

Into the Shadows:

Radical Vigilantes in Khatami's Iran

Jan 1, 2001



In-Depth Reports

Hardline vigilante groups, generally referred to as "pressure groups" (guruh-i fishar) in popular Iranian parlance, have long influenced Iranian politics and society during times of political tension. But particularly since President Muhammad Khatami's 1997 election—as the power struggle between the Islamic Republic's reformist and hardline camps has accelerated—vigilantes have become increasingly active, bold, and violent. Seeming to operate with impunity, their actions threaten both to undercut Iranian domestic reform and to challenge U.S. efforts toward a gradual rapprochement with Iran.

Iranian pressure groups cannot be considered a part of the "opposition" camp because, in reality, they act on behalf of various hardline factions within the government. Rather than attempt to overthrow the regime, pressure groups instead use violence, intimidation, and assassination as tools to affect government policy when they may not have the numerical strength or the power to do so through legal or legislative means.

In this richly detailed Policy Paper, historian Michael Rubin presents a comprehensive survey of Iranian vigilante or "pressure" group, along with an exploration vigilantism patterns throughout modern Iranian history. He argues, U.S. and Western policymakers should take Iranian hardline vigilante groups into account when constructing a coherent policy on Iran. Drawing on both a wide array of Persian language sources and his own research conducted in Iran, Dr. Rubin, a 1999-2000 Soref research fellow at the Institute, concludes that—despite the inevitability of political change suggested by demographic and economic realities in the Khatami era—the prospects for real reform in Iran within the existing system of rule are weakened by vigilante activism.

• **26 pages**

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