

## The Militarization of Post-Khomeini Iran: Praetorianism 2.0

On June 4th of every year since 1989, the Islamic Republic of Iran holds a grand memorial to honor the passing of its founder, Ayatollah Khomeini. In 2010, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) organized and managed the memorial for the first time. As Khomeini's grandson Hassan Khomeini, himself a cleric, stepped up to deliver a sermon, government supporters chanted in protest and booed him off the stage. The humiliation of Khomeini's family vividly illustrates how Iran's power structure has fundamentally changed, away from its unique clerical model toward a type of military dictatorship.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the Islamic Republic is no longer a semi-autocratic, clergy-led state which allows some form of citizen participation. The mass protests following the hotly contested June 12, 2009 election were indeed proof that the Islamic Republic has a vibrant civil society and that many Iranians still expect some level of electoral fairness. But Iran is now a military-led system or, in political-science terms, a "praetorian" state. From this perspective, one may interpret the June 12 election fiasco not as a struggle for power between reformist and hard-liner camps, but rather as an assertion of influence and a de facto coup by the emerging militant class and its preferred candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, against the clerical oligarchy that came to power through the 1978–79 Iranian Revolution.

An analysis of the degree to which the IRGC—Iran's most powerful military entity—has come to call the shots in the Islamic Republic reveals an Iran that is a bona fide praetorian state, one that represents a stronger and more stable form

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of military rule than that envisioned in the 1960s. At that time, following successive coups in Latin America and the Middle East, praetorianism was considered a symptom of weakness, often attributed to nations that had once been great but were great no longer. We call Iran’s version of military influence “post-praetorianism” because it betrays an uncanny ability to break free from the classic debilities associated with martial rule. As such, the new

Islamic Republic appears to be stronger and, surprisingly, on the way to political stability. For the international community, the new Iran presents both immense challenges and new opportunities: it will further erode the civil liberties of the Iranian people, but in the long term, may very well prove to be more united, and therefore more manageable, for U.S. foreign policymakers.

### **Praetorian Iran**

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The theory of praetorianism borrows its name from Rome’s Praetorian Guard, which in ancient times served as the feared imperial bodyguard of the Caesar. It was that military entity’s proximity to power that eventually made kingmakers out of its corrupt military leaders. Generals would sell their loyalty to the highest bidder and impose the winning emperor upon the Senate. This cycle of military takeovers has been witnessed throughout history—in the guard of the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Janissaries, and ultimately in the modern military strongmen of Latin America and the Middle East.

Amos Perlmutter has explained that praetorianism is “a situation where the military class of a given society exercises independent political power within it by virtue of an actual or threatened use of military force;”<sup>2</sup> in other words, states that are prone to experiencing coups d’état. Yet the praetorian label represents a much deeper systematic weakness in a state, one in which the military’s superior organizational capacities are used to compensate for disjointed civilian leadership, breeding cycles of corruption and ultimately state decline. Yet in this case, Iran’s praetorians seem to have learned the lessons of history, avoiding many of the classic trappings of military rule, overcoming corruption and internal weakness to become a feared regional power.

### **Origins of the Revolutionary Guards (1979–1997)**

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a unique, hybrid system of government created especially for Khomeini in the wake of the Iranian Revolution (1978–79). Although Iran has an elected parliament (*Majles*) and president, these are superseded by the office of the Supreme Leader, the position held by Khomeini

and based on his thesis of *velayat-e faqih* (Rule by the Jurisprudent).<sup>3</sup> According to *velayat-e faqih*, a high-ranking cleric should be able to carry out the role of political leader in the absence of the Hidden Imam, the infallible Messiah whom the faithful expect to reappear in the future. In 1979, it conveniently turned out to be Khomeini himself who would rule. But Khomeini's tenure as Supreme Leader was marked by his relatively hands-off approach to governing, keeping elected officials in check through appointments in the judiciary and various oversight bodies.

