

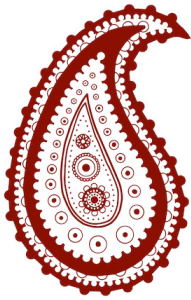
DĀNESH

THE OU UNDERGRADUATE
JOURNAL OF
IRANIAN STUDIES



The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA
College of International Studies
Department of International and Area Studies

Volume 2 (2017)



The UNIVERSITY *of* OKLAHOMA
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FARZANEH FAMILY CENTER
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From the Faculty Advisor

This second volume of *DĀNESH* represents a significant expansion of the journal, both in terms of the scope of topics covered by the published articles, and by the growth of the journal's editorial team. Since its founding in 2016, *DĀNESH* has sought to provide a forum to showcase original research produced by Iranian Studies undergraduate students at the University of Oklahoma. This volume of the journal was produced through the able leadership of **Elizabeth "Libby" Ennenga** (BA, 2017), as the journal's editor-in-chief. Under Libby's editorial leadership *DĀNESH* has continued to thrive as a forum for the study of all aspects of the history, culture, society, and politics of Iran and the Persianate world.

This year also marks the maturing of OU's Iranian Studies program into the newly christened **Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies**. As the program has grown, so too has the interest and dedication of OU students in the field of Iranian Studies. The publication of *DĀNESH*, a peer-reviewed journal published under the auspices of OU's Farzaneh Center and the OU College of International Studies, is also dedicated to highlighting the growing undergraduate program in Iranian Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

The name of the journal, *DĀNESH*, comes from the Persian word meaning *knowledge, learning, and wisdom*. We believe this is a fitting name for a journal that seeks to foster deep and compassionate understanding of one of the world's most culturally rich and historically complex civilizations. It is with this in mind that we present the second volume of *DĀNESH*.

Afshin Marashi
Farzaneh Family Chair in Modern Iranian History
Director, Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies

From the Editor-in-Chief

I am honored to have been a part of the creation of Volume Two of *DĀNESH*. After an exceptionally successful inaugural edition of the journal, I have been more than impressed to see the quality of this new edition. This journal is made up of outstanding research examining the rich history, numerous religions, complex political climate, and vibrant culture of Iran. I believe in the transformative power of knowledge, and each article published in *DĀNESH* proves the academic dialogue on Iranian Studies is thriving at the University of Oklahoma.

Many students worked diligently to create the second edition of the journal. I would like to acknowledge and thank all of the associate editors who were consistently a positive hardworking team throughout this process. I would also like to recognize the authors of Volume Two; whose distinguished works are the reason the journal is possible. Each author remained professional, involved, and patient throughout the entire process — and for that I thank you. To the University of Oklahoma Libraries and Printing Services, thank you for your necessary assistance to help make *DĀNESH* accessible to readers both digitally and in physical copies.

The quality of work and endless support given to this journal is a direct reflection of the growth of the Iranian Studies Program at the University of Oklahoma. Thank you to the Farzaneh family for their generous donations that have allowed students to continue to pursue their interests in Iranian Studies. Most of all, my sincerest gratitude goes to Dr. Afshin Marashi. Neither this journal, nor the Iranian Studies Program would be possible without your continued support of the students and their work. Your guidance, assistance, and support have made all the difference.

Libby Ennenga (BA 2017)
Editor-in-Chief

The Power Behind the Pulpit: The Rise of the Revolutionary Guard in Post-1979 Iran

Parker Selby

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On May 2004 a few hours after the grand opening of the much awaited Imam Khomeini International Airport outside of Tehran departing planes were grounded and arriving planes diverted to nearby Mahabad Airport. Only one plane from Dubai was allowed to land. The owner of the closed airport was a Turkish-Austrian consortium Tepe-Afken-Vie which had invested \$15 million dollars in a deal with the Iranian government to operate the airport. The incident resulted in diplomatic tension between Turkey and Iran and national embarrassment.¹

The shutdown was caused by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp a faction of Iran's armed forces which cited security threats as a pretext for the shutdown. However, it later became apparent that the real reason for the Revolutionary Guard's closure of the airport was that one of its affiliated engineering firms had lost the bid for the contract. The airport was reopened in 2005 under the management of local airlines.

