



Changing of the Guards: Iran's Supreme Leader Struggles to Control Military

By Ali Alfoneh

Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini controlled the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) by assigning personal representatives and commissars to IRGC units and offices. Initially, the system was dysfunctional because of multiple commissars and parallel control structures with overlapping responsibilities, but at the beginning of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's rule, the commissars consolidated their positions and exerted enough power to help stymie political reforms. Today, the system is again weak, and, increasingly, the commissars act more as spokesmen for the guards than as agents overseeing the IRGC and ensuring that the supreme leader holds power over the IRGC. This change undermines Khamenei's authority over the IRGC and has allowed the IRGC greater autonomy to the detriment of outsiders who would engage the regime.

On February 15, 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton made headlines with a comment that the IRGC was slowly taking over Iran. "We see that the government of Iran, the supreme leader, the president, the parliament is being supplanted and that Iran is moving toward a military dictatorship," Clinton told the U.S.-Islamic World Forum in Qatar.¹ In effect, she recognized a phenomenon that began years before. From the IRGC's initial days as an ideological army and the regime's Praetorian Guards, the IRGC has become an economic and, increasingly, political powerhouse. The leaders of the revolution—first Khomeini and, since 1989, Khamenei—have used a system of political commissars in which midranking clergymen served as the eyes and ears of the civilian leadership within the ranks of the IRGC to subject the IRGC to the civilian leadership's control.

The system has not always worked smoothly, and, even under Khomeini, it sometimes broke down because of parallel commissariats with over-

lapping responsibilities that often allowed the IRGC to expand its power in ways that sometimes ran contrary to the supreme leader's interests.

Although the commissar system was dysfunctional when he took over as supreme leader, Khamenei managed to restore control over the commissariat in the first years of his rule. Since 2005, however, Hojjat al-Eslam Ali Saidi, the supreme leader's representative to the IRGC, has increasingly put his stamp on the guards by promoting the vision of the radical ayatollah Mohammad-Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi. A look at

Key points in this Outlook:

- The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is slowly taking over Iran.
- While commissars should represent the supreme leader to the IRGC, today it seems they are speaking for the IRGC instead of overseeing the guards and ensuring the supreme leader's power.
- This has given the IRGC more autonomy within the country, a change that may hinder outsiders' efforts to engage the regime.

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Mesbah-Yazdi's past depicts him as something of a political opportunist. According to some sources, Mesbah-Yazdi was a member of the Hojjiatiyeh secret society, which actively opposed the 1979 revolution and argued that an Islamic government should not be established until the emergence of the Shi'a Messiah Mahdi, or the Hidden Imam (often called the Imam of the Era in Persian-language sources).² To this end, Hojjiatiyeh even cooperated with the shah-era National Intelligence and Security Organization.³ After the revolution, and especially since Khomeini's death, however, Mesbah-Yazdi emerged as one of the most radical proponents of Khomeini's ideology, and he works to mobilize support within the ranks of the IRGC in his bid for succeeding Khamenei. Mesbah-Yazdi not only accepts, but also encourages the IRGC's interference in the political process. By giving Mesbah-Yazdi and the IRGC commanders too much prominence and power, Khamenei may have undermined his own long-term interests for the sake of the short-term gain of containing more pragmatic or reformist factions. Increased intervention of the commissars in the day-to-day politics of the Islamic Republic and greater ideological affinity between the commissars and the guardsmen whom they were supposed to control may culminate in a situation in which the IRGC can overrule even Khamenei.

The Commissars under Khomeini

During the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini struggled to control the armed militias that eventually became the IRGC. Aware that survival of his regime depended on effective coordination between his leadership and the militias, Khomeini dispatched representatives—effectively commissars—to the armed groups. Upon the unification of the four main pro-Khomeini militias on September 16, 1979, Khomeini appointed firebrand preacher Ayatollah Hassan Lahouti Eshkevari to be his representative to the newly organized IRGC.⁴ (See the appendix for a chronological list of the representatives of the leader to the IRGC.)