Although Khomeini may have been a charismatic figure,<sup>4</sup> the unifying effect of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) bolstered his authority, reducing political disunity across the board.<sup>5</sup> Following Khomeini's death in 1989, internal divisions became more marked, partially due to the current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's deficit of charisma and religious credentials.<sup>6</sup> It would be Khomeini's army of true believers—the IRGC—that would rise from Praetorian Guard in the Roman sense in a modern, highly corruptible state.

Khomeini had established the IRGC on April 22, 1979, shortly after the revolution succeeded in ousting the shah and Iran's population had approved the creation of an Islamic Republic. The Revolutionary Guard is interchangeably known as the *Sepah* (Corps) or the *Pasdaran* (Guardians), while the conscripted military is normally referred to by the generic term *Artesh* (Army). Mandatory service in the armed forces applies to all males, and service is generally fulfilled within the *Artesh*, not the *Pasdaran*. The all-volunteer and elitist nature of the *Pasdaran* allows the force to maintain a higher skill level, along with a more purist ideological make-up. The praetorian label used here refers *only* to the *Pasdaran*, and is defined as a network of current members and like-minded graduates, and not the entire force.

In creating the *Pasdaran*, Khomeini's intention was to build an armed force to defend the revolution and clergy's aims, as he distrusted the conventional armed forces and doubted their loyalty. Their irregular status was given a formal legal framework with the passage of the Iranian Constitution on December 3, 1979. In Article 150, the *Pasdaran* are tasked with the "...role of guarding the Revolution and its achievements. The scope of the duties of this Corps, and its areas of responsibility, in relation to the duties and areas of responsibility of the other armed forces, are to be determined by law, with emphasis on brotherly cooperation and harmony among them."<sup>7</sup> The wording of Article 150 reveals a Praetorian Guard with the power and responsibility to "[guard] the Revolution

**The new Iran surprisingly appears to be on the way to political stability.**

and its achievements,” although how it does so is neither restricted nor specifically outlined.

Though the early Guardsmen thought of themselves as the “bastion and perpetrators of revolutionary purity,”<sup>8</sup> their astounding trajectory thereafter is part historical accident and part the confluence of two factors. First, after the shah had been toppled, Khomeini faced an array of other opposition forces seeking to alter the nature of the Islamic Republic. The most notable challengers were the Communist Party (*Tudeh*) and the People’s Mojahedeen of Iran (PMOI or *Mojahedeen-e Khalq*). Khomeini had to mobilize the *Pasdaran* to confront the supporters of both these groups.

Second, by September 1980, tensions between Khomeini and Saddam Hussein had caused Iraq to invade Iran. Khomeini’s distrust of the armed forces had led to a massive purge of military talent, and the *Pasdaran* were perhaps the only institution prepared for combat at the time. As a result, they were put in charge of executing military strategy, rationing food imports, protecting the state, vetting officials, and sitting on revolutionary committees claiming to speak for Khomeini. In short, they received a key leadership role in a moment of crisis.<sup>9</sup>

The *Pasdaran* used this constellation of responsibilities to set out a broader interpretation of their constitutional duty, defining it as “guarding the principle of government by the supreme jurist and the principle of jihad,” thereby institutionalizing a praetorian political dimension to its power.<sup>10</sup> By 1982, most of the opposition had been executed, imprisoned, exiled, or intimidated. Meanwhile, in the external war, the *Pasdaran* had managed to reverse the initial losses of 1980-81, and by the middle of 1982 had expelled all Iraqi troops from Iranian territory. The revolution had survived both its internal and external challenges, in large part due to the work of the IRGC.

