THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S ART of SURVIVAL:
Neutralizing Domestic and Foreign Threats

Saeid Golkar

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Cover photo: Iranian soldiers shout anti-American slogans at a ceremony celebrating the 27th anniversary of the return from exile of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, February 2006. (AP Photo/Hasan Sarbakhshian)

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Acknowledgments

What do you want to achieve or avoid? The answers to this question are objectives.
How will you go about achieving your desired results? The answer to this you can call "strategy."

—WILLIAM E. ROTHSCHILD

Executive Summary

THE REEMERGENCE OF IRAN'S hardliners in 2005 after an apparent reformist victory years earlier came as a shock to many observers, who were convinced that the Islamic Republic had been transforming into a more democratic state. Yet the regime was able to marginalize the reformists who came to power following the 1997 presidential election, even as it dealt with external challenges such as the threat of U.S. attack following the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. It defused another crisis in 2009, gradually crushing and controlling the opposition movement that erupted after the disputed presidential election. And when Arab uprisings swept the region beginning in 2011, toppling several longstanding authoritarian regimes, Tehran effectively controlled its population. No demonstrations have occurred in Iranian cities during this period, and the regime appears steadfast in the face of significant regional change.

How has the Islamic Republic persisted in the face of so many crises since 1997, including the ongoing impasse with the international community over the nuclear program? How has the regime countered threats to its power? Analyzing Tehran's intricate survival strategies sheds light on both questions. Like similar regimes, it has used a combination of tactics and factors to neutralize threats, including the residual appeal of its revolutionary ideology and religious legitimacy, as well as more direct methods like propaganda, restrictive social policies, pervasive surveillance, calibrated violence, coup-proofing, and co-optation.[1]

To deal with threats from below (e.g., revolution), the regime has primarily relied on the Basij, a mass administrative network of social, professional, and militia groups established to mobilize loyalists, demobilize independent movements, and marginalize reformists. Increased investment in the Basij and other social security apparatuses was a major factor in Tehran's ability to dismantle the opposition Green Movement in 2009 and establish a climate of fear in its wake. Those who participate in these apparatuses become dependent on the regime and subject to indoctrination, while those who remain "outsiders" face persistent threats, interference, and suppression, both on the streets and online.

To nullify threats from above (e.g., coup), the regime created a parallel military structure, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), alongside the regular military. It then solidified its control over this organ through intense religious indoctrination (e.g., dispatching clerics throughout the corps), pervasive surveillance (e.g., embedding independent internal intelligence personnel within units), and economic co-optation. Today, the IRGC has extended its influence to every sector of Iran's economy, well beyond that of the regular military. This gives IRGC personnel great incentive to continue supporting the regime in order to secure their privileges.

To deal with external threats, the Islamic Republic has expanded its presence throughout the world, especially in the backyard of its perceived enemies. The IRGC's Qods Force is instrumental in this effort, which aims to form a resistance axis that can challenge the United States and Israel while also deterring them from attacking Iran. Ideological entreaties and oil-funded economic incentives are key to recruiting supporters abroad, whether individually or in the form of large-scale proxies such as Hezbollah.

Despite the success of this approach thus far, the regime's explicit attempts to disrupt the natural order of Iranian society could endanger the regime's long-term survival. The character of the populace has

changed dramatically over the years as increasing numbers of educated youths thwart government suppression by gaining access to information and communication technologies. In addition, high unemployment, inflation, mismanagement, and pervasive political and economic corruption have eroded the Islamic Republic's legitimacy and produced deep popular discontent.

In this climate, the regime will have to choose between accepting the ongoing social changes or bracing itself for another uprising. Although the probability and timing of such an uprising are impossible to know with certainty, many scholars believe riots are likely if Tehran does not begin implementing major reforms in the near future.

Introduction

DESPITE FACING NUMEROUS crises over the past fifteen years, the Iranian regime has shown a surprisingly potent ability to keep its opponents in check and remain in power. The past four years alone have seen mass demonstrations against a disputed election, unprecedented international sanctions, and region-wide Arab uprisings, but none of these developments has seriously shaken the regime's grip at home. To understand how Tehran has accomplished this feat, one must look at the various approaches it takes to dealing with threats.

Within the wide body of scholarship on autocratic governments, some observers argue that rulers are most concerned about neutralizing threats, not just maintaining power.[2] Such threats can come from inside the state, outside the state, or both, and they may or may not involve violence.[3] Generally, they take three forms: threats from top regime officials (e.g., a military coup), threats from popular uprisings, and threats from outside the state, such as foreign intervention.[4]

To neutralize these threats, states tend to create institutions that can carry out a variety of strategies, particularly co-optation and coercion. Some of these strategies focus on controlling the political elite or the masses, while others have been developed to nullify outside threats. Different regimes use different "survival tool boxes" depending on their nature and goals. For example, authoritarian regimes rely more on repression than quasi-democratic regimes. And some autocratic governments use different tools than others—states like Syria use mass repression, intimidation, and organized violence, while Arab kingdoms in the Persian Gulf rely mainly on buying the population's loyalty.[5]

Likewise, Iran has employed a number of different strategies against its opponents. The following chapters describe how the Islamic Republic has thwarted threats from below (revolution), threats from above (coup), and external threats (foreign intervention). Although many of these strategies have been evident since the regime's establishment, this study focuses on methods used since the silent popular uprising that brought reformists to power in 1997. The conclusion discusses whether this approach—however effective it may have been thus far—is sustainable in the long term given Iran's growing social and economic challenges.

