

Iran:

Shaking Up the High Command

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Brief Analysis

An ongoing series of shake-ups at the highest levels of the Iranian military and intelligence communities suggest that Iran's new President, Hojjat-ol Islam Mohammed Khatami, may be moving to exert control over the hardline defense establishment. In recent days he has reshuffled the leadership in the Defense Ministry, the Intelligence Ministry, the naval forces, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In doing so, Khatami has confounded expectations that he lacked the ability to impose change on Iran's defense establishment, where the new president was expected to have the least room for maneuver.

The Changing of the Guard. Probably the most important Iranian military development since Khatami's election was the resignation of Mohsen Reza'i as Commander of the Revolutionary Guard on September 9. Reza'i had served as IRGC commander for sixteen years and was the prime architect of the Guard's rise as a conventional military force and a pillar of the Islamic Republic. He was one of the most powerful figures in Tehran and one of the most ardent of the regime hardliners.

There is little doubt that Khatami brought about Reza'i's downfall. Reza'i and many of his top lieutenants had campaigned hard on behalf of Khatami's election opponent—the hardline speaker of the Iranian Majlis, 'Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri—and had issued several veiled warnings after Khatami's election that significant deviations from Khomeini's line would not be tolerated. Soon after Reza'i's ouster, Khatami issued a warning of his own to the Revolutionary Guards that he would not tolerate their meddling in politics. Although Reza'i was succeeded by his deputy, Yahya Rahim Safavi, who is considered almost equally as hardline, Reza'i's resignation was still a major blow to Khatami's opponents in Tehran because Safavi lacks Reza'i's influence and authority.

New Faces in the Ministries. On August 21, Khatami appointed Rear Admiral 'Ali Shamkhani as his new Defense Minister. Shamkhani was the commander (simultaneously) of both the Iranian Navy and the Revolutionary Guard Navy. Shamkhani joined the IRGC after the revolution and rose quickly through its ranks, holding numerous high-level military commands during the war with Iraq. However, Shamkhani's most important credential for Khatami is his relative lack of political baggage. Shamkhani has never been known as an ideologue, and is one of the few senior military leaders to emerge from the Guard considered generally apolitical. Indeed, in 1990 he was chosen to head

both the regular and IRGC navies because he was a non-controversial figure whom Tehran hoped would be able to heal the rift between the two services. Although it is early in Shamkhani's term, he has so far set a more moderate tone than his predecessors, announcing in his first address as Defense Minister that "detente" in the Persian Gulf would be the highest priority of his Ministry.

In addition, Khatami removed former Intelligence Minister 'Ali Fallahian, replacing him with Qorbanali Dorri Najafabadi. Fallahian was considered one of the driving forces behind Iran's support for terrorism, and he had been a staunch opponent of Khatami during the election. Iranian hardliners, including Supreme Leader Khamenei, reportedly hoped to force Khatami to retain Fallahian in the new cabinet. Thus Najafabadi was a compromise candidate. He is a relatively obscure figure with no background in intelligence affairs. Although he is considered a committed revolutionary, Najafabadi supported Khatami during the election. Moreover, even if he were to prove to be as opposed to Khatami's reforms as Fallahian, Najafabadi's outsider status means he probably will be much less able to mobilize Iran's intelligence services against Khatami than Fallahian would have been.

Sea Changes. After Shamkhani was made Defense Minister the regime chose not to have one man succeed to both of his former posts, thus Iran again has separate commanders for each of its naval forces. Tehran chose Rear Admiral Abbas Mohtaj to head the regular Navy and appointed Brigadier General 'Ali Akbar Ahmadian as commander of the IRGC Navy. Although this is likely to have little impact on Iranian naval strategy, it will weaken the two navies institutionally, and therefore reduce their ability to oppose Khatami's reforms in bureaucratic battles. Moreover, Mohtaj had been Shamkhani's deputy in the regular Navy, and when Shamkhani was out of the country he had served as acting commander of both forces. Unlike Shamkhani, Mohtaj was a vocal supporter of confrontation with the West and export of the Iranian revolution. Thus it is significant that Mohtaj was not rewarded with Shamkhani's job. It suggests that a decision was made to eliminate the post of combined-navies commander because it was too powerful bureaucratically: two individual heads will carry far less weight than one combined commander. Although all military appointments are nominally made by Khamenei and there is no information regarding Khatami's role in the decision, Khatami may have prevented Mohtaj's elevation to combined-navies chief to limit Mohtaj's ability to interfere with his intended reforms.

Implications. Conflicting signals continue to emanate from Tehran regarding Iran's future course. It is still difficult to discern how Khatami would like to reorient Iranian policy. Nor has Khatami established himself as the dominant star in the Iranian firmament. He still has many important internal political battles to win before he can be considered the guiding force behind Iranian policy. Likewise, one cannot expect Iranian defense policy to change significantly as a result of these personnel shifts. As Shamkhani suggested in his initial announcement, there may be a diminution of Iran's previous aggressiveness, but Tehran is likely to continue to see the United States as its primary threat and so will continue to prepare its armed forces for war with the U.S. Navy. In addition, there are no signs yet that Khatami would like to halt Iran's quest for ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons or its support for terrorism, or that he has acquired the authority to stop these efforts even if he wanted to do so.

Nevertheless, the changes in the Iranian high command are still noteworthy as signs that Khatami may prove more able to impose his policies on the Iranian bureaucracy than expected. Before he can make any significant policy changes-on domestic or foreign policy issues-Khatami must first secure his control over the Iranian bureaucracy. The recent personnel changes indicate that Khatami is moving quickly to assert his authority over the Iranian defense and intelligence establishments, powerful bureaucratic forces that in the past have been important opponents of reform. In addition, observers both inside Iran and abroad had expected Khatami to concentrate on economic and cultural matters-where it was believed that his popular mandate and past experience would give him the greatest leverage-while moving slowest on national security affairs. Thus the changes in the intelligence ministry and the military high command demonstrate that Khatami is considerably stronger in these areas in which he was

considered weakest. In particular, the stunning ouster of Reza'i removed a major potential obstacle to Khatami's freedom of action. Meanwhile, Khatami's address to the Guardsmen was a warning that even bigger changes are in the offing and that the Guard and other hardliners in the military better stay on the sidelines when the real political battles begin in Tehran.

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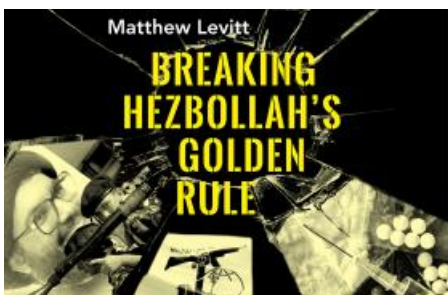
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