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The rise and rise of Iran's Guards

By Mahan Abedin

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The appointment of Rostam Qasemi as the new Iranian oil minister has touched off a flurry of reporting and analysis on the alleged expansion of the economic and political role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in the country.

This line of reporting and analysis is not new and dates to at least the early 1990s. It increased in the wake of the disputed June 2009 presidential elections, which thrust the IRGC center-stage as the main force dealing with the riots and disorder at the street level.

The new oil minister is from impeccable IRGC stock, having joined the force in early 1981, only two years after its official founding in May 1979. Among the most talented and prolific of senior IRGC commanders, Qasemi is also a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and was wounded in battle.

Prior to taking control of the Oil Ministry, Qasemi was the head of the Khatam al-Anbia Construction Complex, the IRGC's engineering outfit, and by far the biggest infrastructural contractor in Iran.

To IRGC critics, the ratification of Qasemi's appointment by a resounding 216 votes in parliament (with only 22 deputies voting against and seven abstaining), signifies a major leap forward in the IRGC's supposed quest to capture all the key political and economic posts in the country.

In response, the IRGC's overall commander, Mohammad Ali Jaafari, maintained that the IRGC

had only reluctantly "lent" Qasemi to the government owing to the fact that a more suitable candidate could not be found at the present juncture.

Political squabbles aside, the precise constitutional role and function of the IRGC needs to be re-examined in the light of the relentless media reporting on the latter's supposed encroachment into the economic and political spheres. Moreover, allegations against the IRGC must be set against the backdrop of the country's political culture and growing geopolitical weight in the region.

Ideological army or political watchdog?

Political tensions related to the Guards (also known as the Pasdaran) increased dramatically in early July when Jaafari gave an interview in which he appeared to indicate that major reformist figures (including former president Mohammad Khatami) were ineligible to contest future elections on account of their unhelpful role in the aftermath of the disputed June 2009 presidential elections that saw Mahmud Ahmadinejad returned for another term.

Major establishment figures like Jaafari refer to the post-election violence and political bickering as *fetneh* (strife) and more pointedly dismiss key reformist leaders, including losing presidential contenders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, and to a lesser extent Khatami, as the *saraneh fetneh* (heads of sedition).

Not surprisingly, the reformists responded robustly to what they perceived as a brazen interference in politics by a military commander. Writing for the Nowruz website, the official site of the "Islamic Iran Participation Front", the country's primary reformist political organization, Seyed Mohammad Reza Khatami, the brother of former president Khatami, accused Jaafari of blatant interference in politics and reminded him of the limitations imposed on the IRGC both by the post-revolutionary Iranian constitution and the guidelines set down by the Islamic Republic's founder, the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Writing for the same website, major reformist intellectual and theoretician Ali Mazrooei delivers a scathing critique of the IRGC's insidious encroachment on "all" aspects of national life, and the Pasdaran's post-war transition from a popular military force into a "giant economic trust".

Even Ayatollah Mohammad Mousavi Khomeini, a former revolutionary prosecutor and arguably the most left-wing cleric in the Islamic Republic, waded into the debate by reminding Jaafari of the clear guidelines set down by Khomeini, to the effect that military personnel (be they from the regular armed forces or the IRGC) should stay clear of politics, factions and parties. This position received immediate backing by Khomeini's grandson, Seyed Hassan Khomeini, who addressed Jaafari directly.

In response to these criticisms, IRGC commanders and their supporters in the conservative establishment insist on an expansive reading of the constitution and the political will of Khomeini. They deny that the IRGC is interfering directly in the political process, but at the same time they insist that owing to the ideological nature of the organization - and the precise circumstances that led to its creation in May 1979 - the Pasdaran have a duty to provide

ideological commentary on political developments in the country and warn political actors of the dangers of deviation.

Regarding the Pasdaran's economic activities, the IRGC and its supporters in the political factions insist that the Khatam al-Anbia complex was set up in the immediate aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war to direct reconstruction efforts and that in due course this organization acquired a set of skills and resources that made it the country's primary infrastructure and large-scale project management organization.

