifle any social unrest.⁷⁴ Cracks are starting to show in Iran's economy, and Iranians are increasingly becoming aware that the sanctions that are squeezing their economy are targeting the IRGC and its nuclear weapons program, a program that nearly 60 percent of Iranians oppose.⁷⁵ This wide spread frustration with a deteriorating economy is changing the face of the temporarily quiet opposition, the Green Movement.

Though the Green Movement of 2009 was predominantly supported by a liberal urban base, it has become "an ever-widening coalition of young people, liberal political and religious leaders, and merchants fed up with the state of the economy, and conservative politicians frightened by the expanding role of the Revolutionary Guards."⁷⁶ The entrance of Iran's merchants into the rising political fray is significant. Though disenchanted with the Islamic Republic's policies for some time, they have rarely protested publicly, even when others took to the streets.⁷⁷ This historical precedent seemingly changed in October 2008 and again in July of 2010, when the merchants, or "Bazaaris" in major Iranian cities closed down in protest over the [regime's] attempts to raise and collect more taxes from bazaar shops.⁷⁸ Additionally, increasing backlash can be expected from traditional mercantile elites, as their companies lose out on bids for contracts that are given to the IRGC.⁷⁹ It is highly likely that with further IRGC economic encroachment and the continued deterioration of Iran's economy, the Bazaaris will openly rail

against the regime and the IRGC.⁸⁰ The composition of the popular opposition appears to be rapidly expanding beyond the community of students, intellectuals, and politicians, and could soon include some of the country's traditional economic power brokers.

Fissures forming in the IRGC and the Regime

There are three primary factors that have pushed the IRGC, and therefore the regime, to the verge of strategic overreach: (1) a well-established record of international terror and a credible asymmetric threat to the international community, (2) increased levels of violent domestic suppression to maintain power in Iran, and (3) the IRGC's economic expansion which has exposed the Iranian populace to the adverse impact of international sanctions. Because of these activities, the IRGC and the Iranian regime find themselves in an increasingly difficult position. The regime, via the actions of IRGC, has effectively isolated Iran from most of the international community. The IRGC has been able to effectively wrest control of Iranian politics because of the Supreme Leader's and the President's heavy reliance upon the Guard to maintain their respective positions of power. Additionally, for all intents and purposes, the IRGC now controls Iran's economy. The gradual ceding of power to the IRGC is undermining the Iranian government's historical "four sources of legitimacy: its ability to manage state affairs (and thus the people's consent), its official religious authority, its commitment to Iran's independence, and a stable base of social support. All of these have now been irretrievably undone."⁸¹ The rapid erosion of the regime's legitimacy is causing the number of disenfranchised Iranians to grow exponentially. Ironically, the frustration with the direction of Iran is not exclusive to the average Iranian citizens. Increasingly, frustration with Iran's state of affairs is spreading throughout the ranks of the IRGC.

The IRGC has always consisted of individuals with differing political perspectives, spanning from radicals to traditionalists to reformists. These differences are becoming more pronounced due to a rift developing between the President and the Supreme Leader, as some IRGC members owe their positions to the President, and others align with the Supreme Leader. This rift is largely due to Ahmadinejad's jockeying for increased power and prestige for the presidency and a desire to operate independently from Khamene'i.⁸² As of December 2010, both the Ayatollah and the President were in the throes of dismissing each other's political appointees while engaged in a tit-for-tat spat.⁸³ This breakdown in the relationship between the Ayatollah and the President is causing active Guardsmen leadership and IRGC alumni to choose sides.

Another source of tension within the IRGC is the divergent opinions within the organization about the direction of the IRGC and Iran. Many Guardsmen today are disenfranchised as they "find themselves defending an Islamic revolution they simply no longer recognize."⁸⁴ While some Guardsmen empathize with the population, others have "made it clear that [they] are ready to pay a higher price in order to achieve national goals – such as an Iranian nuclear capability – and are less concerned with the suffering of the civilian population under international sanctions."⁸⁵ Some Guardsmen are concerned with the expansion into the political arena, as "office holding tends to generate its own specific set of imperatives and priorities that can challenge or completely offset the powerful social bonds created" within the IRGC.⁸⁶ Other Guardsmen are concerned with the IRGC's economic expansion, and its potential to move the organization away from the ideals of the revolution of 1979, as some IRGC leaders are losing their focus on sharpening military skills to earning large salaries and bonuses, and are increasingly becoming motivated by their own self-interest.⁸⁷ More and more, interviews with Guardsmen are unearthing comments like those from a Basij in 2005 who stated, "The only