Thereafter, the clergy sought to reassert civilian control over the military-security apparatus, with the *Majles* passing the statute of the IRGC on September 6, 1982. It laid out the conditions of service for individual Guardsmen, all of them referring to an individual’s ideology and ethics such as faith in Islam, the Islamic Revolution, *velayat-e faqih*, and good personal reputation. In addition, one condition specifies “non-membership in political parties or groups.”<sup>11</sup> As this referred only to individual Guardsmen, the statute clearly put the Guards Corps—as an institution—in charge of “detering foreign threats [and] as a political-military organization tasked with fighting domestic opposition.”<sup>12</sup> This assured the Guards their privileged status within the Islamic Republic, while also guaranteeing clerical control over the revolutionary military branches.

In 1989, the delicate power transition to the post-Khomeini era required the ayatollah’s heirs to reiterate that Khomeini himself had called for the “non-interference of the military in the affairs of political parties” and for them to stay

out of politics altogether.<sup>13</sup> At the time, the Guardians were appeased by a growing role in the reconstruction of Iran's economy. In 1990, many of the diverse companies under IRGC supervision were fused into *Khatam al-Anbia* (also known as *Ghorb*), which then became the leading contracting firm in major industries, notably construction, hydrocarbons, and telecommunications. These wide-ranging activities were permitted under Article 147 of the Constitution, which stated that in peacetime "the government must utilize the personnel and technical equipment of the army in relief operations, as well as for educational and productive ends."<sup>14</sup> This constitutional rationale is essential to the justification of the Guards' preeminent status in Iran's economy, so much so that *Ghorb's* website denotes it as its *raison d'être*.<sup>15</sup>

Despite receiving a number of lucrative contracts under then-president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's (1989-97) policies of reconstruction, the IRGC remained politically closer to Khomeini's successor as Supreme Leader, Ali Khamene'i, for three reasons. First, the Supreme Leader appoints the head of the IRGC and has a direct link with the organization, making the *Pasdaran* beholden to his leadership. Second, the IRGC's existence is ideologically tied to the revolution and the *velayat-e faqih*, so loyalty to the Supreme Leader is necessary to maintain its constitutional status. And third, the personal relations of senior Guards were better with Khamene'i. Rafsanjani's standing had been damaged by his advocacy for a negotiated solution to the Iran-Iraq War, along with his efforts to weaken the IRGC in 1988.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Khamene'i had been the supervisor of the IRGC during its infancy in 1980, and therefore enjoyed close working relations with senior commanders and had an understanding of the institutional culture.

For all of these reasons, the IRGC exhibited concerns about Rafsanjani's pragmatism in foreign and domestic affairs, which they feared would ultimately liberalize Iran's economy and society. Indeed, the Rafsanjani administration made its mark by pursuing rapprochement with the Gulf States and Western Europe in line with an ambitious reconstruction agenda, seeking to open Iran's economy and loosen state control. In response, the head of the IRGC, Mohsen Rezai, warned against the spread of liberal ideas ahead of parliamentary elections in 1996. Specifically, he threatened that the "Guards will knock down the 'liberals' and prevent them from entering the *Majles* even if they are elected."<sup>17</sup>

### **The Guards Move In (1997–)**

On May 23, 1997, the liberal champion, Mohammad Khatami, was elected president of Iran. His landslide victory transformed the Islamic Republic and the systemic role of the Guards in three interlinked ways. First, the Guards became drawn into the political realm, which also affected the nature of their core security responsibilities. Upon Khatami's urging to dismiss Rezai for intervening

in politics, Khamene'i replaced Rezai in September 1997. Yet, this act was ironically the beginning of a deepening symbiosis between the Supreme Leader's office and the entire security apparatus, foremost the *Pasdaran*.

Khatami's electoral mandate of reform placed Supreme Leader Khamene'i in a defensive posture, diminishing his role as arbiter between competing factions, which Iranian observers labeled "civil society" (*jame'eh-ye madani*) and "guardianship society" (*jame'eh-ye velai*).<sup>18</sup> Having lost influence among the executive and legislative bodies following the victories of the so-called 2 Khordad Movement (2 Khordad was the date of the 1997 election, per the Iranian calendar), Khamene'i and other guardians had to resort to extra-constitutional and non-democratic means to undermine popular will, civil society, and the reformist surge. In this process, Khamene'i became increasingly reliant on the *Pasdaran*.