The incident demonstrated two things: first, the closure of the airport demonstrated the ability of the Revolutionary Guards to use force to pursue its interests. The show of force and the closure of the airport at the Imam Khomeini served to underline the fact that the Guards wielded disproportionate amount of force to even the civilian government which was forced to comply with the Guards wishes. Second, it demonstrated the extent to which the Guard's participation and influence in the national economy.

The Revolutionary Guard further demonstrated its political clout in the Majles elections of 2004 and the presidential election of 2005. In the 2004 parliamentary elections conservative, hard-liner candidates swept most of

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¹ "Airport Debacle is 'bad for Iran,' *BBC News*, May 12, 2004.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3707123.stm>. Accessed April 16, 2012.

the seats, approximately a third of whom were former Revolutionary Guards.² One year later Mahmoud

However, despite some analysts' claims that the Revolutionary Guards and the *Basij* represent merely the armed force of the clerically dominated government, their increase in economic and political power since their creation in 1979, now threatens the conservative clerical establishment embodied in the Office of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the Guardian Council. Some have gone as far to say that the brutal crackdown of protestors during the 2009 presidential coup represents a "masquerade coup" by the "neo-principlists" lead by Ahmadenejad.³ Although such claims may be exaggerated there is no doubt that Iran's Revolutionary Guard is a key player in Iranian politics and economy. Due to their perceived radicalism in the West and the United States, the relative strengths and weaknesses of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as an institution have important implications for US and international intervention in Iran.⁴

In this paper I examine the Revolutionary Guard as a political, military, economic, and social institution and seek to answer the following questions: How did the Revolutionary Guard evolve into the economic and political force that it is today? To what extent has the Guard succeeded in gaining the approval and popularity of a large segment of Iranian society? How effective is it as an economic and military institution? And finally, what impact does US and international intervention have the Revolutionary Guard?

To answer these questions, I will survey the origins and evolution of the Revolutionary Guard from the Iranian Revolution of 1979 to the present day. The evolutionary of the Revolutionary Guard as an institution can be roughly divided into three periods: formation and consolidation (1979-1988), economic expansion during the reconstruction era (1988-1997), and the political ascendancy (1997-present). After a brief survey of its history, I analyze the Revolutionary Guard as an institution and identify its strengths and weaknesses. Finally, I conclude with an evaluation of US and

² Elliot Hen-Tov and Nathan Gonzalez, "The Militarization of Post-Khomeini Iran: Praetorianism 2.0," *The Washington Quarterly* 34 (2011): 51, accessed March 26, 2012, doi: 10.1080/0163660X.2011.534962.

³ See Roozbeh Safshekan and Farzan Sabet, "The Ayatollah's Praetorians: The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the 2009 Election Crisis," *Middle East Journal* 64 (2010): 543-58, accessed March 28, 2012, doi: 10.3751/64.4.12.

⁴ In this paper I will assume that sanctions are a form of intervention.

international intervention and answer to what extent economic and military intervention can influence Iranian foreign and domestic policy. I will argue that its penetration of Iranian politics, economy, and military have made the IRGC a largely independent institution that will most likely become the primary authority in the Islamic Republic for the foreseeable future in spite of Iran's democratic, reformist movement and the clerical elite.

Formation and Consolidation (1979-1988)

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Engelab-e Islami*) was formally created May 5, 1979 by Ayatollah Khomeini during the tenure of President Mehdi Bazargan amidst the chaos of the Revolution; however, its true origins lie earlier than the revolution itself. The core of what became the leadership of the Revolutionary Guard consisted of various leftist Islamic groups such as the Mojahdeen-e Khalq (MEK) and the Mojahdeen of the Islamic Revolution (MIR). These two groups already had acquired experience in revolutionary activity before the outbreak of the Revolution in 1978 waging guerilla warfare against the Shah's regime. Many future Guard leaders such as Behzad Nebavi and Mohsen Reza'i served time in the Shah's notorious prisons where they gradually grew disenchanted with the secular Marxist ideologies of their fellow inmates and embraced the strictly Islamic ideology of Khomeini. After their release Nebavi, Reza'i and other like-minded inmates left the MEK and created the MIR in April 1979. Nevertheless, many revolutionaries during the revolution and the early 1980's would hold dual membership in both MEK and MIR.⁵

Other members of the Revolutionary Guard came from the *komitehs*, the local organizations that sprang up during and after the Shah fell to police the population and capture alleged regime supporters and counter-revolutionaries. Most of them were pre-revolutionary dissidents and guerilla fighters, some of whom had been trained by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). It was during this early phase of the revolution that many of the future Guard members would acquire experience in internal security for the Revolutionary Guards would become notorious.⁶ Thus, it is clear that before the formal inauguration of the

⁵ Kenneth Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 32-33.

