

The Islamic Republic's Will to Survive: Likely Nuclear Resistance, Unlikely Social Revolt

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Brief Analysis

On June 7, 2013, Saeid Golkar and Mehdi Khalaji addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Golkar is a fellow at the Roberta Buffett Center for International and Comparative Studies at Northwestern University and author of the new Institute report [The Islamic Republic's Art of Survival \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-republics-art-of-survival-neutralizing-domestic-and-foreign-thr\)](#). Mr. Khalaji is a senior fellow at the Institute and a former producer for the BBC and the U.S. government's Persian news service. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks; video of Mr. Khalaji's full remarks is available above.

SAEID GOLKAR

In general, nondemocratic regimes face three basic threats to their survival: threats from above (coups), from below (popular uprisings), and from abroad (foreign intervention). The Islamic Republic of Iran has persisted for over three decades largely because of its ability to counter each of these threats.

The regime's most effective strategy for neutralizing potential coups was to balance military power through a parallel structure. The establishment of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in 1980 served to safeguard the leadership against any threat from the regular army. And after the Iran-Iraq War ended in the late 1980s, the regime solidified its grip on the military and security services by reinforcing three parallel command structures: the Armed Forces General Command Headquarters (AFGCH), the "Representatives of the Supreme Leader," and the counterintelligence apparatus.

Today, the latter two structures reach down deep, with numerous personnel from each embedded in small units throughout the armed forces and police. And all three structures act as checks on one another. The Supreme Leader's representatives are typically clerics, and officials from the regular army oversee the counterintelligence

apparatus, so both counterbalance the elite IRGC. Meanwhile, the AFGCH reports to the Supreme Leader through the head of his military office, who hails from the Basij paramilitary. Through these mechanisms, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei continues to hold the upper hand over the IRGC.

The regime also uses incentives to prevent coups. By involving security personnel in business ventures and other economic affairs, it reduces their desire for military takeover.

To counter the threat of popular uprisings, the regime has implemented a strategy of organizing and mobilizing supporters while simultaneously disorganizing and demobilizing opponents. Through the Basij and other networks, Tehran not only rallies its core followers (active and potential), it also co-opts people in the gray area between opposition and loyalism by offering them tangible benefits. Once they join regime networks, the propaganda machine pushes them to internalize Islamic ideologies and dissuades them from opposing the government.

To counter external threats, the Islamic Republic has expanded its presence throughout the world, especially in the backyard of its perceived enemies, the United States and Israel. This includes maintaining influence in Syria, Lebanon, Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia. In shaping this resistance axis, the regime seeks to challenge America and Israel while also deterring them from attacking Iran. The regime calls this strategy "the rise of resistance" (*khizesh-e moqavemat*). In the wake of armed conflicts, Western governments typically try to establish a process for disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating militant groups. Tehran's goal is the exact opposite -- it tries to integrate, mobilize, and arm the people.

Iran's situation is unlikely to change in the near future, but there is room for optimism in the longer term. Despite the radicalism of its leaders, the country is also home to some of the region's most open-minded political elite. The Iranian people's support for liberal ideals, the country's large number of educated people, and the pervasive antipathy toward Islamization of society all bode well for the future -- but not while Khamenei remains in power.

MEHDI KHALAJI

Ayatollah Khamenei's role in Iran's economy and foreign policy has increased sharply over the years. When he was appointed Supreme Leader in 1989, he was a fairly weak politician -- in fact, this is the main reason he was appointed. At the time, the Islamic Republic's elite believed that someone of the late Ruhollah Khomeini's caliber could not be replaced, and that the Supreme Leader would therefore become more of a ceremonial position. Under that line of thinking, the president would become the regime's top figure -- indeed, when Khamenei was appointed, President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was the most powerful person in Iran. In his 1989 memoirs, Rafsanjani recounted how Khamenei had come to him earlier that year complaining that his new role as Supreme Leader was "too monotonous and boring," highlighting how weak the post was in comparison to the presidency at the time.

After the Iran-Iraq War, IRGC officials wanted to play a role in the country's political society. Khamenei and Rafsanjani agreed to allow the Guards to become more involved in Iran's economy, and to have the Supreme Leader oversee this process in line with his constitutional role as head of the IRGC. Over time, Khamenei restructured the Guards into the most powerful entity in the country. Meanwhile, Rafsanjani decided to focus on the economic situation, leaving the Supreme Leader to manage not only the IRGC, but also the intelligence apparatus, the judiciary, and the state's television and radio outlets. With control over the guns, the prisons, and the propaganda, Khamenei was able to weaken all other political actors. Then, during Rafsanjani's second term, Khamenei became the final authority on all major issues, with the president overseeing sectors in which the Supreme Leader had already established deep personal influence. Subsequent presidents were under Khamenei's authority from the moment they took office, despite being popularly elected.

Today, Khamenei firmly believes that the West has never recognized the Islamic Republic's legitimacy. In his view,

the animosity between Iran and the United States is genuine and has existed since the Islamic Republic's inception, as evidenced by longstanding U.S. sanctions. He also believes that the Iran-Iraq War was a conflict not so much with Baghdad, but with the West.

As for the current impasse with the international community, Khamenei is far more frightened by the prospect of Western cultural invasion than any economic sanctions. He is obsessed with the idea that the White House is in constant coordination with Hollywood, Google, and Apple to infiltrate the hearts and minds of Iranians. The fact that this year's Academy Award for Best Picture was given to *Argo* and presented by First Lady Michelle Obama reinforced Khamenei's belief that President Obama himself had commissioned an elaborate scheme to destabilize the Islamic Republic. In a sense, then, the West has underestimated the power of idea and the effect that soft power can have on the Iranian regime.

Finally, Khamenei's utter rejection of compromise -- whether internationally or at home -- is eroding the regime's reputation among Iranians even as it enables the Supreme Leader to increase his control. In 2009, for example, leading reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi offered not to run for president again if Khamenei agreed to a recount of the votes in that year's controversial election. Instead, the Supreme Leader insisted that his own candidate had won, rejected Mousavi's offer, and later placed him under long-term house arrest that continues today. This no-compromise policy risked the legitimacy of both Khamenei's rule and the regime itself. In a similar move, Khamenei did not hesitate to disqualify Rafsanjani from this year's presidential election despite the latter's popularity.

The no-compromise stance extends to the nuclear impasse as well. During a recent presidential debate, current nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili criticized Hassan Rouhani, former head negotiator under President Muhammad Khatami, for not standing firm on the issue. Rouhani asserted that under his tenure, Iran's nuclear program was able to make progress without engendering UN resolutions against the regime. Yet Jalili argued that Rouhani had avoided sanctions at the cost of suspending uranium enrichment and failing to resist. This transition -- from a less "resistant" nuclear policy to a no-compromise approach -- directly coincides with the consolidation of Khamenei's power over time. If he maintains or increases his power in the coming years, the resistant aspect will persist as the main basis for Khamenei's decisionmaking on all policies, resulting in complete disregard for any sort of compromise.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Guive Rosen. ❖

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