

# Iran's Widening Crackdown Pressures Rouhani

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Brief Analysis

**Despite endorsing the nuclear deal, the Supreme Leader has empowered the IRGC Intelligence Organization to tighten Iran's domestic political environment ahead of 2016 elections.**

The arrests of multiple Iranian journalists, activists, and businessmen in recent weeks signal growing tensions between President Hassan Rouhani and Iran's conservative establishment in the aftermath of the nuclear agreement with the P5+1. Although the full extent of the crackdown remains to be seen, the heightened role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Intelligence Organization (IRGC-IO) bears important implications for Rouhani and his allies ahead of February 2016 parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections.

## Resurgence of IRGC Intelligence

The IRGC-IO was established by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in 1997 after the election of reformist president Mohammad Khatami as an alternative organization with functions that parallel the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). The IRGC-IO has largely taken over domestic security, though MOIS shares responsibilities for actively thwarting reformists and preventing internal unrest.

Shortly after its establishment, the IRGC-IO appears to have been instrumental in suppressing the 1999 student uprisings. That July, the hardline daily *Kayhan* revealed that IRGC officers had submitted a letter to Khatami just before the crackdown warning against the threat from "reform-mindedness" and "hypocrites and opponents...gathering in regiments in the name of 'students.'" The officers claimed they would take action to protect the Islamic Republic, adding, "With complete respect and endearment toward His Excellency [Khatami], we declare that our patience has come to an end, and we will not permit ourselves any more tolerance in the face of your inaction." Much more recently, in an April 2014 press conference, IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari stated: "As we have seen, in 1999 [hinting at the suppression of extensive student unrest in Tehran] the Leader [Khamenei] came out strongly against this sowing of doubt, and emphasized the need for the continuing existence of the IRGC for

the continuation and advancement of the regime."

After the contested 2009 presidential elections, Khamenei directed a major reorganization that expanded the IRGC-IO's intelligence and security powers. In July 2009, Khamenei appointed regime loyalist and close confidant Hossein Taeb, formerly MOIS deputy commander of counterintelligence (1989-1997) and commander of the paramilitary Basij (2008-2009), to head the IRGC-IO. Taeb had been Khamenei's student in the early days of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and befriended Khamenei's son during the Iran-Iraq War. As a senior MOIS official, Taeb developed a reputation as one of the regime's most violent interrogators of counterrevolutionary and "seditionist" elements.

Increasingly, Taeb has become Khamenei's enforcer given his direct access to and personal ties with the Supreme Leader. Under Taeb's leadership, the IRGC-IO has arrested and interrogated thousands of Iranians accused of being part of a Western-fomented "velvet revolution" to topple the Islamic Republic. The IRGC-IO used the threat of Western infiltration to justify broadening its interrogation and arrest powers, increasing its supervisory role over the media, and tightening regime control of cyberspace.

In a September 15 speech to IRGC commanders, Rouhani claimed that the IRGC is not the sole guardian of the Islamic Revolution, stating that "the very same duty has been defined for the representatives of parliament, the Supreme National Security Council, the armed forces, and other institutions." Rouhani's attempts to limit the IRGC's role in domestic politics, while carefully avoiding the Supreme Leader's redlines on opening the country's political atmosphere, have met obstinate resistance from hardliners.

On September 16, in what was seen as pushback against Rouhani's criticism of the IRGC, Khamenei insisted that no other actor bears the "institutional responsibility to protect the Islamic Revolution like the IRGC" and called on the IRGC-IO to "constantly monitor all issues and identify threats" against the Islamic Republic. Since then, the IRGC-IO has led the investigation and subsequent arrest of Iranians accused of ties to Western intelligence agencies.

## Recent Arrests

In the past few weeks, the IRGC-IO has spearheaded a drive against a "new wave of sedition," arguably the largest state crackdown since 2009. It has arrested at least nine journalists, activists, and businessmen. On October 16, the IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency reported that Gerdab -- an outlet of the IRGC-IO's cyber division used to publish pictures and identify protestors during the 2009 crackdown -- had arrested another 170 individuals associated with social media websites accused of spreading anti-regime propaganda.

