The Security Forces of the Islamic Republic and the Fate of the Opposition

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Brief Analysis

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Friday sermon, which called for an end to mass protests contesting the outcome of last week's presidential elections and which carried an implicit threat of "bloodshed and chaos" if they continued, has raised the stakes in the ongoing standoff between the government and opposition in Iran. The stage may now be set for a violent showdown. Past experience, however, raises questions whether the security forces can be uniformly relied on to implement an order to violently quash the protests, and whether such an order could in fact spark unrest within the ranks of the security forces that could have significant implications for the future stability of the regime.

Security Organs of the Islamic Republic

According to the constitution of the Islamic Republic, the army is responsible for defending Iran's borders and maintaining internal order, while the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is responsible for protecting the regime. In practice, matters are not so clear-cut. During the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC (and its popular militia, the Basij) fought alongside regular military units at the front.

This ambiguity regarding roles and missions has continued until today: the regular military and IRGC routinely hold joint military exercises, while the Basij has, in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, played a greater role in preparing to confront a foreign invasion, implementing the regime's new "mosaic" doctrine, and preserving the values of the revolution. The IRGC and Basij also routinely participate in exercises that hone their ability to deal with domestic unrest. The Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) is a partner with the Basij (and ultimately the IRGC) in these efforts to maintain domestic order.

A History of Civil-Military Tensions and Ferment in the Ranks

The intermittent unrest that has racked Iran since the early 1990s has occasionally exposed latent tensions between the country's political and military leadership, as well as political differences between the senior echelons of the armed forces and the rank-and-file, raising questions about the implications of a violent crackdown in Iran today.

The first sign of trouble was the refusal of army and IRGC units garrisoned near Qazvin (a major town northwest of Tehran) to obey orders to quash riots there in August 1994. The commanders of these units apparently refused to

turn their weapons on the Iranian people. The regime was forced to airlift in special IRGC and Basij antiriot units from elsewhere to put down the violence. The May 1997 election of reformist candidate Muhammad Khatami to the presidency put further stress on civil-military relations. Though senior IRGC officers had endorsed his conservative opponent (Majlis speaker Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri), credible post-election press reports indicated that IRGC personnel voted for Khatami in even greater proportions than did the general population (73 percent versus 69 percent).

This indicates that the IRGC -- a military organization long thought to have been a bastion of support for conservative hardliners -- was in fact riven by the same divisions as Iranian society. This, perhaps, should not have come as a surprise, due to the fact that for the past two decades, the IRGC has increasingly come to rely on conscripts to meet its manpower needs, due to a drastic decline in volunteers. This raised questions about the political reliability of the IRGC should it be needed to quell popular unrest.

The student riots of July 1999 provided the backdrop for the next crisis in civil-military relations. These riots were put down by the LEF (often aided by the thugs of the Ansar-e Hizballah, a shady vigilante group sponsored by the IRGC and Basij) who were relieved by the Basij once the situation had stabilized. These events highlighted the fact that by July 1999, a new division of labor within the security forces had emerged: the LEF had become the regime's first line of defense against domestic unrest, with the Basij providing backup. When necessary, they might be reinforced by the IRGC's "Special Units," followed by the IRGC's ground forces. The regular military's ground forces would be deployed only as a last resort.

At the height of the July 1999 unrest, twenty-four senior IRGC commanders sent President Khatami a letter that in effect threatened a coup should he not restore order quickly. Such a threat was unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Republic, though given the political divisions in the armed forces, it is unclear whether a coup would have succeeded. The result could well have been bloody street violence, perhaps even civil war. In the end, Iran's clerical leadership was able to restore calm, thereby preempting a coup, though the threat of overt military intervention was an unsettling new development.

Hardline elements, however, in the security services and armed forces had already covertly intervened in the political arena, through their participation in the murder of dissident and reformist intellectuals starting in the autumn of 1998 (and continuing through the spring of 2000). Through these actions, the senior leadership of the security services and armed forces threw their support behind the conservative rivals of President Khatami. This development raised doubts not only about the prospects of the reform movement, but also about the impact of the growing politicization of the armed forces on discipline and effectiveness.

The rise of these security hardliners accelerated under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad. A former Revolutionary Guard member, Ahmadinezhad was a manifestation of the ascendancy of a power elite comprised largely of IRGC veterans, who make up a majority of the cabinet and more than a third of the current parliament, and who have benefited from the expansion of the IRGC into nontraditional roles in business and industry. Under Ahmadinezhad, the IRGC -- through its current and former members -- has emerged as the main pillar of the regime.

The protests that followed in the wake of the 2009 presidential elections constitute the most serious challenge ever to the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. They have revealed new organizational arrangements for dealing with domestic unrest that raise questions as to whether the use of force to quell antiregime protests would produce unrest in the ranks, and spark a new crisis in civil-military relations. Film and television footage of the protests show that this time the Basij are in the lead in dealing with the unrest, with LEF playing a supporting role. IRGC units have not yet been committed. This is consistent with the growing role assigned the Basij since 2003 as the first line of defense against possible U.S. regime-change attempts -- whether through an invasion or a color revolution. It is not clear, however, that this apparent confidence in the Basij is justified.

While the recruitment base of the Basij is much narrower than that of the IRGC (which draws on conscripts from all sectors of Iranian society), it is a volunteer force that many join for opportunistic reasons -- for a paycheck, a scholarship, or a bit of authority. And while the Basij is probably more thoroughly vetted than other mass organizations (due to the role of local clerics and mosques in the recruitment process), it is hard to believe that its membership is insulated from the broader political forces at work in Iranian society today. Accordingly, some units might experience significant desertions if employed to violently suppress the protests.

Conclusions

So far, the government has avoided a head-on confrontation with the opposition, and has contented itself with harassing demonstrators and detaining or arresting opposition organizers and prominent reformist politicians. This approach, however, has not succeeded in slowing the momentum of the opposition protests. As a result, the regime might be tempted to employ greater violence in an effort to crush the opposition.

Iran so often surprises even the most seasoned observers that it is impossible to foresee the outcome of a violent clash between regime and opposition. Much will depend on the following questions: which security forces the regime chooses to employ (Basij supported by LEF, or by IRGC as well), how it chooses to employ them (confronting protesters through a massive show of strength with a relatively limited and focused use of violence, or by overwhelming numbers and an unrestrained use of violence), and how skillful the opposition is in encouraging dissent in and defections from the ranks of the security forces. But a violent crackdown, even if successful (as seems likely), could be the opening round of a long and bitter struggle, with far-reaching implications for the cohesiveness of the security forces and the long-term stability of the regime.

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