1 | Neutralizing Threats from Below

TRADITIONALLY, MASS POPULAR uprisings are one of the most powerful threats to autocratic governments, and Iran is no exception. Large protest movements have challenged different regimes throughout the country's contemporary history, including the 1905 constitutional revolution, 1963 uprising, 1979 Islamic Revolution, and the riots that swept Akbarabad, Islamshahr, Shiraz, Mashhad, Arak, and Khoramabad in 1994–1995.[6] Some experts also regard Muhammad Khatami's shocking victory in the 1997 presidential election as a silent revolution. Since then, Iran experienced student uprisings in 1999 and 2003,[7] as well as a spontaneous revolt in 2007 after gas prices were increased. And the Islamic Republic faced its most formidable mass uprising in 2009, when the Green Movement took to the streets following the disputed presidential election.

As in other nondemocratic regimes, Tehran has employed several methods to counterbalance these threats, including repression and populist policies for buying citizen loyalty.[8] Fear-mongering, propaganda, moral policing, surveillance, social distraction, and shadowy vigilantism have also been used at various times, particularly to mobilize ideological support. In addition, Tehran has employed social engineering to paralyze the populace and reduce the likelihood of an uprising, creating "nongovernmental organizations" to rearrange and manipulate social groups, prevent collaboration between individuals, and maintain the existing political order.

Organizing the Masses

After its establishment in 1979, the Islamic Republic began to organize its supporters into different networks such as "Islamic associations" (Anjoman-ha-ye Islami) and "Islamic societies" (Jameh-e Islami). These organizations addressed all facets of social life, encompassing the education sector, factories, government bureaus, and more. By 1985, as many as 50,000 Islamic associations had reportedly been established.[9]

Yet the regime has gradually lost many of its supporters over the past three decades. As far back as 1997, Iranian scholars were arguing that "both the scale and scope of social support for the regime has been eroded even among many of its erstwhile dedicated supporters."[10] This trend parallels the regime's loss of three forms of legitimacy: charismatic, revolutionary, and religious. First, the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini left Iran without its charismatic leader, and his successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, could not fill the gap. Second, increasing economic problems and the growing gap between rich and poor damaged the regime's revolutionary message, especially as more Iranians began to blame these problems on government mismanagement and corruption. And third, its religious legitimacy has been gradually undermined over the past decade due to increased urbanization, a more-educated populace, and growing secularization among youths—the latter a reaction to the imposed Islamization of society. More recently, the brutal repression of the Green Movement weakened the regime's religious legitimacy among the more pious and traditional bulk of society.

In response to this sharp decline in its support base, the regime intensified its efforts to mobilize dedicated followers into different organizations, most importantly the Basij—a network of social, professional, and militia groups that has become the equivalent of a parallel society. Supreme Leader Khamenei has used the various Basij branches to meticulously organize the population. He regards this practice as the most important tool for regime survival, believing that strong organization is the only means of effectively shaping education, logistics, and indoctrination.[11]

Today, the Basij has more than twenty branches. One of the most important is the Pupils Basij Organization (PBO or Sazman-e Basij-e Danesh amouzi). Established to organize students into a pro-regime body, the PBO consists of three groups: primary-school children (Omidan, or "The Hopeful"), middle-school students (Puyandegan, or "Seekers"), and high-school students (Pishgaman, or "Pioneers").[12] According to

government statistics, it had 4,800,000 members as of 2010,[13] organized into 708 local "resistance bureaus" (Hozeh) and 54,000 individual offices in middle and high schools across the country.[14] In addition, PBO chief Gen. Mohammad Saleh Jokar stated that another 6,000 or more offices would be established in primary schools to organize students between seven and twelve years old.[15]

In 2002, the regime created new branches to bring teachers and trainers in the general education system under the Basij umbrella.[16] One was the Teachers Basij Organization (CBO or Sazman-e Basij-e Farhangian), which by 2010 encompassed more than 350,000 of the Ministry of Education and Training's 1,800,000 personnel.[17] That same year, a news outlet reported that 60 percent of teachers and other general education employees in Tehran were CBO members.[18]

The regime also created two branches in higher education to organize students and professors: the Students Basij Organization (SBO or Sazman-e Basij-e Danesh joui)[19] and Lecturers Basij Organization (LBO or Sazman-e Basij-e Asatid). By 2007, the SBO had established more than 2,700 bureaus at 700 colleges and universities; three years later, 700,000 of Iran's 3,200,000 university students were SBO members, according to the organization's head.[20] Meanwhile, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 presidential election, coupled with the SBO's success in controlling universities, convinced the regime to direct massive support toward the LBO's expansion. By 2007, approximately 25 percent of Iranian lecturers were members, according to the organization's chief.[21] The LBO has more than 350 clubs throughout the country, and this number is increasing dramatically because of regime sponsorship. The majority of LBO core members come from Imam Hossein Comprehensive University (IHCU), known informally as "IRGC University"; for example, most LBO chiefs have been IRGC generals and IHCU faculty members, as is the organization's current deputy for study and analysis, Hashemi Nasab.

