

## **STUDENT UNREST AND IRAN'S MILITARY**

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### **Introduction**

One of the enduring features of Third World politics in the post-World War II era has been the dominant role of the armed forces in the political processes and political discourse in the global South. In the Middle East, military officers have been instrumental in either directly or indirectly controlling the political apparatus of several key regional states since the 1950s.<sup>1</sup> Gamal Abdul Nasser's "Free Officers" successfully brought down Egypt's monarchy in 1952. This successful military foray into the nationalist and anti-Western political milieu of the time was followed by similar military coups in Iraq in 1958 and Libya in 1969. Post-independence Syria also experienced numerous coups and years of instability generated by overt military intervention in that key Arab country's politics. Although such Middle Eastern military officers as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Syria's Hafez Assad have "civilianized" themselves after assuming power, the military's influence is still present in the political institutions of these countries. In the Arab Middle East, only the Gulf states, where the pattern of military recruitment has favored the ruling families, and Lebanon, where the unique nature of that country's sociopolitical structure has not allowed the establishment of a strong military, have been immune from military coups or military involvement in domestic politics.

Turkey and Pakistan, two non-Arab but significant regional states have also been susceptible to military intervention. Pakistan has been ruled directly by the military for almost half of its existence as an independent state while the country's military establishment has played a crucial behind-the-scenes role throughout the history of Pakistan. The October 1999 military coup by General Pervez Musharraf is the latest in a series of direct military interventions in Pakistan's fractious and increasingly polarized politics. Although the Turkish Kemalist establishment prides itself as a beacon of democracy, the Turkish military has played a pivotal role in the country's political developments in the post-Ottoman period. Today, Turkey's military-dominated and military-controlled National Security Council is the most important player and the ultimate arbiter of political decisions in the country. In short, military and political institutions have been intertwined and have performed overlapping functions in many key Middle Eastern states and have constituted a major pillar of civilian regimes in the region.<sup>2</sup>

The Iranian military has played an instrumental role in shaping political events in the twentieth century. The establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty became possible through Reza Khan's (later Reza Shah) military coup in 1921. The second Pahlavi monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah, relied heavily on the Iranian military to sustain his regime in the immediate

aftermath of Reza Shah's forced abdication in 1941. His reliance on the armed forces was heightened after 1953 when the Shah was restored to the Pahlavi throne by an Anglo-American sponsored military coup that overthrew the nationalist government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Despite the Pahlavi kings' reliance on the armed forces to buttress their rule, the Iranian military never developed into an independent political force. In other words, unlike the armed forces of many Middle Eastern countries, the Iranian military did not play a leading role in shaping the contours of Iranian politics during the monarchical era, and it generally remained subservient to the institution of the monarchy.<sup>3</sup>

### **Transformation of the Iranian armed forces**

Following the demise of the Pahlavi monarchy, the Iranian military fell into disarray because of massive rank-and-file desertions and the collapse of morale during revolutionary upheaval and the subsequent purges of the armed forces by the new Islamic authorities in the country.<sup>4</sup> Although the total collapse of the Iranian military was prevented by the intervention of the provisional revolutionary cabinet of Prime Minister Bazargan and the requirements of the Iran-Iraq War, the regular armed forces of Iran have yet to fully recover from their post-revolutionary shock. However, a new military force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), or *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Islami*, emerged as a parallel institution to the regular armed forces. The IRGC has seen phenomenal growth since its inception in May 1979 as a small, irregular force designed to protect the nascent institutions of the Islamic Republic.<sup>5</sup> Numbering some 125,000 uniformed personnel, the IRGC's ground forces constitute the largest component of the force (100,000) divided into 16-20 divisions. The IRGC's naval forces number some 20,000 while the marines constitute about 5,000 revolutionary guards.<sup>6</sup> The commander of the IRGC is appointed by the Supreme Religious Leader, or *faqih*, and reports directly to him and not the country's president. Aside from its broad mandate to safeguard the gains of the Islamic Revolution, the IRGC's powers have been ill-defined. Article 150 of the Islamic Republic's constitution states that the functions of the IRGC will be determined by law in conjunction with the duties of other military forces of the nation and with regard to the principle of brotherly cooperation and coordination among all military forces. The *Pasdaran* perform both domestic and external military functions. It is their domestic functions, which at times are coordinated with the regular police and internal security forces, which have been the most controversial part of the IRGC's activities in recent years. In addition, the *Pasdaran* utilize the services of their affiliate, *Basij-e Mustaz'afin* (Mobilization of the Oppressed) and the irregular "street forces" of *Ansar-e Hezbollah* (Associates of the Party of God) to quell domestic uprisings. Given the genesis and development of the IRGC and its affiliates, the *Pasdaran* are viewed as the most likely military forces to intervene in Iran's politics to safeguard the institutions of the Islamic Republic against internal decay. The question that poses itself at this juncture is this: Can the armed forces play a major role in Iran's domestic politics if political dissent, as reflected in the summer 1999 student uprisings, challenges the foundation of the system? The likelihood of such an intervention does not seem to be high in the immediate future.