The early signs of this new partnership were the harassment, suppression, and occasional murder of reform sympathizers in the late 1990s, accompanied by the judicial and legal disempowerment of the Khatami administration. In April 1998, the new head of the Guards, Yahya Rahim-Safavi, called for the "uprooting of anti-revolutionaries everywhere [and to] behead some and cut out the tongues of others."<sup>19</sup> The most notable instance of this crackdown was the violent suppression of student protests in July 1999, when the regime relied heavily on the mobilization of the *Basij* militia and the paramilitary *Ansar-e Hezbollah*. The former were under the formal command and control of the *Pasdaran*, while the latter enjoyed informal links, staffed by *Basij* and Guard veterans.<sup>20</sup>

While shifting toward maintaining internal order, the Guards also ensured that core national security items were placed under their exclusive purview. In the late 1990s, these major items were Iran's development of ballistic missiles, the operation of asymmetric warfare through the *Pasdaran*'s *Qods* Force as well as allied proxy groups in the Middle East, and the supervision of any possible nuclear weapons program.<sup>21</sup> Acquiring oversight of Iran's nuclear power industry, since it enjoyed consensus support in Iran, also served as a source of prestige for the Guards and a tool of popular mobilization.

These political calculations also indicate the second change in the *Pasdaran*'s role since 1997—namely the institutional transformation into a network of political and economic actors, rather than a purely military institution. Rezai's departure as head of the IRGC served to actually increase the influence of the *Pasdaran*. Rather than exiling him to obscurity, Khamene'i appointed him to the Expediency Council, a powerful body at the heart of the Iranian political system, headed by Khamene'i's rival, former president Rafsanjani. This set the precedent for high-level *Pasdaran* members to enter the political arena, first through appointments via the Supreme Leader's office, and then later as elected officials.

Some observers have pointed to this diffusion of power, the loose affiliation among the *Pasdaran*'s members, and even diverse opinions among them to argue that the Guards neither constitute a useful conceptual unit nor a cohesive institution. For example, former *Pasdaran* Brigadier General Mohammad Qalibaf, in his position as head of law enforcement, sought to suppress *Basij* and *Ansar-e Hezbollah* violence during the 1999 crackdown—a clear expression of support for reformists.<sup>22</sup>

In actuality, St. Andrews University expert Ali Ansari argues this loose association may have become a source of the Guards' strength: "The IRGC was not a disciplined military organization in the Western sense of the term; it was a network, a brotherhood, in which personalities and connections mattered far more than structures. This did not make it necessarily less effective or indeed less dangerous as an instrument of coercion—the lack of transparent rules might, in fact, make it more so—but it was certainly a different type of beast."<sup>23</sup>

After 2001, the Guards' influence expanded to manipulate the elections themselves, not just manage their results. The *Pasdaran* network has allied itself with ideologically conservative political and clerical figures. A central tenet of the praetorian takeover has been the Guards' ability to bind ideological sympathizers, accounting for the gradual and partial transfer of power. Just as Rome's praetorians needed Senate legitimacy, and like the Ottoman Janissaries were bound to choose a Sultan from the legitimate House of Osman,<sup>24</sup> the *Pasdaran*'s legitimacy rests on their connection to the clergy-centered constitutional system, which Khomeini helped build. The result of this symbiosis has been to catapult a mass of former Guards into political life through electoral success, which has required vetting candidates by the Guards' allies and their own operational machine. In fact, in the 2008 parliamentary elections and 2009 presidential elections, former Guardsmen supervised the electoral process.