Lahouti Eshkevari was an effective commissar and managed to appoint his personal representatives at all levels of the IRGC,⁵ but his tenure ended soon after he tried to subordinate the IRGC to the interim government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan; hardline clerics, along with their allies in the IRGC—Mohsen Rafiqdoust, Mohammad Gharazi, Marziyeh Hadid-Chi Dabbagh, Mohsen Rezai, and Abbas Douzdouzani—demanded that the IRGC should instead report to the Council of the

Islamic Revolution, Khomeini's shadow government.⁶ In the Islamic Republic, real power does not often follow the official structure; official organization charts are irrelevant. Unwilling to support anyone who would entrust Iran's elected officials with military power, Khomeini decided Lahouti Eshkevari must go. Three weeks after hardline students seized the U.S. embassy in 1979, Khomeini announced that Lahouti Eshkevari "was sick and had a heart condition"—an informal dismissal—and for a time Khomeini had no commissar formally representing him in the IRGC.⁷ Lahouti Eshkevari did not get the hint and continued to align himself with the formal government structure, at this time under President Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr, rather than Khomeini's informal structure. In response, Khomeini had Lahouti Eshkevari arrested and, on October 28, 1981, executed.⁸

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Still, Khomeini strived to maintain balance within the IRGC. The Statute of the Guards codified the IRGC's powers and subordinated the organization to the supreme leader, as opposed to the United States where the president is commander-in-chief.⁹ Because Khomeini could not personally involve himself in the IRGC's daily affairs, however, he appointed a new representative to succeed Lahouti Eshkevari and to preside over a vast commissariat to whom the IRGC commanders at each organizational level and each branch of the IRGC had to report. The Statute of the Guards divides the commissariat into supervisory and political bureaus.¹⁰ Because the roles of the bureaus overlap, however, the commissars exist in a state of permanent competition. In effect, the theoretical level of oversight undermines the commissars' ability to maintain civilian control effectively. IRGC commanders are theoretically required to report to the supreme leader's representatives, but the commanders are often able to get their way by playing competing commissars against each other. Although in theory the commissars have vast power, for example, to appoint or dismiss leading

commanders, in reality, IRGC commanders can exploit divisions between commissars and among the broader civilian leadership to ensure they keep their positions.

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After the Lahouti Eshkevari affair, Khomeini was understandably cautious in his appointments to the IRGC. His representative had to be strong enough to command authority among the guardsmen, but not so strong that he would become a rival to the revolutionary leadership in Tehran. Following Lahouri Eshkevari's dismissal, Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khamenei both served briefly as Khomeini's representatives to the IRGC on their way to higher office.¹¹ Khomeini then appointed Hojjat al-Eslam Fazlollah Mehdizadeh Mahallati who, according to one source, established "more than seventy offices" to function as his subordinate assistant commissars across Iran and in all levels of the guards.¹² Mahallati's efforts were vital to the regime's survival after Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, but he faced the same problems as Lahouti Eshkevari, including factions in the civilian leadership in Tehran, whose oversight the IRGC—also factionalized—tried to minimize.

IRGC commanders would often bypass Mahallati and go directly to Khomeini to solve internal IRGC problems, thereby weakening Mahallati's position. This occurred most starkly in the leadership crisis surrounding the brief tenure of Morteza Rezai as the IRGC chief and in later crises in which the supporters of the long-deposed interim government were purged from the IRGC.¹³ Followers of Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, at the time Khomeini's designated successor, also challenged Mahallati's authority. In an attempt to appease the Montazeri faction, Khomeini appointed Montazeri-follower Hojjat al-Eslam Hassan Taheri Khorramabadi on December 14, 1981, to serve alongside Mahallati.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, this created more problems: the two representatives began to compete with and undercut each other.¹⁵

As the rivalry worsened, Khomeini replaced Taheri Khorramabadi with Hojjat al-Eslam Mohammad-Reza Faker and appointed Taheri Khorramabadi head of a

mission to Pakistan.¹⁶ This did not end the feud with Mahallati, however. When Faker intervened in operational issues, IRGC commanders threatened to resign, leading to Faker's dismissal and Taheri Khorramabadi's reinstatement.¹⁷ Khomeini may have tried to manage the problem, but he was unable to solve it. At the same time, Taheri Khorramabadi's dismissal and reinstatement demonstrated the growing power of rank-and-file guards.¹⁸ Simultaneously, the rivalry made it easier for guards to pass the blame whenever military operations in the ongoing war with Iraq failed.¹⁹ Mahallati grew so concerned about the rivalry and opposition to him within the body of the IRGC that he told Rafsanjani, then speaker of the Parliament, he was concerned about his own security,²⁰ a fear perhaps validated when Mahallati died in a suspicious plane crash in 1986.²¹ Following Mahallati's death, Khomeini declined to appoint a replacement, perhaps suspecting IRGC involvement in the crash, although the official press blamed it on Iraqi fighter jets.²² Khomeini's relative passivity suggests that he recognized some elements in the IRGC had gone rogue and, if pushed, could react violently against his close allies, if not against Khomeini himself.

Only on March 9, 1989, almost six months after the war with Iraq ended, did Khomeini appoint a new representative to the IRGC.²³ Hojjat al-Eslam Abdollah Nouri was a former student of Montazeri who had turned against his old master. Nouri helped purge the IRGC of Montazeri supporters, probably in order to secure his own survival, but his tenure was short because of Khomeini's death.