## Factors inhibiting military's direct involvement

As stated above, the purges of the officer corps of the armed forces since 1979 have transformed the military command positions. Today, officers who hold key positions in the armed forces are those who have been promoted since the establishment of the Islamic Republic and have occupied their posts because of their loyalty to the Islamic Republic. In other words, they have developed a stake in maintaining the system. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic has established an intricate system of control through four groups in the armed forces. First, there exists an Ideological Department headed by a senior cleric which is responsible for "political-religious" education and indoctrination of all armed forces personnel. Second, through the Information and Guidance Department, the authorities collect a vast amount of detailed information on armed forces personnel. An extensive network of informers and infiltrators provide needed data to this department. Third, through the Islamic Association, a large and more open clergy-dominated group within the armed forces, those whose allegiance to the principles of the Islamic Republic is in doubt are identified. Finally, through the Strike Group, a lightly armed but highly dedicated force composed of the *Pasdaran* and an elite group of military police, the regime targets those suspected of disloyalty by the other three aforementioned organizations. Although the strength of these organizations may have been reduced in recent years, their existences nevertheless demonstrates obstacles to a credible challenge to the Islamic Republic by the country's armed forces. The structure and recruitment pattern of the Iranian military separates Iran's armed forces from those in Turkey, Pakistan, and other neighboring states that have intervened extensively in their country's politics in recent decades.

The *Pasdaran*, however, can play a balancing role among Iran's fractious political leadership in times of crisis and domestic uprisings. In the aftermath of the summer 1999 attacks on student compounds at Tehran University and the subsequent student uprisings in several major cities, twenty-four senior IRGC commanders sent an ominous letter to President Khatami. The letter, among other things, warned Khatami of grave consequences that may ensue if street demonstrations are not dealt with forcefully. The letter concluded that the signers' patience has limits.<sup>7</sup> Although the IRGC commander General Rahim Safavi was not among the signers of this letter and later disavowed its contents, the publication of this letter signaled the first major potential military challenge to Khatami's presidency. In response to the letter, Khatami's Public Relations Office issued a terse reply reminding the *Pasdaran* of their "sacred defense duties" and their responsibility to uphold the law.<sup>8</sup> The publication of the *Pasdaran* letter prompted the IRGC to write an official letter purporting that the original letter did not reflect the views of the *Pasdaran* organization and was simply a private letter by a group of officers who used the organization's official stationery.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding the sleight of hand and mental gymnastics the Iranian authorities used to downgrade the importance of the original *Pasdaran* letter to Khatami, it was clear that the IRGC, or at least some of its commanders, have begun to redefine the parameters of their expanding role in Iranian politics. Although it is more likely for the IRGC to remain a dependent player rather than an independent force in the game of power politics in the Islamic Republic, the reaction of some elements within the IRGC to the recent student uprisings in Iran may auger a shifting of priorities for the *Pasdaran*.

### **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> For an overview of the role of the military in Middle Eastern politics, see Paul Cammack, David Pool, and William Tordoff, *Third World Politics: A Comparative Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, pp. 157-164.
- <sup>2</sup> For a historical analysis of the role of the military in the Middle East, see J.C. Hurewitz, *Middle East Politics: The Military Dimension*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969, passim. Also see, Manfred Halpern, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963, passim.
- <sup>3</sup> For details, see Nader Entessar, "The Military and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in Hooshang Amirahmadi and Manoucher Parvin, eds. *Post-Revolutionary Iran*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988, pp. 57-61.
- <sup>4</sup> Entessar, pp. 62-65. Also, see Nikola B. Schahgaldian, *The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1987, pp. 17-27; William F. Hickman, *Ravaged and Reborn: The Iranian Army, 1982*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1982, passim, and Gregory Rose, "The Post-Revolutionary Purge of Iran's Armed Forces: A Revisionist Assessment," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 17, nos. 2-3, Spring/Summer 1984, pp. 153-194.
- <sup>5</sup> For details, see Kenneth Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993, pp. 7-48.
- <sup>6</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (London), *The Military Balance 1998/99*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 127.
- <sup>7</sup> The text of the letter was also faxed to the Kayhan Publishing Group, which published it in the daily *Kayhan*, July 19, 1999.
- <sup>8</sup> See *Hamshahri*, July 21, 1999.
- <sup>9</sup> *Kayhan*, July 27, 1999.

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Hooman Sadri:**

Dear Professor Entessar: I agree with you—the political role of the military in Iran is an interesting subject, particularly the position of the Pasdaran on the student unrest. In this regard, Katzman's work (1993) is the most comprehensive study of Pasdaran, but there is certainly a need to revisit their role, especially during Khatami's presidency. Your essay has certainly increased my curiosity, so I hope that you are working on this subject and that we will soon see a current and comprehensive work on that.

#### **Nader Entessar:**

Thank you very much for your observation and information.