Whereas virtually no parliamentarians in the 1980s had served in the IRGC, former Guards have constituted about a third of *Majles* members since the mid-2000s, when reformist election victories were reversed. Conversely, the number of clerics in parliament has dropped from being slightly over half in 1984 to just about 10 percent in 2008.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in the cabinet, the IRGC traditionally supplied about a quarter or fewer (5 or 6 out of 20-25) cabinet ministers—usually in security-related posts of defense, intelligence, and interior—or even fewer during the Khatami administration. Yet during the first Ahmadinejad presidency, they surged to more than half (12-14 of 21) of its members, taking on many portfolios not connected to security alone.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Ahmadinejad's 2005 election victory led to an expectation among former Guards that they would receive leadership positions across the Islamic Republic, including governorates and ambassadorships. Even the small minority of former Guards who have

politically affiliated themselves with reformists still confirm the heightened politicization of the force.<sup>27</sup>

The third change in the role of the Guards, beyond their expanding political role and influential institutional diffusion throughout Iran, has been a dramatic increase in their economic importance. One would describe the *Pasdaran* as having “cashed in” since 2005. Based on available data, it is reasonable to estimate that the Guards controlled less than five percent of GDP shortly after the end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1989.<sup>28</sup> Now, they directly or indirectly oversee at least 25 percent of GDP, and more likely about 35 percent and growing.<sup>29</sup>

This rapid growth has happened through a variety of means, since the government used seed money to foment commercial activity when founding the

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IRGC-affiliated *Ghorb*. To some degree, there has since been organic growth of the Guards' main business units, such as *Ghorb*, as they have pooled their expertise and faced little domestic competition in certain sectors. However, bearing in mind that 80 percent of the Islamic Republic's economy has been traditionally state-run, much of the economic success is a function of their institutional links, which works in three ways.<sup>30</sup> First, the *Pasdaran* have used their privileged position to

win public tenders, large contracts, and break into new industries, particularly the oil and gas sectors. Second, they have used their access to hard currency and subsidized exchange rates to accumulate capital. In turn, they have used that capital to build on their arms imports expertise to create a vast network of shadow ports, through which they smuggle a whole range of goods for the Iranian market.<sup>31</sup> Third, *Ghorb* is not subject to the same working standards as the rest of Iranian businesses and its sheer size makes it disproportionately competitive.

Prior to 2005, the Guards have also occasionally used raw power to reverse high-profile tenders in their favor. One of the most notable examples is when it nullified Turkcell's winning bid to operate a second mobile-phone network as part of a consortium. Upon pressure by the Guards and their patrons, the *Majles* was forced to change the terms of the deal and revoke Turkcell's majority share in the consortium.<sup>32</sup> After Turkcell's departure, an Iranian-led consortium under the ownership of a Guards' subsidiary received the license for the network. More dramatically, when a Turkish–Swiss consortium won the lucrative contract to operate the brand new Imam Khomeini International Airport, the Guards took physical control of the airport and prevented its operations until one of its companies was appointed to replace the foreign consortium. This show of strength was not only geared toward gaining a major contract, but also aimed at



securing Guard control of the country's international transport hubs for its import business.

Since Ahmadinejad's election, the Guards have no longer needed to rely on such tactics, but could simply "legalize" their demands instead. In particular, the Ahmadinejad administration has embarked

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on a massive privatization program, claiming to have reduced the public sector's share from 80 percent to 40 percent of GDP. Much of the privatization has simply led to a large-scale transfer of state assets to well-connected individuals associated with the *Pasdaran* network, leading observers to liken the process to the rise of the oligarchs in Russia.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, while their institutional transformation and expansion of political and economic influence have informally enhanced the Guards' power, the last mark of the preeminent position of the Guards is their official, redefined role as the ultimate guardians of the Islamic Republic under Ahmadinejad. In 2007, the head of the IRGC, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, identified the Guards' primary mission as fighting "internal threats" and attempts at a "velvet revolution." Therefore, the IRGC was structurally reorganized more toward a force for domestic control and less as a defensive military branch.<sup>34</sup>