In addition, the Scientific Basij Organization (Sazman-e Basij-e Elmi, Pazhouheshi, va Fanavari) was established in 2008 to mobilize elites who were not involved in universities or research institutes but were active in scientific fields as independent inventors, innovators, or in other roles. In 2010, the group's chief claimed that approximately 3,000 of the country's 7,000 recognized scientific elites were members.[22]

Similar to the LBO, the Clergies and Islamic Students Basij Organization (CISBO or Sazman-e Basij-e Tollab) was split from the SBO in 2000 by Khamenei's order. Its main aim is to train a new generation of young clergy members who are completely obedient to the Supreme Leader. CISBO was placed under the control of the "83 Imam Sadeq Brigade" (Teip-e Mostaqel-e 83 Imam Sadeq), a paramilitary group responsible for recruiting and organizing clergy, suppressing non-loyalist clerics, and instilling fear in the seminaries at Qom and Mashhad. There are no precise statistics regarding CISBO's membership, but in 2012, its former chief claimed that more than 65 percent of clerics had joined, and that the group had established one regional center, fifty-two local bureaus (Hozeh), and 789 "resistance offices" (Payegah) in Islamic schools throughout Iran. Altogether, CISBO had allegedly recruited more than 10,000 clerics and religious students.[23]

In addition to organizing the clergy, the regime has sought to include religious singers (Maddah) under the Basij umbrella, establishing the Maddah Basij Organization (Sazman-e Basij-e Maddahan) in 2008. As one Basij commander put it, every militia unit had at least one cleric, so they should be given Maddah as well in order to increase jihadist fervor within the ranks. To achieve this, the group held a training session for 4,000 male and female applicants shortly after its creation.[24] By February 2013, its chief claimed that approximately 20,000 Maddah had been assembled and trained throughout Iran.[25] The regime has encouraged this growth as a means of controlling the large cadre of hardliners among the Maddah.

Tehran has also established a special gender-specific Basij organization for women. Although women have had parallel branches in various sectors since 1988, it was not until 2005 that the Basij created an overarching organization to integrate and mobilize women in support of regime objectives.[26]

Originally the Sisters Basij Organization, the group was renamed the Women's Society Basij Organization (WSBO or Sazman-e Basij-e Jameh-e Zanan) in 2009 to expand its area of activities and include women of any age. In 2010, the group's chief claimed that more than 5,000,000 women had joined, distributed among more than 10,000 offices throughout the country.[27] Because a WSBO member can come from any occupation, there are overlaps in membership for female Basij members.

Branches were established for workers as well. The Employees Basij Organization (Sazman-e Basij-e Karmandan) was tasked with recruiting more than one million government employees, while the Workers Basij Organization (Sazman-e Basij-e Kargaran) targeted regime supporters in other workplaces. Initially, the WBO aimed to recruit more than 7,500,000 workers,[28] but as of 2010, it had only managed to organize around 5 percent of them in 100 offices nationwide, despite its chief's emphasis on the important role workers played in the 1979 revolution.[29]

The regime has also sought to include merchants (*bazaari*) under the Basij umbrella given their role in the economy and their influence on internal politics. As of 2009, the Guilds (or Asnaf) Basij Organization (GBO) had established 13 bureaus and 130 local branches, according to group leader Gen. Majid Mashayekhi.[30] Each of these bureaus represents two or three different guilds. For example, the eleventh bureau, with ten branches and 4,200 members, is responsible for real-estate professionals, paint sellers, and stonecutters.[31]

In addition, Basij groups have been established for each profession. For example, the Medical Society Basij Organization (MSBO or Sazman-e Basij-e Pezeshki) is for physicians, surgeons, dentists, pharmacists, nurses, radiology technicians, and so forth. Established in 1995–1996, it was reorganized in 2000 to form a network of pro-regime professionals; the group's chief claimed a membership of more than 120,000 as of 2012.[32] In recent years, members have been organized into thirty-six relief and rescue battalions responsible for helping other Basij battalions and civilians in emergency situations, in addition to their other duties.[33]

The Engineers Basij Organization (EBO or Sazman-e Basij-e Mohandesin) was created in 2000 to recruit civil, architectural, aerospace, chemical, electrical, mechanical, and materials engineers. As of 2010, it had reportedly organized some 58,000 members in 200 clubs throughout Iran,[34] divided into five branches: energy, information technology, agriculture, construction and mining, and industry.[35] According to another report, 70 percent of EBO members have a bachelor's degree, and 30 percent have an associate's, master's, or doctoral degree.[36] The EBO also has close relationships with the Construction Basij Organization (Sazman-e Basij-e Sazandegi), an entity responsible for carrying out government construction projects. The construction branch usually assigns contracts to the EBO and hires EBO members for its projects.

The Artists Basij Organization (ABO) (Sazman-e Basij-e Honarmandan) is one of the newest branches, created in 2005 to organize pro-regime artists. Anyone who works in the arts can join; the group's chief, Hossein Qanadian, claimed that membership increased from 6,000 in 2008[37] to 23,000 in 2010,[38] then to 200,000 by late 2012,[39] representing fourteen fields of art and organized into 400 centers throughout Iran.[40] The ABO was established following the Supreme Leader's insistence that a cultural war had been launched against the Islamic Republic. Accordingly, the group's most important duty is to confront covert cultural threats to the regime.

Newer still is the Lawyers Basij Organization (LBO or Sazman-e Basij-e Hoqouqdanan), created in 2008 to consolidate the regime's power among independent lawyers, supplement its control over the judiciary, and highlight its will to fully penetrate all sectors of society through the Basij. According to LBO chief Hojatoleslam Jalil Mohabi, the organization has enrolled about 14,000 lawyers since its creation.[41]

Another branch that appeared in 2008 is the Media Basij Organization (MBO or Sazman-e Basij-e Resaneh), established to incorporate journalists nationwide. Given the importance of information control, the MBO seeks to recruit and mobilize journalists in order to bolster the regime and control media outlets, especially news agencies, newspapers, and magazines.

