

Iran's Hardline Vigilantes and the Prospects for Reform

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On June 5, 2001, Michael Rubin, a visiting scholar at The Washington Institute, addressed Institute's Special Policy Forum. In 2000–2001, Dr. Rubin was a visiting professor at three universities in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. This forum marked the publication of his new Institute study, [Into the Shadows: Radical Vigilantes in Khatami's Iran](#). The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

As Mohammad Khatami begins his second term as president of Iran, the major question is the degree to which hardliners will block progress toward reform. Many reformists were disappointed with Khatami's first term in office and wonder whether a second term will be significantly different from the first.

The hardliners have several different means at their disposal to block reform, given Iran's onion-like political structure: reformists keep peeling off one layer obstructing reform, only to encounter yet another. Winning the elections is only one step; gaining control over the formal government apparatus is but one more. Among the many other layers in the way of reform are the hardline vigilante groups that can be mobilized to violently attack reformists, intimidating many reform supporters and creating instability that is used to justify further repression.

Iran's Vigilante History

Vigilantes with high-level patronage have long been a feature of Iranian politics, waxing and waning with the changing political environment. A well-known example is the street gangs that were crucial to the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Musaddiq in 1953. During times of ideological turmoil, as during the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the years directly following it, a number of groups have tended to become more active. History suggests that when the government employs a forceful attitude, these groups tend to fade away, or at least become dormant.

An example of such an official response occurred in the government's dealing with the Mehdi Hashemi Gang, the group responsible for leaking the story that came to be known as the Iran-Contra scandal. Mehdi Hashemi, a political rival of Ali Akbar Rafsanjani (then Majlis speaker and later president), was in charge of exporting Iran's revolution, especially to Lebanon in the early 1980s. Hashemi -- who enjoyed the full sponsorship of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini at the time -- was set on transforming Lebanon into an Islamic state, in spite of the fact that Syria stood in the way. Fully aware that Syria was

Iran's only Arab ally during the Iran-Iraq War, Hashemi nevertheless arranged for the kidnapping of the Syrian ambassador in Tehran (who was later released unharmed). Both in this affair and in the exposure of the dialogue that was taking place with the Reagan administration in the Iran-Contra scandal, Hashemi's goal was to embarrass those whom he saw as moderates, especially Rafsanjani. Soon thereafter, Hashemi was arrested, tried, and executed. In this episode, as well as in other cases, regime-sponsored radicals such as Hashemi became a problem when the diplomatic environment changed. This case shows that Iran can take firm action against radicals when it decides that its interests require such steps—a lesson worth bearing in mind when considering the U.S. attitude toward terrorism committed by vigilante groups outside the Iranian government structure but nevertheless sponsored by various officials.

Vigilante Group Categories

Iran's vigilante groups usually fall under one of two main divisions. The first tends to be a relatively open and large group with supporters among the masses, such as Ansar-i Hizbullah. The roots of this group can generally be traced back to the Iran-Iraq War; its members feel that they sacrificed much for the revolution and that they must continue to defend the cause for which they were prepared to sacrifice their lives during the war. Ansar-i Hizbullah became more prominent after its participation in the 1999 attack on a student dormitory in Tehran.

Ansar-i Hizbullah maintains a level of organization that suggests sponsorship by powerful figures within the government. For instance, in the 1999 attack on Tehran University's Amirabad dormitory, group members were brought to the vicinity in buses in the middle of the night, just as the police were beginning to conduct the raid. Moreover, in attacks carried out against reformist journalists, Ansar-i Hizbullah members have used motorcycles with 1000 cubic centimeter (cc) engines -- significant because in Iran only security service members may possess motorcycles with an engine capacity exceeding 250cc, and only the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) may use motorcycles with engines as large as 1000cc. This suggests that Ansar-i Hizbullah's actions have the support of some top officials. For example, noted hardliner Ahmad Jannati, former chairman of the Council of Guardians and head of the Islamic Propagation Organization, appears to be very well connected to this group.

The second type of vigilante group is more covert and professional. One example is the Said Imami Gang, largely composed of Intelligence Ministry operatives and named after the former deputy minister of intelligence. It currently stands accused of murdering a number of Iranian intellectuals and dissidents during Khatami's administration. It would appear that some, if not all, of these targeted groups are under the thumb of specific power centers such as the IRGC.

Interestingly, these hardline pressure groups tend to focus on domestic Iranian issues and are not overly concerned with regional or international questions. Nonetheless, if any faction within the country were to suggest a drastic change in Iran's position, e.g., vis-à-vis the United States or Israel, these groups have the potential to inflict much damage. For instance, soon after Khatami called for a "dialogue of civilizations" with the American people, there was an attack on a bus full of American businessmen visiting Iran. The group which claimed responsibility, Fida'iyān-i Islam, has a long history of activity, primarily during periods of domestic unrest: in the 1950s, then during the first year of the Islamic Revolution, and then again around the time of Khatami's 1997 election as president.

Vigilantes and Iran's Prospects

Regime loyalists realize that the country's demographics favor reform. With improved telecommunications technologies such as the internet and satellite television broadcasts, the reformists are bound to rally more support for their cause, ultimately leading to further confrontations with the hardliners and the vigilantes. Yet, hardliners are unlikely to give up power voluntarily. It is possible that the conservatives may already be slowly losing support in the institutions upon which they have traditionally relied, especially the IRGC and the Judiciary. If so, they could turn to the vigilante groups to obstruct reformist transformations. In fact, it is at times of reformist triumph, such as Khatami's landslide victory four years ago, that hardliners who are not willing to give up power voluntarily are backed into a corner and are more likely to take action. In other words, as the layers of the onion are peeled away, conservatives are more likely to resort to these vigilante groups to achieve their goals.

During Khatami's second term, the primary impact of the vigilante groups will be to threaten stability. If hardliners are forced into a corner, they see few better options than to create a crisis: if the crisis escalates, then the government will have good reason to crack down on reforms. If, on the other hand, the reformists are forced to compromise in order to contain the crisis, then the reformists endure the loss. Essentially, the hardliners have nothing to lose by creating such a crisis, as long as they can rely on the vigilante groups to both escalate the situation and then take the blame; therefore, these groups continue to be a useful instrument for opponents of reform.

The vigilante groups both undermine moderation and polarize the Iranian political landscape. They are detrimental to Iran's future, to regional stability, and to U.S. interests in a peaceful and democratic Middle East. Washington therefore has good reason to press Iran into taking firm action against vigilantes -- especially since history has shown that this kind of action can lead to at least a temporary decline of these groups.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Mohamed Abdel Dayem.