⁶ Shaul, Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984), 63-64.

Revolutionary Guards in May 1979, many of the Guardsmen had some experience in guerilla warfare and internal security.

After the fall of the Shah and the triumph of Khomeini the new regime faced several challenges from former revolutionary allies such as MEK and the Tudeh Party and ethnic separatist movements in Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, and Khuzestan. Furthermore, the violent purges of revolutionary tribunals and the *komitehs*, even by the Revolutionary Council's admission, were out of control. Consequently, the newly formed Revolutionary Guards were entrusted with the dual tasks of suppressing separatist movements and reigning in the *komitehs* and tribunals. After the beginning of the Kurdish revolt in August 1979 the Revolutionary Guards, along with *Artesh* divisions were dispatched to suppress the revolt. Although the Guards acquired more military experience in the Kurdish and other campaigns to crush Arab, Baluchi, and Azeri separatist movements their performance was mixed; the Revolutionary Guard's experience was mainly in urban warfare and their unfamiliarity with the mountainous terrain in the north allowed the Kurdish *peshmerga* to plan ambushes that inflicted many casualties on the Guards.⁷

Efforts to curb the excesses of the revolution tribunals were likewise mixed. Attempts by the Provisional government to impose order on the *komitehs* merely made them stronger. Dispatched by the Revolutionary Council to centralize the *komitehs* and the tribunals, Mahdavi-Kani succeeded somewhat in reducing their numbers (during the revolution and its aftermath around 1,000 local *komitehs* had formed in Tehran itself), however, his efforts to centralize served merely to consolidated them.

The eight-month period of Bazargan's tenure was a crucial period in which revolutionary organizations, especially the Revolutionary Guard shaped the emerging order. Despite Bazargan's insistence on implementing the rule of law his efforts were largely thwarted by the developing "parallel government of revolutionary committees, courts, and guards backed by the Revolutionary Council."⁸ During this formative period the political and security apparatus of the Revolutionary Guard began to form. Although it was monitored by the Revolutionary Council through an appointed cleric, the Guard was largely successful in maintaining its autonomy. Several of the Revolutionary Council's appointed representatives to the Revolutionary Guard Council were rejected by the Guards who resented what they saw as

⁷ Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*; (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 230-234.

⁸ Bakhsh, *Reign of the Ayatollahs*, 52-55.

the imposition of leaders without their consent.⁹ Thus, although it is correct that the Guard was largely a political instrument of the clerics on the Revolutionary Council, even during its formative period the Guard displayed tendencies of autonomy. This trend would accelerate and continue throughout its history.

The Iran-Iraq War was a decisive event in the evolution of the Revolutionary Guard into a professional organization. Although it gained valuable military experience in suppressing the ethnic revolts that sprung up after the fall of the Shah, before the war the IRGC remained largely an unorganized militia concerned more with the internal affairs of the Islamic Republic. However, the experience of the Iran-Iraq War molded the IRGC into a professional military.¹⁰

The sheer increase in the size of the IRGC and the *Basij* during the Iran-Iraq War demonstrates its role in consolidating and strengthening the Guard; the first year of the war saw IRGC membership double from 20,000-30,000 to 50,000. By the end of the war that number would increase to around 450,000. It also expanded its purview, establishing branches in the navy and the air force, a national command structure, and a budgetary administration. Furthermore, by 1987 3 million Iranians had received *Basij* training.¹¹

The war also served to expand the IRGC's monopoly of violence and minimizing the role of its main competitor: the *Artesh*. At the beginning of the war the ranks of the *Artesh* had been depleted to 150,000¹², and the lingering distrust of it throughout the war led the Islamic Republican Party (IPR) to advocate for the expansion of the IRGC's abilities, powers, and privileges to wage the "sacred defense." Such privileges included superior pay and benefits to its members and superior access to arms and spare parts.¹³

The Revolutionary Guard's performance in the Iran-Iraq War was lackluster. Due to several disadvantages such as a chronic shortage of spare

⁹ Among the rejected appointees were Ayatollah Hasan Lahuti and future president Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam*, 33.

¹⁰ Marius A. Belstad, "Born by Revolution, Raised by War: The Iran-Iraq War and the Rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps" (Master Degree's Thesis, University of Oslo, 2010), 30.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 32-37.

