

Review - Iran Unveiled

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MICHAEL RUBIN, JUL 1 2013

Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards is Transforming Iran from Theocracy Into Military Dictatorship

By Ali Alfoneh

Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 2013.

Students of Iran too often focus disproportionately on the Islamic Republic's politics. Accompanying every Iranian election is speculation about whether reformers or hardliners will triumph and how they might alter Iranian policy. Western analysts likewise debate the approach of various Iranian politicians to Iran's foreign policy and, especially, Tehran's willingness to strike a nuclear deal. The problem with such discussions is that most Iranian politicians and diplomats have little say over the broad themes of Iranian policy. Decisions about the character of Iranian policy and diplomacy most often rest in the hands of the Supreme Leader and his unelected aides, as well as increasingly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

The IRGC has been among the most important but, until recently, most under-studied bodies within the Islamic Republic. For years, the only comprehensive study of the IRGC was Kenneth Katzman's *The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard*.^[1] However, with the rise of the IRGC's importance during the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad presidency, a number of other Iran scholars and policy practitioners, mostly from the think-tank world, have begun to

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examine the IRGC. In 2009, for example, seven RAND scholars released a short monograph, *Rise of the Pasdaran*, which examined the IRGC's role in domestic Iranian politics.[2] More recently, Steven O'Hern, a retired military counterintelligence officer, used his service in Iraq as a launching pad to explore the IRGC and its efforts to conduct special operations outside Iran.[3]

Until now, however, there has been no study as comprehensive and systematic as Ali Alfoneh's *Iran Unveiled*. Alfoneh — full disclosure: a former colleague — came from Iran to the United States via several years at the Royal Danish Defence College. *Iran Unveiled* traces the history of the IRGC from its formation in the combination of several revolutionary street militias through its gradual institutionalization to the present day when, he argues, it has effectively become the predominant power in the Islamic Republic. Alfoneh argues bluntly, "The regime in Tehran, traditionally ruled by the Shia clergy, is transforming into a military dictatorship dominated by the officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps." [4] Separate chapters examine the IRGC's role in domestic politics; its role as an internal security organization; the rise and fall of the IRGC commissars; the indoctrination which IRGC members undergo; the IRGC's role in the export of Iran's revolutionary ideology; and, perhaps most importantly, the IRGC's economic empire.

Alfoneh's narrative is thick with detail which he derives disproportionately from Persian-language sources including the IRGC's own newspapers, internal publications, and websites never before systematically tapped in the West. He supports his thesis that the IRGC has led a slow creeping military *coup d'état* with extensive biographical research into Iran's officialdom, tracking over time just how many parliamentarians, governors, ministers and their deputies maintain direct or familial links to IRGC.

Alfoneh's focus on Khatam al-Anbia, the economic wing of the IRGC, will be especially important for both academics and policymakers as the IRGC's ability to generate its own revenue in amounts far greater than its official budget effectively makes the IRGC independent of political control. Having taken predominant control over the oil industry, construction, and the manufacture of automobiles and electronics, the IRGC might control upwards of 40 percent of the Iranian economy; sources smuggling income which Alfoneh also traces are just icing on the cake.

Whereas Westerners might think of the IRGC primarily a formidable military foe, Alfoneh shows how Iranian technocrats and regime pragmatists understand the IRGC to be the chief impediment to economic reform. Iranian politicians may promote privatization as a key to jumpstart the Islamic Republic's moribund economy, but the IRGC has used its banks and shell companies to accumulate properties and state-owned industries at bargain basement prices. And if the conservative Tehran *bazaaris* initially supported the Islamic Revolution, they now find themselves on the defensive as the IRGC uses its military muscle and political influence to undercut Tehran's traditional traders.

The IRGC's imprint on foreign policy and diplomacy leads Alfoneh to be pessimistic about the future of Iran's relations with the West. "The Guards' domestic need for foreign enemies has also led foreign policy behavior increasingly characterized by risk taking," Alfoneh writes, citing recent terror plots against Saudi interests, Israeli diplomats in third countries, and Iranian support for insurgencies in both Iraq and Afghanistan.[5]

Alfoneh also suggests that the IRGC's strength makes nuclear diplomacy difficult, as the IRGC is the institution that would likely have custody over any Iranian nuclear bomb and therefore has the greatest interest in a nuclear weapons capability. Should Iran become a military nuclear power with the IRGC having command and control over its atomic arsenal, the question of factionalism within the IRGC will become a paramount concern to Western intelligence agencies. After all, every state with an interest in the Middle East will want to know not only what weapons the Iranians possess, but what kind of man would have his finger on the launch button. Alas, while *Iran Unveiled* delves deeper into the IRGC than any previous work, IRGC's factionalism remains veiled. While there is analytical consensus that the IRGC is not homogenous, internal fissures remain largely unexplored: As much as academics, analysts, and journalists describe Iranian politicians on a continuum from reformist to hardliner, outside knowledge of IRGC personnel does not allow insight into where specific IRGC officers might be on a similar spectrum. In effect, when Western officials face down the IRGC, they do so blindly.

Sheer detail and originality make *Iran Unveiled* an important work, but its thesis will soon be put to the test: If the

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Ahmadinejad presidency marked the ascendancy of the IRGC — Ahmadinejad, after all, was the first president of the Islamic Republic whose legitimacy was derived from the IRGC and war rather than clerical opposition to the Shah — then the June 2013 election of Hassan Rowhani and the accompanying return of the presidency to clerical circles will put the IRGC's privileged position in question. If Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Rowhani are able to reassert control over the IRGC not only in the political but also in the economic spheres, then the clerical elite may get a second wind in the Islamic Republic's governance. If they are not, however, then Alfoneh will be correct that it may be best to begin thinking of the Islamic Republic as a military dictatorship with an Islamist patina, rather than a theocracy with a strong military.

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[1] Boulder: Westview Press, 1993.

[2] Frederic Wehrey, Jerrold D. Green, Brian Nichiporuk et al., *Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009.

[3] *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, Dulles, Va.: Potomac Books, 2012.

[4] Alfoneh, 1.

[5] Alfoneh, 247.