This proved either prescient or a self-fulfilling prophecy after the June 2009 presidential elections, when the IRGC was at the center of the regime's effort to suppress widespread unrest.<sup>35</sup> The successful clampdown has further solidified the position of the Guard by increasing their clerical and political associates' dependence upon it. In short, as Babak Rahimi, professor of Iranian Studies at the University of California–San Diego, put it, "the Guard is now perceived as the main political force within the theocratic establishment, remapping its factional political landscape into a new military oligarchy . . . [O]ne of the most important implications of this development is the consolidation of a military state that can be described as a theocracy only in name."<sup>36</sup>

## Dealing with Praetorianism 2.0—The Case of Iran

Historically, countries that experience praetorianism have hardly been states to fear, since they are likely on their way down. According to David Rapoport, the founder of praetorianism studies, the three classic deficiencies associated with this form of military rule are insecurity, venality, and impotence.<sup>37</sup> Insecurity means that traditional praetorian militaries take power because of a mutual fear between government and the armed forces. The consistent fear of one another

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makes the country prone to military intervention, even if it does not actually occur.

Second, venality refers to the bribery that takes place as soldiers depend on government allowances for their survival. This usually comes in the form of payments from the government to the threatening military establishment, similar to protection money paid to the mob. However, it provides diminished returns as each additional bribe becomes less effective in

securing support, leading to a cycle of more bribes being offered and increasing instability.

Third, on impotence, as praetorian militaries become more corrupt, they cease to be effective at their original purpose: fighting and winning wars.<sup>38</sup> In other words, corruption robs the military of its original mission, in the process alienating both its members and the general public who do not recognize the legitimacy of military rule.

Today, it appears the Islamic Republic has overcome the three challenges listed above. First, the mutual civil–military fears do not correspond to Iran. In fact, the bifurcated political structure of Iran with both theocratic (*velayat-e faqih*) and democratic (elected governments) pillars prevented such a clash, allowing for a triangular relationship instead. In this context, a symbiotic relationship blossomed between the theocratic element and the Guards, exchanging legitimacy for material force. This still remains true after the June 2009 elections, though power has further shifted in favor of the Guards.

Commentators in the United States often view a democratic transition in Iran as a panacea, but this is more hope than actionable policy. The simple fact is that the Green Movement is currently not potent enough to transform the Islamic Republic. Similarly, there is little reason to believe that the clergy would be able to roll back the rise of the Guards. After the elimination of democratic representation, any incipient signs of mutual fear between the clergy and its military equivalent are far outweighed by the imperative to maintain the current arrangement in light of widespread public frustration in Iran. In addition, the Guards will continue to rely on the legitimacy provided by the façade of clerical leadership: overt military rule along the lines of the military juntas of Latin America in the 1970s is therefore out of the question. For the foreseeable future, Iran's praetorians will seek to consolidate power, rein in political contestation of public office, and gradually diminish independent clerical influence without blatantly displacing the clerics from the constitutional offices they are expected to hold.

Second, although the IRGC began as a subservient military force, it eventually ballooned into a vital player in Iran's economy, providing a high level of economic self-sufficiency. This is a critical point, since it guarantees the generous funding of the force without the need to bend over backwards to please civilian or clerical leadership. And third, the IRGC

remains one of the most important military entities in the Middle East, with possession of a formidable domestic naval air force in the Gulf, along with an undisclosed number of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles and a presumed nuclear weapons program.<sup>39</sup> Iran's *Pasdaran* seem to have solved many of the inherent challenges of praetorianism, forming a more stable base from which to carry out their interventionist role. This all suggests that the Islamic Republic's system of government has provided the IRGC with a permanent space from which to carry out its praetorian activities.