The regime's determination to organize every social group has also led it to expand the network of "resistance" groups within sports clubs.[42] In addition to recruiting and integrating youths into the Basij, this effort aims to assemble professional athletes (especially martial arts experts) into fighting units such as the *zolfaghar*.

Finally, the regime established the Basij Retirement Organization (Sazman-e Basij-e Pishkesvatan-e Jahad va Shehadat) in 2009 to organize retired personnel from the armed forces, mainly the IRGC. As of 2012, it had reportedly recruited more than 55,000 of Iran's 500,000 retired veterans.[43]

Suppressing Independent Organizations

In addition to organizing its supporters into numerous networks, the Islamic Republic has long suppressed groups inside and outside the country that might in any way bolster opposition to the regime.[44] This goes beyond overt and covert repression of active opposition movements such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq and the Freedom Movement of Iran (Nehzat-e Azadi-e Iran)—Tehran has also sought to undermine any social and cultural groups that could eventually pose a challenge. To achieve this goal, the regime pervasively represses civil society organizations and prevents individuals from establishing independent groups.[45]

Since 2005, many NGOs that were established during the reform era have been dissolved, including social, cultural, and political groups; the government has even shut down organizations focused on reducing poverty in rural areas.[46] Although Tehran asserts that NGOs are a Western tool for overthrowing the Islamic Republic, the real fear is that Iranians who work for NGOs will become connected and form a strong network in opposition to the regime. Examples of this suppression include the dissolution of workers groups (e.g., the Tapeh Sugarcane Factory Workers Syndicate and Tehran Bus Workers Union) and independent student organizations (e.g., the Office for Consolidating Unity, or Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat, an Islamist student association).

Indeed, the regime does not tolerate any form of independent networking, even economic or religious. The repression of Sufi groups such as Dervish-e Gonabadi is an example of this strategy, which many people believe is rooted not only in political concerns, but also in the ideological and religious nature of the Islamic Republic. The regime's central doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* holds that the only true interpretation of Islam is jurisprudence, and that other interpretations (including the mystical approach of Sufism) are wrong and should be eliminated. Accordingly, it has arrested several spiritual and religious leaders to coerce them into dissolving their groups; more than 700 such groups were disbanded between 2010 and 2012 alone.[47] For example, the Society of Al-e Yasin, a spiritual NGO that organized followers around a personalized interpretation of Islam, shut down after its leader and several members were arrested. Mohammad Ali Taheri—the founder of Interuniversal Gnosticism (Erfan-e Halqeh), which had more than 20,000 trainers—was another spiritual leader arrested on allegations of teaching false knowledge and organizing adherents.[48]

On the economic front, the Iranian security apparatus has actively suppressed network marketing groups in recent years, forcing companies involved in pyramid schemes to discontinue operations. Some of the firms targeted were Palinure, Inviting, Golden Village, FSG, and Griffin.[49] Such companies organized thousands of people in cluster networks that were not under state control.

The regime does not tolerate large independent sports clubs either. For example, the group Razmgah-e Komando-ye Iran was established more than two decades ago in northern Iran to organize youths interested in martial arts.[50] Over the years, it trained more than 20,000 martial arts experts based on the founder's ideology. In response, regime security forces attacked the group and destroyed its resort in Savadkouh in October 2012. According to IRGC propaganda, Razmgah clubs are places of evil where deviant thoughts are propagated.[51]

More broadly, Tehran has invested much effort in limiting access to online social networks such as

Facebook and Google+, especially among youths. It is deeply concerned about any attempts to connect people and form networks online, believing that such activity will eventually lead to offline mobilization that could threaten the regime.[52] Accordingly, the IRGC's cyber command has focused on identifying and suppressing nascent online social groups.

Taken together, these organizing/disorganizing strategies help the regime simultaneously mobilize supporters and demobilize opponents. Through the Basij and other networks, Tehran not only organizes 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.[53] In this manner, the regime has been able to limit the sort of behavior that nonviolence scholar Gene Sharp called "withdrawal of consent," where citizens refuse to obey government orders. The people who join these networks are considered insiders (*khodis*) and depend on the regime for survival, while those who abstain are outsiders (*gher-khodis*) who may be threatened, disorganized, and suppressed.[54]

2 | Neutralizing Threats from Above

MANY AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES have been overthrown via coups led by small groups of elites rather than revolutions. Prior to the Arab uprisings that erupted in 2011, the coup was the main method of political change in the Middle East for decades. Given their access to arms, the unity of their organizations, and their established chain of command, it is no surprise that military, paramilitary, and secret police elites are likely candidates for such plots. Political elites who have access to security forces are candidates as well.

Regimes typically use several coup-proofing strategies to decrease the desire and ability of armed forces to stage such action. The most important is establishing authoritarian control over the security apparatus. According to one expert, some of the most common coup-proofing methods include exploiting family, ethnic, and religious loyalties for coup-critical positions, creating a parallel armed force, developing multiple internal security agencies, and fostering expertise in the regular military.[55] Although coups have not been as prevalent in Iran as in other regional states,[56] the overthrow of the Qajar dynasty in 1921 and the Mossadeq government in 1953 both fit the definition and help explain why such plots have been a major source of anxiety for the political elite since the 1979 revolution.

From its founding, the Islamic Republic has applied several strategies to decrease the chances of a coup. Some are designed to reduce the desire to stage such action, such as indoctrination and economic co-optation of the armed forces. Others are intended to neutralize the effectiveness of a coup if one begins to form, such as creating parallel structures and implementing pervasive surveillance.