reason I stay in the Basij is for the money...many of my friends in the Basij are unhappy with the government.”⁸⁸ The corruption stemming from the rapid acquisition of power and money coupled with the post-election crisis “and the ethical and ideological dilemmas that it has created, combine to present the most serious challenge the [IRGC] has ever faced.”⁸⁹ The divide that is developing within the IRGC is perhaps best represented by the October 2010 bombing that occurred “at a Revolutionary Guard base in western Iran, which killed 20 Guard officers, and was widely suspected to be the work of Guard saboteurs.”⁹⁰ Though the IRGC organization is arguably the de facto leader of Iran, as its power and influence continues to expand, it is also an organization that is increasingly splintering into multiple divergent factions with competing interests, some of which are highly disenfranchised.

Implications

There are few nations with power structures as nuanced, peculiar, and complex as that of Iran, and any attempt to paint an all-encompassing picture runs the risk of oversimplifying reality. Nonetheless, in analyzing the trajectory of Iran, it may be useful to dial the focus in on Iran’s principle power bases, what actions those entities are taking, and the apparent impacts of those actions. In review, a brass tacks summary of Iran’s power brokers looks like this: A Supreme Leader who constitutionally controls virtually every aspect of Iranian society, and who is dependent on a group of armed henchmen (the IRGC) to execute that control; an IRGC that sponsors and conducts terrorist activities around the world, including in Iran, and which is increasingly taking part in activities to promote its own organizational self-interest over those of Iran; and a President who owes his position to the IRGC, and who is actively fostering an environment that provides the IRGC multiple opportunities to continue to expand its power and

influence, despite any turmoil that it may cause for Iran. In addition, as Iran continues to move towards increasingly asymmetric international policies via the IRGC, it needs a nuclear weapon to serve as a deterrent to invasion in response to its asymmetric activities. In short, the Supreme Leader needs the IRGC, the President needs the IRGC, the IRGC is moving towards needing no one, and all three seem to believe they need a nuclear weapon. A fact that the current Iranian regime and the IRGC seem to be ignoring is that they also need the support of the Iranian people, or at a minimum, they need to maintain an environment palatable enough to stave off a national revolt. Their collective inability to do either is becoming more apparent by the day.

It was the brutal tactics and human rights violations of the SAVAK, as well as the rampant government cronyism and perceived negative trajectory of Iranian society that led to the Islamic revolution of 1979. These same factors, perpetrated by the current Iranian regime and its IRGC, led to the Green Movement of 2009. While the movement was ostensibly suppressed for the day by the IRGC's Basij Force, it continues to percolate underground,⁹¹ and the 14 February demonstrations in Tehran show that the movement may be picking up steam. Soon to join the masses of disenfranchised Iranians are the Bazaaris and traditional economic elites, as they grow increasingly frustrated with the IRGC's no-bid contracts and they feel the impact of the grip of international sanctions tightening.

In early 2011, the Iranian regime and the IRGC find themselves in a precarious position. They have few, if any, friends in the international community outside of Nigeria and Venezuela. They are rapidly losing domestic support because of wide spread anger at suppression of human rights and at Iran's weakening economy. At the center of all Iran's problems and self-imposed turmoil is the IRGC, and the IRGC now appears to be showing cracks in its own base. The IRGC's heavy-handed execution of both foreign and domestic policy, coupled with a distressed

Iranian economy that is inextricably linked to the IRGC, is creating a backlash both within Iran and among the international community that could lead to the eventual undoing of both the IRGC and Iran's current regime. It appears that the very mechanisms that led to the IRGC's rapid ascendance to power may now be sowing the seeds of its eventual demise. There is no doubt that "Iran may be closer to profound political change than at any time since the revolution that ousted the Shah [32] years ago."⁹² The international community should do everything in its power to support the Iranian citizens that are willing to fight for change -- it would be in the World's best interest that they get it.

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