The Commissars under Khamenei

After Khomeini's death on June 3, 1989, Khamenei assumed Iran's leadership. His representatives to the IRGC reflect attempts to correct Khomeini's dysfunctional parallel system. Khamenei centralized the commissariat under a single representative and sought to suppress ideological factions within the IRGC. In addition, Khamenei worked to unify ideological teachings espoused by members of the IRGC.

On June 26, 1990, Khamenei appointed Hojjat al-Eslam Mahmoud Mohammadi Eraghi. Eraghi was the son of Ayatollah Baha al-Din Mohammadi Eraghi—a prominent dissident under the shah—and the son-in-law of Mesbah-Yazdi. Khamenei liked Mesbah-Yazdi's interpretation of the concept of the Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist (*Velayat-e Faqih*), the theological

underpinning of the regime.²⁴ By appointing Eraghi, Khamenei hoped both to increase his own control over the IRGC and to unify IRGC ideology to more directly conform to the principle of Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist. However, Eraghi's tenure did not last long, perhaps because of weak performance. Khamenei replaced him with Ayatollah Mohammad-Ali Movahedi Kermani, a theological heavyweight who continued his predecessors' purge of Montazeri supporters from the IRGC.²⁵

Perhaps the most serious religious scholar ever to have held the position,²⁶ Movahedi Kermani conducted the most ruthless purge of the guards to date. In an interview to *Sobh-e Sadeqh*, the IRGC's weekly newspaper, he explained, the "representative of the Guardian Jurist must also totally supervise the entire body of this institution so there is no deviation in it."²⁷ In practical terms, this fight against "deviation" meant not only purging anyone believed to support Montazeri, whom Khomeini had dismissed shortly before his death,²⁸ but also suppressing internal criticism against IRGC corruption arising from the IRGC's involvement in the Iranian economy since the end of the war with Iraq. The criticism was voiced by a group of guards led by Commander Mehdi Kazemi Douz-Douzani, an IRGC Ground Forces deputy financial officer who complained publicly of corruption in the IRGC in 2001; he accused the IRGC of running 147 economic enterprises in Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Europe.²⁹ Khamenei had Douz-Douzani executed on January 14, 2004.³⁰

Movahedi Kermani also emerged as a strong arm for Khamenei outside the IRGC, a novel role for the representative. For example, he not only publicly defended the IRGC intervention to crush the 1999 student uprisings, but he also encouraged the IRGC to engage in "fighting the devil,"³¹ urged the Basij to defend the ideological purity of the Islamic Republic to counter the reforms of President Mohammad Khatami,³² and, in 2003, urged IRGC commanders to "scrutinize the work of the parliament" to see if an individual parliamentarian supported Khamenei or not, thereby usurping the role of the Guardian Council.³³ Movahedi Kermani served as representative until soon after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's 2005 election, at which time he retired.³⁴

On December 24, 2005, Khamenei appointed Saidi to be his representative to the IRGC.³⁵ Little is known about Saidi aside from his own claim that he graduated from the Haqqani School at the Theological Seminary of Qom and studied under Mesbah-Yazdi³⁶ and that he also served as the IRGC's counterespionage chief for a decade

beginning in 1984.³⁷ Declaring that "among the viewpoints of all holy warriors, the viewpoints of Mesbah Yazdi are the closest ones to the viewpoints of Grand Ayatollah Khomeini," Saidi has continued Eraghi's efforts to propagate Mesbah-Yazdi's ideas among the guards.³⁸ Like Mesbah-Yazdi, Saidi stresses that legitimacy of the regime does not derive from popular participation, but rather from God.³⁹ Anyone who "resists the Guardian Jurist," Saidi argues, is also "resisting the Imam of the Era."⁴⁰ Ironically, on several occasions, Khomeini clearly demonstrated enmity toward Mesbah-Yazdi, so the embrace of the cleric under Khamenei illustrates an ideological shift.⁴¹