Parallel Structures

The regime's most effective coup-proofing strategy was the establishment of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in 1980.[57] The main reason for its creation was the political elite's deep mistrust of Iran's conventional military (Artesh) despite the latter's declaration of neutrality in the months before the revolution.[58] Since its inception, the IRGC has been responsible for defending the regime and neutralizing any coup attempts by the army. In 1985, during the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC was extended to three main branches (air force, ground force, and navy) in parallel with the three branches of the Artesh. Another expansion occurred in 1990, when the Basij militia and Qods (Jerusalem) Force were added to the IRGC. During this time, the Armed Forces General Command Headquarters (AFGCH or Setad-e Kol-e Nirouha-ye Mosallah) was established to coordinate and balance power between these branches (see figure 1).
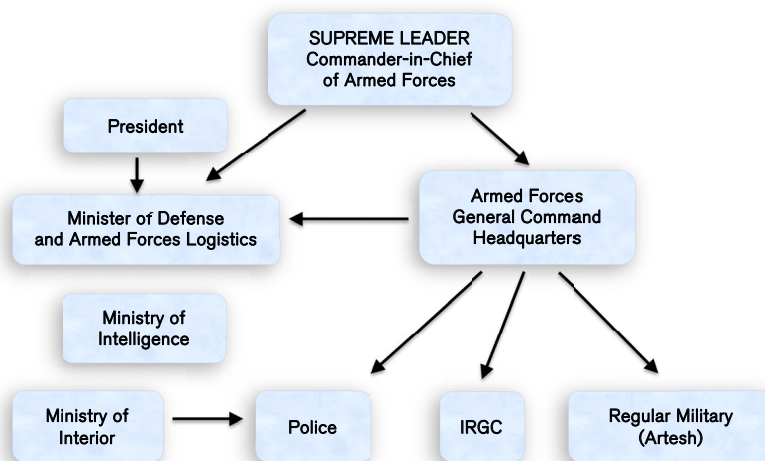

FIG 1. Regime Chain of Command

Although the AFGCH is staffed by both Artesh and IRGC personnel, the latter have the upper hand. According to Seyyed Hesam Hashami—an Artesh brigadier general and top counterintelligence chief—the majority of leading personnel at the joint headquarters are from the IRGC, not the Artesh.[59] For example, in 2010, only two AFGCH deputies were from the Artesh, while six others hailed from the IRGC: the deputies for operations, intelligence, inspection, logistics, cultural affairs, and Basij. The most recent structural changes to the joint staff decreased the number of main deputies to four, according to AFGCH chief Maj. Gen. Seyyed Hassan Firouzabadi.[60] All four are now under the IRGC's control; three of them are the deputy of the Basij and cultural defense, the deputy of structure and joint affairs (*moavenat-e arkan va omor moshterk*), and the deputy of strategic affairs and surveillance (*moavenat-e rahbordi va eshraf*). With this combination, the IRGC has more power to neutralize potential threats posed by the Artesh.

Yet the most powerful man in Iran's military hails from neither the IRGC nor the Artesh. The head of the AFGCH, General Firouzabadi, is a Basij member who had no military experience before he was appointed chief of staff in 1988. Whereas the rotation period for most military personnel is approximately three years,[61] Firouzabadi has kept his post for far longer because of his complete loyalty and subordination to Ayatollah Khamenei. The AFGCH, as the highest military establishment, collaborates with the Military Bureau in the Office of the Commander-in-Chief (Daftar-e Nezami-ye Farmandehi-ye Kol-e Qova). The head of this bureau, who is the main line of communication between the Supreme Leader and the armed forces commanders, is Brig. Gen. Muhammad Shirazi, another Basij officer with no prior military background. Due to his close personal relationship with Khamenei, which began before the Islamic Revolution, Shirazi has preserved his position for more than twenty years.[62]

Pervasive Surveillance
Another means of curbing the military's ability to stage a coup is by creating a comprehensive surveillance

network throughout the armed forces. To achieve this goal, the regime established Counterintelligence Organizations (Sazman Hefazat-e Ettelaat) in all branches of the military and security apparatus, each of them independent from the military command and under the Supreme Leader's control (see figure 2). Although these organizations have primary responsibility for identifying foreign spies and other traditional counterintelligence tasks, they are also used for internal intelligence purposes.

The heads of these organizations include clerics and military personnel, all working directly under the Supreme Leader's Office. Since 1983, three of the heads of the IRGC Counterintelligence Organization have been clerics (Hojatoleslam Ali Saidi, Hojatoleslam Gholam Hossein Ramezani, and Hojatoleslam Hossein Taeb), while the others have been IRGC military personnel (Generals Ahmad Vahidi, Muhammad Kazemi, and Morteza Rezaei). The Ministry of Defense Counterintelligence Organization has been led by a similar mix of IRGC officers and clerics (Gen. Hassan Zolghadnia, Gen. Ali Shamshiri, and the aforementioned Hojatoleslam Ramezani), as has the police Counterintelligence Organization (Gen. Muhammad Reza Naghdi, Hojatoleslam Ramezani, and Gen. Muhammad Kazem Moazenyan).[63] Yet all of the counterintelligence chiefs within the various branches of the Artesh have been regular army officers.

Each of these organizations works under the auspices of the Commander-in-Chief's General Office of Counterintelligence (Daftar-e Omoumi-ye Hefazat va Ettelaat-e Farmandehi-e Kol-e Qova). Since 1989, when a new military structure was implemented, three people have been appointed to head this office, all of them army officers (Generals Muhammad Ali Nazaran, Abdollah Najafai, and Seyyed Hesam Hashami). This is another way to create balance between the Artesh and IRGC and neutralize coup attempts.