For the United States, Iran's newfound praetorianism is a double-edged sword. Much of what makes Iran's foreign policy so destructive today is related to its own internal factionalism and the need to create a cult of anti-Americanism. In this regard, Iran's elite today is similar to Mao's China, consistently pushing the envelope in forcing its leaders to prove their anti-Western sentiment. From this perspective, a strong, consolidated, praetorian state no longer contending with internal factionalism would eventually become a more predictable actor in the international system, much like other anti-American military regimes. Although this is perhaps not the desired outcome for supporters of Iran's nascent democratic movement, it would facilitate developing credible diplomatic strategies based on either engagement or coercion.

However, praetorianism traditionally comes with major short-term problems. Iran's Revolutionary Guards may be gaining power, but they have not yet achieved full control. Their rise was facilitated by Khamene'i, but he reluctantly began to rely on the Guards, as he would have preferred to rule by the power of his word. Currently, he is struggling to reassert his independence, so the process of the Guards' takeover will not be completed until Khamene'i's death and the appointment of his successor, whose endorsement by the *Pasdaran* would signal the ultimate crowning of the praetorian takeover. Therefore, the continuing power struggle is first likely to engender further radicalization, not unlike the kind that saturated the early days of the revolution, when Khomeini's efforts at consolidating power rewarded off-the-rails extremism (the 1979 student-led seizure of the U.S. embassy being one tragic example).

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**T**hwarting Iran's nuclear weapons program may depend on understanding Iran's praetorianism.

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On the nuclear front, the short-term threat is even greater. The difference between a stable regime and one amidst a power struggle could be the difference between Iran merely continuing uranium enrichment and actually testing a nuclear bomb. Such a test would have an irreversible impact on the Middle East, sparking a regional arms race and many other problems. Ultimately, effective U.S. efforts to thwart Iran's nuclear weap-

ons program and support for rogue actors will depend on an even more refined understanding of Iran's version of praetorianism, which is still a work in progress and a function of domestic developments.

It is important to recognize the limited and distorted impact of U.S. policy on Iran's internal politics. One should recall that Saddam's invasion of Iran in 1980 not only inspired a rally-around-the-flag effect, but also specifically empowered the Guards, whose ability to fight back during the Iran-Iraq War earned them the admiration of millions of Iranians, something surely lacking in today's Iran. Any military confrontation today would likely produce a similar reaction.

Sanctions, often thought of as an alternative to military action, work in opposite ways. As long as the praetorian consolidation is incomplete, sanctions tend to exacerbate regime infighting and raise tensions, both at the leadership level and throughout the corps of the Revolutionary Guards. This development may delay the consolidation of military power, but at the same time could exacerbate it. That is because, as explained above, Iran's new leaders have thrived—both politically and economically—in a climate of isolation and confrontation with the global order.

Nevertheless in the long term, U.S. policymakers may find it easier to deal with a united Iran. In fact, the problem with U.S.-Iranian relations since the revolution has less to do with the purity of Iran's anti-American ideology than with the fractious nature of Iranian decisionmaking. A praetorian system, which will come at the expense of human rights and freedoms at home, may very well achieve the necessary political stability for the United States to craft a long-term strategy for dealing with Iran.

In terms of the nuclear program, a praetorian Iran which enjoys political stability could better reflect on the costs and benefits of conflict with the outside world without ideological constraints. It may seek a bargain that ensures Iran the presence of the full nuclear fuel cycle while allowing for verification mechanisms which satisfy the international community. Similarly, an arrangement on the nuclear issue could lessen Iran's support for Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Without the conflict with the United States and no

longer vying for political dominance at home, the need to prove radical credentials would be diminished. Although tragic for the Iranian people, praetorian Iran may offer a path for the country's reintegration into the international community.