¹² Efraim Karsh, *Essential Histories: The Iran-Iraq War* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002), 19.

¹³ Belstad, "Born by Revolution, Raised by War", 32.

parts, heavy armor, aircraft and advanced weaponry, the Guard relied mainly on sheer manpower and religious zealotry.¹⁴ This was demonstrated in its “human wave” tactics, which entailed the charges of massive numbers of lightly armed *Basijis*, sometimes as young as 10-12 years old, at enemy positions. These charges were ostensibly to weaken the enemy’s lines and pave the way for attacks by more heavily armed Revolutionary Guards. *Basij* charges were also utilized to clear minefields. Although the IRGC’s use of human waves scored some military victories, it resulted in unnecessary casualties and mostly resulted in stalemate on the front. The most illustrative case of the inefficiency of the human wave tactic was Operation Karbala 4, a failed Iranian offensive to capture the Iraqi city of Basra in December 1986; around 10,000 Iranian troops were killed a period of three days.¹⁵ Such tactics also failed to prevent the Iraqi counter offense beginning in 1987 which pushed Iranian forces out of Iraq and managed to capture sizeable portions of Iranian territory. Sensing defeat on land by the Iraqi forces, increasing American and international pressure in the Persian Gulf, and domestic pressure from a public exhausted by devastation and economic ruin, Ayatollah Khomeini finally yielded to Rafsanjani’s advice and accepted the UN-proposed ceasefire.

The Revolution Guard has long emphasized its role in the “Sacred Defense” of the Islamic Republic in as evidence of its legitimacy.¹⁶ Despite its mixed performance on the battlefield, the Guard points to its success in resisting the Iraqi onslaught despite being vastly outnumbered and the alleged US and international community’s support of Iraq. The later was particularly incorporated into the Guard’s mythology of the Iran-Iraq War. Mohsen Reza’i would later call it the “War against the World.” One author has also claimed that as a result of its large role in the Iran-Iraq War, the Guard acquired nationalist credentials and perceived legitimacy from the population at large:

“During the war, the IRGC developed to become a truly national actor, defending not just its politically likeminded compatriots but the whole

¹⁴ At the beginning of the war Iraq had 2,750 tanks, 4,000 armored vehicles, 1,400 artillery pieces, and 340 combat aircraft, in contrast to Iran, which had the capacity to field only 500 tanks, 300 artillery pieces, and less than 100 combat aircraft, Ward, *Immortal*, 248.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 37-41.

¹⁶ Wehrey, Frederic et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2011), 24.

country against the Iraqi onslaught. Iranians not initially positively inclined towards the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or the ideology of the fundamentalist *ulama* therefore to a larger degree found themselves fighting for the same basic value of Iranian independence in the face of external danger, and, whether they liked it or not, had to acknowledge the IRGC's important role in defending the Iranian nation."¹⁷

It is difficult to judge whether or not how many Iranians today accept the Revolutionary Guard mythology of the Iran-Iraq War. Although the Guard and the regime at large have kept the memory of the Guard's sacrifice in the war alive through museums, public ceremonies, and movies it is not clear if this resonates with younger generations. Although some Iranians have expressed ambivalence and/or distrust of the Guard's portrayal of its part in the war effort, it would be misguided to assume that even the Guard's critics would welcome international or American military intervention in Iran. Such an action would probably serve to increase the Guard's legitimacy in the eyes of the public, as was demonstrated by the public support it enjoyed during the Iran-Iraq War.

Economic Expansion During the Reconstruction Era (1988-1997)

The end of the Iran-Iraq War, the death of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, and the election of President Hashemi-Rafsanjani ushered in a new era for the Islamic Republic characterized by pragmatism and a toning down of the Revolutionary rhetoric and policies of the Khomeini era. As a part of his pragmatic political program, the new administration, while remaining a conservative, clerical dominated institution, initiated a program of reconstruction (*saz-bazi*) that aimed to encourage foreign investment and the rebuilding of Iran's economy devastated by a decade of war and revolution. Furthermore, Rafsanjani attempted to reorganize and rationalize the bureaucracy, signaling a shift away from the charismatic rule of the Supreme Ruler to an institutionalization of authority.¹⁸

As a part of this drive to rationalize state institutions, the Joint Armed Forces General Staff was created in 1988 to institute coordination between leading officers of the Regular Army (*Artesh*) and the IRGC. A year later the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics was created to incorporate the IRGC into a larger military structure and reduce its autonomy. The establishment of other agencies such as the Ministry of

¹⁷ Belstad, "Born by Revolution, Raised by War", 45.