Through these intelligence networks—which are distributed from the AFGCH down to individual divisions, brigades, battalions, companies, and platoons—the regime is able to closely monitor the armed forces. The people who work for these organizations use different methods of gathering information, such as
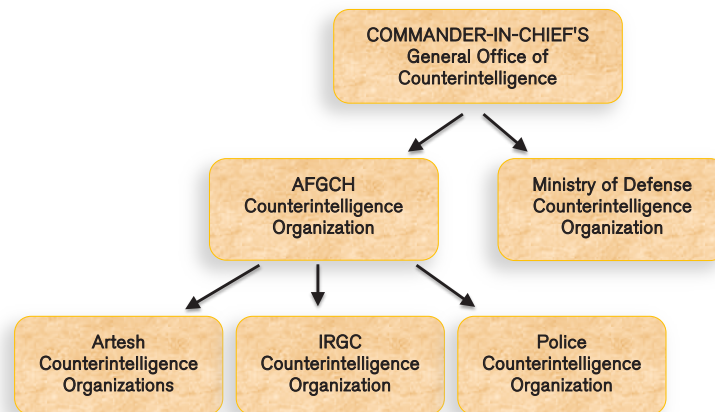
FIG 2. Regime Internal Intelligence Organizations

interrogating draftees applying to receive their military services graduation.[64] The extensive presence of intelligence personnel has created a climate of fear in the armed forces, with most soldiers unwilling to express themselves freely. Their caution is well founded—during the Green Movement protests of 2009, intelligence authorities arrested a number of military personnel, especially from the navy, and accused them of working against the Islamic Republic.

Indoctrination

As an ideological regime, the Islamic Republic has worked restlessly to indoctrinate citizens from all walks of life, but disseminating its views throughout the armed forces has been particularly important in terms of exerting control and neutralizing the coup threat.[65] This indoctrination is carried out by placing clerics at all levels of the military, from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to individual platoons. These clerics are required to identify personnel who have doubts about Islamic ideology and report them to counterintelligence.

To oversee this indoctrination, the regime has established an Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader in the Armed Forces (Hozeh-e Namayandegi-ye Vali-ye Faqih dar Nirou-ye Mosallah) in each military and security branch, including the Joint Chiefs, Artesh, IRGC, Basij, police, and Defense Ministry. These offices are independent from the military command; they are directed by clerical commissars

appointed by and committed to Ayatollah Khamenei. Their activities are also overseen by the Ideological Political Bureau in the Office of the Commander-in-Chief (Daftar-e Aghidati va Siasi-ye Farmandehi-ye Kol-e-Qova), headed by Hojatoleslam Gholamreza Safaei (who led the regime's ideological political directorate after the 1979 revolution, when Khamenei was deputy defense minister). Currently, this office designs and implements all of the ideological-political training for military and security personnel.[66]

The heads of each Office of the Representative are clerics, but their staffs include many military personnel as well. Each office has three main deputies: a political deputy, an ideological and political training deputy, and a deputy of supervision and confirmation of qualifications (*moavenat-e nezarat va tayid-e* salahiat). The first two deputies focus on the political and religious training of military/security personnel, which includes promoting the superiority of the clergy, the centrality of the regime's founding doctrine (*velayat-e faqih*), and the legitimacy of the Supreme Leader's claim to represent the "Hidden Imam."[67] The third deputy is responsible for confirming the ideological-political qualifications of military personnel seeking promotion. Officers cannot be promoted without such confirmation, regardless of their professional qualifications. Those who participate in religious activities or pro-regime rallies have a better chance of securing "premature rank promotion or command assignment without attainment of appropriate

rank," giving the clerical establishment vast influence over the armed forces.[68]

The regime also has a tradition of asking clerics who have served as Representatives of the Supreme Leader to lead intelligence organizations, and vice versa. For example, Hojatoleslam Saidi, the current chief of the IRGC Office of the Representative, headed the IRGC Counterintelligence Organization between 1983 and 1987. And Hojatoleslam Haydar Moslehi, the current minster of intelligence, headed the Office of the Representative in the Basij during the reform era.

decreased temporarily during the reform era, but it rose to new heights with the reemergence of the hardliners and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's 2005 electoral victory.

The IRGC in particular has become deeply involved in business as a means of supporting the clerical establishment. Studies of IRGC and Basij participation in Iran's political economy show that the latter's business activities are limited to guaranteeing the welfare of its personnel, while the IRGC's influence extends to every sector of the economy. The Guards therefore have even more incentive to support the regime and protect

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                 Ideological Political Bureau
                      OFFICE OF THE
                  COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

        Representative of the              Representative of the
          Supreme Leader                    Supreme Leader
       JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF            MINISTRY OF DEFENSE