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Like Movahedi Kermani, Saidi does not restrict his role to the IRGC, but openly blurs the military and political spheres. He has questioned Khomeini's statements prohibiting IRGC intervention in politics, suggesting: "It is quite possible that this certain issue is bound to time and space, the necessity of the special conditions that may not be present in other circumstances."⁴² Saidi has also argued that the IRGC is not a classical army and should therefore be free to intervene in politics.⁴³ Ahead of the 2009 presidential election, Saidi embraced Ahmadinejad's candidacy. Addressing the IRGC Zanjan unit, he urged the public to vote for a candidate who works for the line of Khomeini and warned the guards against the "deception of some candidates."⁴⁴ Subsequently, he condemned the "lax attitude" that began during "the era of the reformists . . . especially under Ataollah Mohajerani, President Khatami's minister of Islamic Guidance and Culture."⁴⁵ On another occasion, Saidi urged the guards to vote for Ahmadinejad, albeit without directly mentioning the president's name.⁴⁶ In the election's chaotic aftermath, Saidi directed his attacks against Rafsanjani for suggesting collective leadership rather than concentration of power in Khamenei's hands,⁴⁷ and he also accused Ahmadinejad's opponents of being misled by "Western political thought such as those of Max Weber."⁴⁸

Collapse of the Commissariat

Clinton and the State Department may have been late to recognize analysts' concerns about the rise of the IRGC, but the Obama administration would be right to recognize a perfect storm is occurring. Because of limited financial means—only \$12 million for the 2010–2011 fiscal year⁴⁹—the supreme leader's representatives can no longer contain the IRGC effectively, and the IRGC, because of the indoctrination of the last decade, now finds it permissible to interfere in politics.

The gradual decline of the commissariat, coupled with a growing desire for IRGC intervention in politics, has led Saidi to transform the commissariat into the mouthpiece of the guards rather than an agency by which the supreme leader can control the IRGC. Despite ideological congruity between Khamenei and the IRGC leadership, this could prove dangerous for Khamenei, who may find it difficult to subject the guards to his will while the IRGC develops into a state within the state and Khamenei a hostage in the hands of his own Praetorian Guard.

Notes

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18. Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Obour az Bohran*, ed. Yaser Hashemi, 389.
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Appendix: Representatives of the Leader to the IRGC, 1979–2010

Title and Name	Year of Birth	Place of Birth	Educational Background	Career Prior to Appointment	Functioning Period
Ayatollah Hassan Lahouti Eshkevari	~ 1927	Gilan	Elmiyyeh Theological Seminary in Qom	Prerevolution: revolutionary preacher Postrevolution: parliamentarian	September 16, 1979– November 25, 1979.
Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani	1934	Kerman	Elmiyyeh Theological Seminary in Qom	Prerevolution: revolutionary activist Postrevolution: member of the Council of the Revolution, parliamentarian	1980 (No decree)
Ayatollah Ali Khamenei	1939	Khorasan-e Razavi	Theological seminaries in Mashhad and Qom	Prerevolution: revolutionary activist Postrevolution: Khomeini's representative to the Defense Ministry	1980 (No decree)
Hojjat al-Eslam Fazlollah Mehdizadeh Mahallati	~ 1930	Markazi	Elmiyyeh Theological Seminary in Qom	Prerevolution: revolutionary activist Postrevolution: Revolutionary Committee deputy, parliamentarian	June 18, 1980– February 20, 1986
Hojjat al-Eslam Hassan Taheri Khorramabadi	May 22, 1938	Lorestan	Haghani School of the Elmiyyeh Theological Seminary in Qom	Prerevolution: scholar Postrevolution: member of the Assembly of Experts	December 14, 1981– August 25, 1982 and June 29, 1983– December 17, 1983
Hojjat al-Eslam Mohammad-Reza Faker	~ 1945	Khorasan-e Razavi	Mashhad Theological Seminary	Prerevolution: professor of theology Postrevolution: Khomeini's representative to the Supreme Propaganda Council	August 25, 1982– June 29, 1983
No Representative	—	—	—	—	1986–1988
Hojjat al-Eslam Abdollah Nouri	~ 1950	Isfahan	Theological seminary	Prerevolution: theological student Postrevolution: Islamic Republic of Iran broadcasting director general, deputy foreign minister, Construction Jihad and IRGC	March 9, 1989– ~ March 1990
Hojjat al-Eslam Mahmoud Mohammadi Eraghi	~ 1952	Kermanshah	Haghani School of the Elmiyyeh Theological Seminary in Qom	Postrevolution: locum tenens for representative of Ayatollah Khamenei to the IRGC	June 26, 1990– Unknown
Ayatollah Mohammad-Ali Movahedi Kermani	~ 1931	Kerman	Theological seminaries in Kerman, Qom, Najaf, and Mashhad	Prerevolution: Friday prayer Imam at the Moslem Ibn al-Aqil Mosque in Tehran Postrevolution: member of Tehran Combatant Clergy Association, parliamentarian	February 17, 1992– December 16, 2005
Hojjat al-Eslam Ali Saidi	Unknown	Unknown	Haghani School of the Elmiyyeh Theological Seminary in Qom	Postrevolution: member of the Society of Combatant Clergy and head of its political bureau	December 24, 2005– Present