¹⁸ Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 2006) 105-107.

Intelligence and Security (MOIS) were likewise intended to reign in the Revolution Guard and encourage cooperation and intelligence sharing between the different agencies.¹⁹ However, Rafsanjani's attempts to integrate the IRGC was significantly hindered by the resistance from the Revolutionary Guards' leadership as well as Khomeini's successor Supreme Leader Khamenei's granting the Guard additional security mandates not sanctioned by the Presidency.²⁰ Although partly due to the power of the Supreme Leader over the military, the ability of the IRGC to resist Rafsanjani's attempts at integration demonstrate that the Revolutionary Guard retained a significant degree of its autonomy throughout the reconstruction era.

In one of his most significant actions during the Reconstruction that would greatly influence the development of the IRGC, Rafsanjani began encouraging the Revolutionary Guards to engage in economic and financial activities to "bolster its budget." As a part of his reconstruction policy Rafsanjani was seeking to lower the government defense budget and ushering the IRGC into private business was part of his initiative to encourage government agencies to acquire revenue independently, thus freeing up government funds for other projects.²¹ Perhaps, it was also a calculated move to appease the IRGC's hardliners who resented Rafsanjani's role in convincing Khomeini to end the war with Iraq. Whatever his motives were, his decision would mark the beginning of the IRGC's penetration of the Iranian economy on an unprecedented level and only serve to strengthen the organization's autonomy.

As a result of Rafsanjani's economic policies of "privatization" and his need to placate the disgruntled Guardsmen, the state began transferring previously state-dominated sectors such as petroleum, natural gas, construction of housing, pipelines, roads, agriculture, and international trade to IRGC-affiliated corporations and firms.²² In effect privatization in the Islamic Republic means the transfer of formerly state dominated industries to an informal network of IRGC-affiliated firms and corporations in a no-bid process. Among the biggest these benefactors is *Khatam al-Anbiya* (also known as *Ghorb*,) a consortium of several agricultural, industrial, engineering, and construction firms that has been

¹⁹ Frederic Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, 8-10.

²⁰ Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under his Successors*, (Oxford University Press, 2009), 59-60.

²¹ Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, 56.

²² *Ibid.*, 56-59.

awarded over 750 government contracts since its creation in 1990. More importantly it is reported to be the Islamic Republic's sole contactor in the natural gas industry.²³

In addition to its business interests, the IRGC also influence indirect control over the large economic foundations (*bonyads*) such as the Foundation for the Disinherited (*bonyad-e mostaz'afin*), Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans' Affairs, and *Bonyad-e Shahid* which control nearly 40 percent of the Iranian economy and are allotted around 58 percent of the state budget. Many of the heads of these foundations are former Revolutionary Guards or *Basij* who report directly to the Supreme Leader and not the state.²⁴

The IRGC is also known to engage in illicit black market activities which would later become the subjects of several corruption trials during the Khatami era. Due to its control over most of Iran's seaports, the IRGC is in the position to control the import and export of illicit goods, which some have claimed include drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes. Such black market transactions are estimated earn \$12 billion a year.²⁵

Political Ascendancy (1997-present)

Beginning during the Khatami Presidency (1997-2005) and culminating during the Ahmadinejad Presidency (2005-present) the IRGC extended its control of the internal security and intelligence apparatus, and began to exert unprecedented political influence. As the IRGC gained influence and suppressed reformist movement it came increasingly in conflict with the clerical conservative establishment whose reliance on the IRGC is threatening to transform the Islamic Republic of Iran into a "Praetorian State" in which the Supreme Leader would be the appointed puppet figure of the IRGC.

The election of President Khatami in 1997 by a popular approval not witnessed since the election of Bani Sadr was the beginning of a conservative resurgence. The relaxation of press censorship, the call for a policy of détente with the United States and the West, development of civil society (*jam'e madani*), the implementation of the rule of law, and other democratic reforms threatened clerical rule and the office of the Supreme Leader. Thus, the Supreme Leader Khamenei increasingly relied on the IRGC to use extra-constitutional and non-democratic means to counter the

²³ Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, 59-64.

²⁴ Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, 60-61.