 Representative of the    Representative of the    Representative of the
   Supreme Leader           Supreme Leader           Supreme Leader
       ARTESH                    IRGC                    POLICE
```
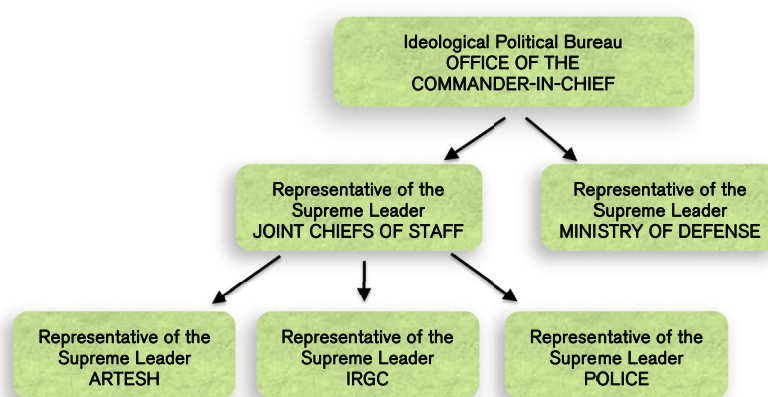
FIG 3. Regime Indoctrination Organizations

Although indoctrination is compulsory for all military and security personnel, the volume of ideological-political training is most intense for the IRGC. Thus, while the IRGC is mainly responsible for controlling the regular military, the clerical establishment strives to control the IRGC by inculcating its ideology.

Economic Co-optation

The regime uses economic participation as another method of neutralizing coup attempts, with expanded military entrepreneurship becoming one of the most common forms of co-optation.[69] By involving military and security personnel in business ventures and other economic affairs, the regime gives them extra incentive to remain loyal. According to former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, this strategy was used to depoliticize the military establishment, especially the IRGC, after the Iran-Iraq War.[70] Military participation in the economy

their privileges.[71] Indeed, the scope and scale of the IRGC's participation is much larger than that of the regular military, though the Artesh still boasts significant involvement of its own. Like other branches, the Artesh established a cooperative foundation (Bonyad-e Taavon-e Artesh) that has been involved in numerous economic projects, including construction contracts with Qom municipality[72] and investments in the mining industry.[73] As with the Basij, however, most of the Artesh's business activities are aimed at guaranteeing the welfare of its personnel.

To preserve its growing economic benefits, the IRGC has also increased its political involvement, leading some observers to conclude that the Guards have escaped the clerical establishment's control. According to this argument, the IRGC is now the most important power hub in Iran, controlling the Supreme Leader in the same way that Turkish soldiers controlled the caliph in medieval

times.[74] Yet the regime's ample mechanisms for controlling the IRGC show that Khamenei remains above the Guards, as does his inclusion of Artesh personnel in the Armed Forces General Command Headquarters. The composition of the Office of the Commander-in-Chief is another clear indicator: its three main deputies are General Hashami, the counterintelligence chief; General Shirazi, the military chief; and Hojatoleslam Safaei, the ideological-political chief. Like AFGCH chief Firouzabadi, none of these men hails from the IRGC.

Another indication of Khamenei's continued superiority is the broad role played by the Representative of the Supreme Leader in the IRGC. Over the past three decades, Khamenei has taken many responsibilities previously belonging to Guard commanders and reassigned them to his representative's office in the IRGC, including the key posts of political deputy, public affairs deputy, and propaganda deputy. These appointments show that while the IRGC has expanded its influence over many corners of Iranian society, the Supreme Leader still controls the IRGC, though this could change post-Khamenei.

3 | Neutralizing External Threats

FOREIGN INTERVENTION has been a concern for the Islamic Republic since its inception. Regime elites have long interpreted the Iran-Iraq War as an imperialist effort to overthrow them, and fears of external regime change only increased after the post–September 11 U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. To counter this threat, Iran has sought to create a "strategic deterrence point" that makes international players unable or unwilling to topple the regime.

This doctrine has internal and external components, many of which focus on asymmetric warfare. The internal elements include "mosaic defense," a strategy that involves decentralizing the IRGC and establishing provincial commands (*sepah-e ostani*) throughout the country. In each province, the IRGC has placed a single commander in charge of all Guard and Basij forces in the area (some full-time, some volunteer), with responsibility for defending his territory using only these personnel. This approach enables the Guards to act independently in times of crisis.

The external component of the regime's deterrence strategy centers on confronting enemies outside Iran's borders. Here, Tehran is guided by the words of Imam Ali: "Swear to God when a nation allows an enemy to enter its territory, without a doubt it will be debased and oppressed."[75] Based on this idea, 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, Tehran seeks not only to challenge America and Israel's domination, but also to deter 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.[76] The IRGC Qods Force is the regime's main tool in this fight against "international arrogance" (*estekbar-e*

jahani). According to one Qods commander, the force is responsible for maintaining a presence in the international arena, identifying local enemies, and empowering local allies to "resist" these enemies.[77]

The regime uses both material and ideological incentives to recruit and organize foreigners as its local agents. Thanks to considerable oil revenues, it is frequently able to buy such loyalty, especially in developing countries across Africa and the Middle East. It has annually invested millions of dollars in these countries while the Iranian people suffer from a poor economic situation at home.

Another regime tool for spreading influence abroad is the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC). When it was formed after the 1979 revolution, the IKRC was a domestic charity focused on assisting poor Iranian families, divorced women, and orphans, particularly in underdeveloped parts of the country.[78] Since then, however, it has expanded to Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and South America, with operations in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan,[79] Tajikistan, Sudan, Comoros,[80] Syria, Bangladesh, Venezuela, Mauritania, Senegal, and Somalia.[81] One of its goals is to generate positive images of the Islamic Republic in the hope of attracting new recruits, spreading the regime's soft power under the guise of providing humanitarian aid.

Ideology is used for recruitment purposes as well, especially among Shiite populations. Since 1979, the regime has established several organizations to export the Islamic Revolution abroad and bring a new group of sympathizers under its ideological umbrella. In 1995, these institutions were incorporated under a new entity called the Islamic Culture and Communications Organization (ICCO). According to its charter, the ICCO's responsibilities include reviving and disseminating Islamic tenets in order to bring the true message of Islam to the world. In practical terms, this meant expanding cultural relations with various Muslim and "oppressed" nations and communities, as well as strengthening and regulating existing relations.