## Notes

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21. Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, "The Conservative Consolidation in Iran," *Survival* 47, no. 2 (June 2005): p. 188.
22. Wehrey, et al., p. 7.
23. Ali Ansari, "The Revolution Will Be Mercantitized," *The National Interest*, Web site, February 11, 2010, <http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=22602>.
24. David C. Rapoport, "The Praetorian Army: Insecurity, Venality, and Impotence," in Roman Kolkowicz and Andrzej Korbonski, eds., *Soldiers, Peasants, and Bureaucrats: Civil-military Relations in Communist and Modernizing States* (Herts, UK: George Allen & Unwin, 1982).
25. Numbers of clerics from Raz Zimmt, "2008 Iranian Parliamentary Elections: A Triumph of the System," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): pg. 50; in 1980 and 1984, there were a small number of clerics in the *Majles* that had previously served in the Guards, e.g. Khamene'i himself in 1980. However, they are not tabulated as former Guards as it was their clerical status that enabled their political career, not their military credentials. 2004 number from Gheissari and Nasr; 2008 figure from "The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps: Military and Political Influence in Today's Iran," *Saban Center-USIP Iran Working Group*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., November 13, 2008, [http://www.brookings.edu/events/2008/1113\\_iran.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/events/2008/1113_iran.aspx).
26. Data for the Mousavi and first Rafsanjani administrations are from Katzman, *Warriors of Islam*, pg. 124; the 2009 figures are from profiles available at hamshahri.org and all other figures are from a proprietary study conducted by one of the authors in 2005.
27. Hen-Tov, 167.
28. The 1989 estimate is based on the following two assumptions. First, the IRGC's economic activities—even in construction and heavy industry—were overwhelmingly in the defense sector. Second, the IRGC supervised two main sources of income—its own defense-industrial complex and international arms purchases. Regarding the former, we know that the IRGC defense industry was smaller than the non-IRGC domestic arms production, which amounted to \$1.5 billion, or about two percent of GDP. Turning to arms imports, Iranian purchases measured about \$2.5 billion in inflation-adjusted currency in 1988. According to the U.S. Department of State, they dropped from about 3.5 percent of GDP in wartime to barely more than two percent of GDP immediately after the war and less thereafter. Adding the less than two percent from the defense industry to the arms imports, it is hard to imagine that the IRGC controlled even five percent of GDP in 1989.
29. As with the 1989 figure, reliable data are limited and widespread claims that the IRGC controls 60 percent of Iran's economy are unable to be substantiated. Instead, one can infer the total value of all entities subordinate to the Guard or a member of the Guard network by the use of proxy data—the revenue of Guard companies and subsidiaries, estimates of illicit smuggling revenues based on trade discrepancies, newly-acquired assets in the recent wave of privatizations, and control of para-statal assets through Guard veterans. Adding the above components together, the Guards appear to exercise some form of control over at least 25 percent at the lower range and up to 40 percent of GDP at the higher range of estimates.
30. Ali Alfoneh, "How Intertwined Are the Revolutionary Guards in Iran's Economy?," *AEI Outlook Series*, no. 3, October 2007, <http://www.aei.org/outlook/26991>.
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35. See for example Ladane Nasser and Ali Sheikholeslami, "Iran Police Quash Rally as Revolutionary Guards Warn Protesters," *Bloomberg*, June 22, 2009, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aTMTGmuvvDkM>.
36. Babak Rahimi, "The Role of the Revolutionary Guards and Basij Militia in Iran's 'Electoral Coup'," *Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 21 (July 17, 2009), [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=35277&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=26&cHash=e3e29e9833](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=35277&tx_ttnews[backPid]=26&cHash=e3e29e9833).
37. Rapoport, "The Praetorian Army."
38. See David C. Rapoport, "A Comparative Theory of Military and Political Types," in *Changing Patterns of Military Politics*, ed. Samuel P. Huntington (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962); also see Rapoport, "The Praetorian Army."
39. See Steven A. Hildreth, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Programs: An Overview," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, February 4, 2009, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RS22758.pdf>; and Greg Bruno, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Program," Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounders, Web site, October 15, 2009, [http://www.cfr.org/publication/20425/irans\\_ballistic\\_missile\\_program.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/20425/irans_ballistic_missile_program.html).