

Iran's Revolutionary Guard Commander Sends a Warning

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Brief Analysis

Remarks last week by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander Yahya Rahim Safavi during a closed meeting with IRGC officers -- leaked to the Iranian press -- underscore the growing impatience of the country's conservative hardliners with the liberal trend of the Khatami government, Iran's declared intention to adhere to its arms control commitments, and efforts by the government to circumscribe the political role of the IRGC since presidential elections last year.

In his comments, Safavi reportedly berated Minister of Culture Ataollah Mohajerani for allowing the emergence of scores of new newspapers, many of which have been critical of the conservative clerical faction, and upbraided Interior Minister Abdollah Nuri for failing to quell student unrest in Tehran and recent strikes in Najafabad protesting the house arrest of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri (who has criticized Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i and the system of clerical rule). Safavi bitterly complained that "Liberals... have taken over our universities and our youth are now shouting slogans against despotism. We are seeking to root out counter-revolutionaries wherever they are. We have to behead some and cut off the tongues of others. Our language is our sword. We will expose these cowards."

Safavi also had strong words for the new government's foreign policy: "Can we withstand American threats and domineering attitude with a policy of detente? Can we foil dangers coming from America through dialogue between civilizations? Will we be able to protect the Islamic Republic from international Zionism by signing conventions to ban proliferation of chemical and nuclear weapons?"

The Political Role of the IRGC: Safavi's comments fly in the face of President Khatami's warning to the IRGC last September to stay out of politics. Moreover, they raise the prospect of a more assertive political role for the Revolutionary Guard and the potential for greater conflict between conservatives (led by Supreme Guide Khamene'i and Majlis Speaker Nateq-Nuri) and their reformist opponents (led by President Khatami). However, if reports that guard personnel voted for Khatami in the same proportion as the general population (69%) are true, it is not clear that hard-line IRGC commanders could actually deliver their troops in the event of a showdown. Safavi may have also misjudged the political context. His open criticism of political leaders -- including his criticism of Khatami's call for a civilizational dialogue with America -- has provoked a firestorm of criticism.

Iran's Arms Control Commitments: Safavi's disparaging comments about the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)

and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) highlight that there are those in Iran who would like to ignore the country's arms control commitments. The fact that it was Safavi who made these remarks is particularly important. The IRGC is believed to be in charge of Iran's chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons programs, and its operational chemical and biological weapons inventories and missile forces. His opinions on these matters therefore carry great weight.

In January 1998, Iran formally joined the CWC, which obligates it to declare its inventories of chemical weapons within 30 days and to destroy them within 10 years. Iran has not yet submitted its declaration yet (though, many other countries -- including the United States -- have not). Iran has several options:

- comply fully with the CWC by declaring and destroying its chemical arsenal, while retaining a rapid breakout capability -- in the form of a surge production capacity that can be activated in a matter of days, in the event of a crisis or war;
- declare and destroy its less effective agents, while secretly keeping stocks of more lethal agents (such as nerve gas) and retaining a surge production capability;
- deny possessing any chemical weapons while hiding existing inventories (which is probably not a credible option).

It seems unlikely that Iran would give up a potentially important tactical force multiplier and the core component of its strategic deterrent while Iraq may still retain a chemical and biological warfare capability. Thus, Iran will probably pursue the second option, which provides a way for it to ostensibly meet its international commitments while addressing the concerns of those decisionmakers who see chemical weapons as a crucial component of Iran's defense. This option also holds out a reasonable chance of success, since experience in Iraq shows that a sophisticated effort to conceal a residual chemical weapons arsenal can succeed, even against highly intrusive inspections.

In the nuclear arena, Safavi's comments reinforce suspicions that Iran is using its civilian nuclear program as a stepping stone to a military program. Its strategy apparently is to acquire civilian nuclear technology that also has military applications, while avoiding actions contrary to its NPT commitments that could prematurely halt its procurement efforts and result in harsh international sanctions. Iran has three options:

- create a civilian nuclear infrastructure capable of rapidly producing a nuclear weapon if its threat environment were to change;
- use its civilian program to acquire the expertise and know-how required to embark on a clandestine parallel nuclear program once all the necessary building-blocks for a military program are in place, so that it would not be vulnerable to a cut-off in foreign assistance if discovered;
- simultaneously create a clandestine parallel weapons program alongside its declared civilian nuclear program.

From Iran's perspective, all three options have drawbacks. In option one, the threat environment could change very quickly (if Iraq were to acquire fissile material or a weapon from the former Soviet Union), and it simply is not possible to create a rapid nuclear break-out capability. Because of the nature of the technology, a decision to go nuclear could take months to implement. During this time, Iran would be vulnerable. In option two, if a clandestine Iranian nuclear weapons program were discovered, Iran would face sanctions and censure- - though it would eventually get "the bomb." In option three, if a clandestine parallel program was prematurely compromised, Iran would be censured, sanctioned, and without a nuclear weapon -- the worst of all worlds, from Tehran's perspective. This option, however, could potentially provide the quickest route to a nuclear weapons capability.

It is hard to believe that Safavi's opinions will not have some -- perhaps a decisive -- impact on Iranian decisionmaking pertaining to the CWC and NPT. In both cases, it would seem that Safavi's preference would be to clandestinely circumvent these treaties, one way or another. It remains to be seen if he will carry the day.

Potential for Terrorism?: In the past, different factions in the Iranian government have used a variety of means -- including terrorism -- to undercut the policies of their rivals. This was the background to the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran in 1979 and the leaking of U.S. efforts to create an opening with Iran in 1985-86 (producing the Iran-Contra Affair). Safavi's remarks raise the possibility that opponents of President Khatami's policies could resort to various means -- including terrorism against Americans -- to embarrass and discredit Khatami and scuttle new attempts at a political opening. Safavi's comments underscore just how difficult and risky U.S. attempts to normalize relations with Iran may be.

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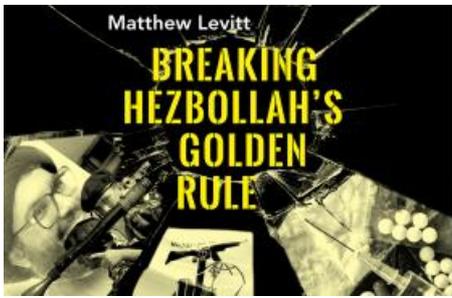
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