²⁵ Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, 64-66.

reform movement.²⁶ The most striking example of this occurred in July 1999 when *Basij* and *Ansar-e Hezbollah* paramilitaries violently suppressed student protests at the Tehran University. The later organization, though not officially a part of the IRGC, has informal links with the Guard leadership. Although being the leading figure of the reform movement, Khatami did nothing to stop the suppression of the student protests.²⁷ Khatami's inability to prevent the Guards and the clerical establishment from crush the protests demonstrated the limits of presidential power and the rising influence of the IRGC in Iranian politics.

The IRGC also began to resume its internal security and intelligence roles that it had enjoyed during the early days of the Revolution. Despite Rafsanjani's attempts to subsume the IRGC's policing and intelligence functions within a national, centralized hierarchy, the result was the development of parallel IRGC and official security and intelligence institutions whose jurisdictions overlapped. During the Khatami era, the IRGC began developing of its own "shadow intelligence agency" to challenge the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) which was staffed largely by reformist, Khatami supporters.²⁸ Furthermore, after the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 the MOIS was purged of its reformist leaders and replaced with largely IRGC veterans.²⁹ Once again the IRGC demonstrated its ability to redefine itself and adopt a wide variety of roles in the Islamic Republic as a part of its broad mandate as guardians of the revolution.

Furthermore, it was during the Khatami Presidency that the IRGC began to extend its purview over ballistic missile defense systems and Iran's nuclear energy-and possibly weapons program. As will be discussed more thoroughly below, this has significant implications for the possibility of US intervention in Iran and the security of neighboring countries. The IRGC nearly launched ballistic missiles at US Coalition forces in Iraq in 2003 and has launched ballistic missiles against *Mojaheddin-e Khalq* bases there as well.

The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 signaled the culmination of the conservative backlash began during the tenure of President Khatami. However, it also witnessed the unprecedented entry of

²⁶ Hen-Tov and Gonzalez, "The Militarization of Post-Khomeini Iran", 58.

²⁷ Ali Alfoneh, "The Revolutionary Guards' Role in Iranian Politics", *Middle East Quarterly* 15 (2008), 4.

²⁸ Wehrey et al., *Rise of the Pasdaran*, 29-31.

²⁹ Safshekan and Sabet, *The Ayatollah's Praetorians*, 554.

the IRGC, of which Ahmadinejad is former member, into politics. In his first term nine of the twenty-one ministry portfolios, including the posts of Ministry of Energy, Justice, Defense, and Commerce, were occupied by former IRGC officers. Furthermore, Ahmadinejad appointed scores of former IRGC officers to governor posts throughout Iran to reward them for their political support in the 2005 Presidential Election.³⁰ Also, approximately one-third of the Majles seats in the 2000's have been filled by former Guardsmen.³¹

The 2009 presidential election in which Green Movement members protesting the rigging of election were crushed by the *Basij* was not only a victory of conservatives against the reform movement but the victory of the IRGC. It has been argued that the 2009 Election Crisis was in reality a virtual IRGC coup.³² This is a slight exaggeration; the conservative clerical establishment still largely remains in control of the Islamic Republic through the judiciary, Maslahat Council, and the Guardian Council. Nevertheless, the 2009 Election Crisis demonstrated the great extent of the IRGC's power and the resumption of its internal security role that it had not enjoyed since the days of the revolution. Moreover, Ahmadenejad's claims to communicate directly with the Hidden Imam and other "neo-conservative" figures such as Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi's radical re-interpretations of the doctrine of the *vilayet-e faqih* have created some tensions with the conservative clerical elite. The lack of clear candidate for Khomeini's successor and the growth of the IRGC's military-industrial complex combined could shift the balance of power in the Islamic Republic to the IRGC.

Conclusion

As this survey of its history has shown, the IRGC has displayed a striking degree of institutional resiliency, functional diversity, and autonomy since its founding during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Despite attempts during the Rafsanjani and Khatami presidencies to subordinate it to the central government, the Guard has continued to grow in size and influence unabated. As it has evolved the Guard has taken on a variety of roles and functions in the Islamic Republic from intelligence gathering, providing internal security, suppressing dissidents and military defense to spearheading economic development and providing scholarships

³⁰Alfoneh, "The Revolutionary Guards' Role in Iranian Politics," 9-10

³¹Hen-Tov and Gonzalez, "The Militarization of Post-Khomeini Iran", 51-52.