This argument implies that the IRGC's entry into large-scale economic projects was determined by necessity and it is only sustained reluctantly in the face of a resource-poor private sector.

While the Pasdaran's position is clearly self-serving, their arguments are not wholly without merit. While it is true that articles 143 to 151 of the post-revolutionary constitution forbid military influence in politics, an expansive reading of the same articles can allow for certain types of administrative involvement in political affairs, under certain circumstances.

Indeed, the Pasdaran dominated the political structures of unstable provinces on the country's periphery in the 1980s, especially the northwestern Kurdish regions where local separatist groups challenged the authority of the central government.

The IRGC and its allies in the conservative establishment often make reference to this key fact to discredit the reformists' arguments. They point out that the Pasdaran's involvement in political affairs was more blatant and extensive in the 1980s, a period dominated by the left-wing of the Islamic Republic, which in the 1990s metamorphosed into today's reformists.

As for the political will of Khomeini, the IRGC high command concedes that the late founder of the Islamic Republic set down clear guidelines forbidding the armed forces from involvement in politics, since to do so would corrupt politics, and by extension the military force that engages in it. But by the same token they argue that Khomeini was referring foremost to taking sides in politics at the expense of one faction or another.

Indeed, the majority view in the Islamic Republic is that the Pasdaran is more than just a military force and more specifically its ideological training and mandate allows it to indulge in political commentary, provided that commentary is designed to safeguard the ideological and political boundaries of the Islamic Revolution, and not to determine the outcome of political struggles between competing factions.

Whether recent statements by the IRGC high command are yet another expansive reading of these guidelines or is in clear breach of them is open to debate.

Military rule or Islamic Republic?

The idea that Iran is slowly edging towards military rule and that the Pasdaran commanders, in association with political allies in the hardline factions, are plotting to sideline the clergy altogether with a view to an eventual military takeover, took shape after Ahmadinejad's ascension to the presidency in June 2005.

At the time, key reformist leaders argued that Ahmadinejad was a creature of the IRGC and had been recruited by them to spearhead the transition from an Islamic Republic to a system in which the Pasdaran exerted overt political control.

Certainly, the notion that Ahmadinejad poses a danger to clerical rule is correct, as evidenced by the president's recent public falling out with the conservative establishment and the supreme leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei. But Ahmadinejad has also publicly fallen out with the IRGC, with the latter siding with the conservative establishment by labeling the president a "deviant".

In this respect, the IRGC has stayed true to its original mandate of safeguarding the ideological health of the Islamic revolution by admonishing political leaders who are judged to pose a threat to the foundational principles of the revolution and the unique political system that emerged from it.

In the economic sphere, while there are legitimate concerns about the Pasdaran's growing strategic economic portfolio (which ranges from telecommunications to oil), it is worth remembering that the regular Iranian military also wields wide-ranging economic interests. But these are rarely mentioned by the opposition media because unlike the IRGC the regular military is not ideologically committed to the Islamic Republic.

More broadly, the notion that Iran is slowly edging towards military rule must be critically examined against the country's modern political history. Iran's underlying political culture and heritage does not lend itself to overt manipulation by military organizations. Indeed, unlike its Arab, Turkish and Pakistani neighbors Iran does not have a history of military rule or even a strong military influence in politics. Given this underlying political-cultural dynamic it is difficult to imagine how any military force can mobilize critical elements in society in favor of non-civilian rule, regardless of attenuating circumstances.

Nevertheless, the Pasdaran's organizational profile is set to grow even more in the years ahead. The reasons behind this ascent have less to do with the political situation in Tehran than with Iran's geopolitical profile and the increasing possibility of a military confrontation with the United States.

The Pasdaran control all of Iran's strategic military assets, including the country's increasingly sophisticated long-range missiles program, and are likely to be at the sharp end of any military confrontation with the United States in the Persian Gulf.