Over time, ICCO branches were created in sixty-seven countries.[82] The organization also publishes several magazines in different languages, including English, Spanish, Arabic, Urdu, Kurdi, and Azari.

As an umbrella organization, the ICCO has several subgroups, including the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly (Majma-e-Jahani-e Ahlul Bayt) and the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought (Majma-e Jahani-e Taqrib-e Mazaheb-e Islam). These networks propagate Islamic ideologies outside Iran while absorbing and deploying people who are interested in pursuing religious studies in Iran. As of 2008, approximately 20,000 foreign students had graduated from Iranian institutions such as the University of Islamic Schools of Thought and returned to their countries.[83] Al-Mustafa International University is another Iranian school that trains a wide range of Islamic seminary students, with more than sixty branches outside Iran and students from 110 countries studying at the main Qom campus.[84] Many of these students return to their countries to work in local seminary schools or mosques as Islamic propagandists. And as of 2012, Iran had managed to develop more than twenty of its own seminary schools in Lebanon, Syria, Comoros, Pakistan, and other countries.[85]

Material and ideological incentives have also helped Tehran establish and support several pro-regime militant organizations around the world. Hezbollah in Lebanon is the most successful example and has become a key Iranian proxy.[86] For three decades, the regime has tried to create other Hezbollah nuclei in countries with significant Shiite populations, including Iraq, Bahrain, Pakistan, and Yemen. Jaish al-Mahdi and Asaib Ahl al-Haqq in Iraq are two notable examples. According to one IRGC commander, creating and funding such proxies is less expensive for Tehran than upgrading its military via high-priced equipment that could easily be destroyed by a superpower.[87] Other commanders have considered exporting the Basij militia model to Iraq and Syria in order to neutralize threats to those governments.[88]

Apart from establishing Hezbollah clones, the regime has sought to empower sympathetic foreign groups through financial aid, training, and military equipment. For example, it has long provided guns to militant Shiites in Iraq; according to one commander in the Badr Brigades, Tehran asked him to travel to Iraq and find a place to deploy military equipment after the 1991 Gulf War.[89] The regime also supports radical groups in Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories (e.g., Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad). Each year, it allocates millions of dollars to such groups, often using them to identify and target enemies, including U.S. military personnel.

Public diplomacy and propaganda are key regime tools as well. To expand its influence among foreign publics, especially in the Middle East and developing countries, Tehran has established four international television networks: Press TV, al-Alam, Sahar Network, and HispanTV. Press TV is a twenty-four-hour English-language satellite station aimed at various English-speaking populations. Al-Alam is an Arabic channel that targets Arab communities, many of which look to the Islamic Republic as an alternative to their secular, Western-oriented authoritarian governments. For example, the network was the first to broadcast images of British naval personnel seized by the IRGC in 2007, an incident intended to show Iranian military power. These images were welcomed by the many Muslims who had experienced feelings of humiliation under British colonialism. The regime also targets South American populations that have long criticized U.S. interference. In 2011, it established the Spanish-language network HispanTV to counter "distortion" caused by the perceived Western "monopoly on news about Iran and the Middle East in Latin America."[90] Throughout all of these external efforts, the regime has striven to present an alternate image of Iran—that of an independent and democratic Islamic nation opposed to the United States and its allies in the Middle East. For a time, that approach gained much traction. Coupled with the gap between state and society in most Middle Eastern countries, Tehran's massive foreign propaganda campaign led many Muslims to see President Ahmadinejad as a hero willing to challenge the West. Yet this picture changed dramatically after the regime's suppression of the Green Movement following the 2009 election.

Conclusion

OVER THE PAST THREE DECADES, the Islamic Republic has faced several internal and external crises, including coup attempts, war, and mass uprisings. Thus far, the regime has been able to manage these crises and neutralize threats to its survival. The creation of a parallel military structure, most notably the IRGC, helped nullify the threat of military takeover. The clerical establishment has since been able to control the IRGC through intense indoctrination, pervasive surveillance, and economic enticements. Externally, Tehran has avoided foreign intervention through a combination of public diplomacy, asymmetric warfare, and deterrent actions abroad. It has also expanded its influence in the Muslim world and among developing countries, in part by empowering local radical groups that align with its interests. Meanwhile, the creation of various Basij branches has helped the regime recruit and organize supporters at home even as it marginalized reformists and the social groups that backed them, including students, youths, and women. And by increasing its investment in social security apparatuses, Tehran eventually dismantled the Green Movement of 2009, establishing a climate of fear in its wake.

Yet the regime has also made explicit attempts to disrupt and reorganize the natural order of Iranian society, and that approach could endanger its long-term survival. In years past, Tehran's strategy greatly reduced the threat of coups, foreign intervention, and revolution, but longevity does not automatically imply sustainability.[91] The character of Iranian society has changed dramatically of late as increasing numbers of educated youths thwart government suppression and find creative ways to access new information and communication technologies. In addition, high unemployment, inflation, mismanagement, and pervasive political and economic corruption have eroded the Islamic Republic's legitimacy over the past decade, producing deep popular discontent.

In this climate, the regime has only two options: accept the country's gradual, deep sociopolitical changes or brace itself for another mass uprising. Although government control has expanded across all sectors of society, the people's frustration could still lead to spontaneous riots and open calls for political change. Like predicting an earthquake, the probability and timing of such an uprising are impossible to know with certainty. Yet many scholars believe social riots will erupt if the regime does not begin implementing major reforms in the near future. And the longer Tehran waits to move toward reform, the larger and more violent such riots will be.

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