Senior officials have criticized the politicization of the arrests and the IRGC-IO's lack of accountability to normal government oversight. For example, on October 24 Ali Motahhari, a conservative Majlis (parliament) member with ties to the Rouhani camp, criticized the IRGC-IO's heightened role, asking, "Why were the recent arrests carried out by the Revolutionary Guards Intelligence Organization? Don't we have an Intelligence Ministry? The Guards say they will do whatever they want." In a November 9 editorial in the conservative daily *Resalat*, hardliners responded to these accusations by calling for the MOIS to follow the example set by the IRGC-IO: "The Iranian people are confused about the Ministry of Intelligence's lag in performing its duties, and they are asking about the relationship between the contamination of its minister and the ministry's lack of action in confronting Western infiltration."

On November 3, the day before the anniversary of the 1979 U.S. embassy takeover, the IRGC-IO released a statement announcing that "a number of members of an infiltration network affiliated with the U.S. and UK governments have been arrested." In a telephone interview with state-run TV, an individual identified as an "IRGC-IO specialist" claimed the organization had uncovered a network that sought to influence Iranian public opinion and "pollute some domestic publications" in order to "beautify the image of America...and lay the groundwork for America's official presence in Iran."

At a November 4 cabinet meeting, in his first public response to the arrests, Rouhani censured hardliners for

"misusing" the Supreme Leader's remarks to detain and intimidate opponents: "Heaven forbid that some people should try and abuse the [Supreme Leader's] phrases and terminology to accuse whomever they oppose, or to try and marginalize certain groups...We must fight any infiltration by foreigners in a real and serious way, rather than toying with the word 'infiltration.'" Later, speaking at a November 8 press exhibition in Tehran boycotted by several conservative media outlets, Rouhani criticized the granting of "special privileges" to some media, which act as "undercover police," while others "face harsh punishments" -- a thinly veiled reference to reformist journalists arrested by the IRGC-IO.

While hardline and IRGC-affiliated media immediately condemned Rouhani's statements, a number of officials have come to his defense. For example, Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, averred: "The arrests of some people active in the media field...in the wake of the JCPOA [are] being presented by some as settling political scores...I share that viewpoint." Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi also voiced his support for Rouhani, warning that the term "infiltration" must be used appropriately "and not in such a way that decreases its worth and value so it becomes a trivial issue." Alavi's remarks are noteworthy given that they reinforce the longstanding bureaucratic rivalry between the MOIS and the IRGC-IO; whereas Rouhani controls the MOIS and appoints its top officials, he exerts no authority over the IRGC-IO or the IRGC commander.

## OUTLOOK

The increasingly restrictive post-nuclear-deal environment will have negative domestic repercussions, but it has not so far directly affected the nuclear agreement -- a deal Iran still needs to fix its rapidly deteriorating economy. Khamenei's empowerment of the IRGC-IO, however, will result in continued intimidation of Iranians who support domestic reforms and improved relations with the West. In such a political climate, the intensity of the IRGC-IO's activities sends a strong message that the conservative camp will wield blunt force to resist attempts at moderating the Islamic Republic. A disturbing prospect in this context is whether the IRGC-IO would use its influence to further tighten the security of Iran's nuclear program, a development that could complicate access to sensitive sites and impede implementation of the nuclear deal.

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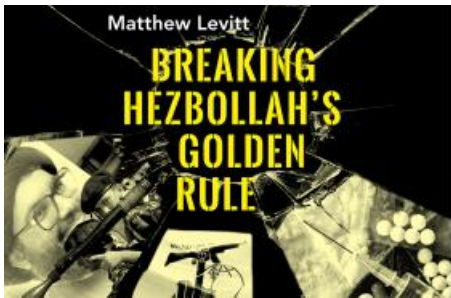
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