³²Safshekan and Sabet, *The Ayatollah's Praetorians*, 554-56.

to rural students. This it has done all as a part of its broad mandate in the constitution to safeguard the principles of the Islamic Revolution.³³

All of this has serious implications for the prospect of American or any other foreign power's intervention in Iran, and any serious discussion of economic sanctions and regime change in Iran must incorporate the IRGC into its calculations.

Due to the IRGC's extensive penetration of the economic, financial, and business sectors since the Rafsanjani Presidency, it is most likely that international sanctions on Iran will only serve to cement the IRGC's iron grip on the Iranian economy as the withdrawal of foreign firms leaves the IRGC with fewer viable economic competitors and allows it to expand even more. The IRGC's control of the nation's ports also puts it in the position as the main beneficiary of lucrative smuggling operations as the demand and price of Iranian oil increases. Although ratcheting up sanctions might limit the ability of the Iranian rentier state from collecting the rents on oil, the main source of its revenue and arguably a significant source of its legitimacy, it is unlikely it will lead to significant changes in the Islamic Republic's domestic or foreign policy, much less a regime change. Like the sanctions era in Iraq under Saddam's Ba'ath regime, sanctions will most likely lead to severe economic dislocation and a humanitarian crisis which will in turn increase the population's reliance on the state, regardless of its popularity or legitimacy.

Likewise, any military intervention by the United States or its allies in Iran will necessarily entail a confrontation with the IRGC as well as the *Artesh*. Since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC has moved away from its prior disdain for more sophisticated weaponry and begun purchasing more sophisticated long-range ballistic missiles and anti-ship and air defense systems. Moreover, it has also been busy developing its domestic arms industry, although complete self-sufficiency has not yet been accomplished.³⁴ Furthermore, if the accusations are true that Iran has succeeded in manufacturing nuclear weapons it is probable that the IRGC has asserted its authority over their development and deployment.

Iran's national defense strategy relies on its armed forces to conduct asymmetrical warfare against an invading enemy by attacking its supply and communication lines with irregular units, and the IRGC and the *Basij* militias are to play a significant role in this strategy of guerilla warfare. About 600,000 of the 3 million active *Basij* members are said to receive

³³ Alfoneh, "The Revolutionary Guards' Role in Politics," 6.

³⁴ Ward, *Immortal*, 308-310.

regular military training and instruction in tactics of asymmetric warfare and thus would most likely be a formidable force in any foreign invasion or occupation.³⁵

It remains unclear how most ordinary Iranians view the IRGC and the *Basij*. Due to both of their critical roles in suppressing the protests during the 2009 Presidential election it is likely that many participants in the Green Movement do not view the IRGC as legitimate. However, dislike of the IRGC or the Islamic Republic does not necessarily translate into support of foreign intervention and it would be ill-advised of US policy makers to expect approval for its interventionist policies as it expected before the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Although some middle class Iranians and *bazaaris* have expressed dissatisfaction with the IRGC's virtual monopoly over large segments of the Iranian economy others have emphasized the IRGC's role in reconstruction the country after the economic destruction during the Iran-Iraq War.³⁶ Moreover, the IRGC also has provided thousands of students with scholarships, loans, and welfare subsidies, although some claim that handouts such as these have not completely succeeded in buying the loyalty of Iran's younger generation. It seems that the rural/urban divide largely influences the degree of the IRGC's popularity, with rural inhabitants largely supporting the Guard due to its implementation of several rural public works projects whereas urban inhabitants largely resenting the Guard for its suppression of demonstrations, civil society activities, and arresting dissidents.³⁷

The IRGC, of all of the institutions in the Islamic Republic, is now poised to rival even the Office of the Supreme Leader. As it increases its monopoly of the use of force and its penetration into politics, some have speculated that after the death of Khamenei the IRGC will use its power to appoint a politically pliant Supreme Leader that will bow to the Guard's political and economic interests. As the Guard continues to assert its praetorian control over the Office of the Supreme Leader and the rest of the government its legitimacy will rest mainly on its ability to maintain a monopoly over the use of force, to distribute its oil wealth relatively equally and to fund national development, and to defend its population from foreign and internal threats. Whether these predictions are true or not, the IRGC has now established itself as a permanent political actor in Iran,

³⁵ Wehrey, Frederic, et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, 44-47.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 70-75.

³⁷ Wehrey et al., *Rise of the Pasdaran*, 28-29.

one that cannot be ignored by the international community and the United States in particular.