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Iran: Mounting Tension between President Rouhani and the Revolutionary Guards

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The tension between Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and the Revolutionary Guards that was evident during the presidential election campaign has intensified in recent weeks and evolved into a confrontation that is unprecedented in its openly severe nature. The current confrontation surrounds two main issues: Iran's missile strike against Islamic State targets in Syria, and President Rouhani's criticism of the Revolutionary Guards' involvement in the economy.

On June 18, 2017, Iran launched mid-range surface-to-surface missiles against Islamic State targets in the area of Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria. Immediately following the attack, the Revolutionary Guards issued a statement announcing that the attack was in response to the combined terrorist attack by the Islamic State in Tehran on June 7. After the statement was released President Rouhani justified the attack, calling it "completely correct and essential," but clarified that the missiles were not fired based on the decision of "one man or a specific military unit," but rather, according to standard procedure, based on the decision of the Supreme National Security Council, which convened after the attacks in Tehran. Rouhani's statement was intended to emphasize that the Revolutionary Guards do not operate independently, and are subject to the decisions of the Supreme National Security Council, headed by the President. In turn, Revolutionary Guards were quick to issue another statement specifying that the missiles were fired in accordance with the instructions of the Supreme Leader. The Guards also emphasized that the intelligence for the operation was collected by their own Quds Force, in contrast to the claim of the Minister of Intelligence, who following the missile strike declared that his office had provided the Revolutionary Guards with the requisite intelligence.

Following the exchange between the President and the Revolutionary Guards, the Iranian conservative daily Kayhan launched a scathing attack against Rouhani. According to an

editorial published on June 25, the Laylat al-Qadr attack, as the missile strike is called in Iran, was carried out under the direct orders of the Supreme Leader based on intelligence provided by the Revolutionary Guards. “The man who frightened the public regarding the threat of war,” the editorial argued, “meaning, Rouhani, who woke up the following morning to the sound of missiles, should not claim to have authorized the operation.” The sharp confrontation prompted senior officials within the Iranian security establishment to intervene in the affair in an effort to ease the tensions. Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, clarified that all Council decisions are authorized by the Supreme Leader in his capacity as the commander in chief of the armed forces.

A few days later, a more serious exchanged occurred between the President and the Revolutionary Guards, this time pertaining to the organization’s involvement in the Iranian economy. During a meeting with businessmen on June 22, President Rouhani stated that his government was committed to economic privatization but argued that true privatization could not be achieved in accordance with the plan announced by the Supreme Leader in 2006, because “parts of the economy that were held by an unarmed government have been transferred to an armed government.” Rouhani thereby expressed his objection to the Revolutionary Guards’ ongoing control over large parts of the Iranian economy, especially by means of the Khatam al-Anbiya construction headquarters. The President views the Guards’ involvement as a factor delaying progress in the Iranian economy, especially after the lifting of sanctions and the emergence of new foreign investment opportunities in Iran.

This statement by the President sparked bitter protest, including from Revolutionary Guards Commander Mohammad Ali Jafari, who maintained that it was unfair for the government, which had transferred the management of building and development projects to the Revolutionary Guards during the period of sanctions and took pride in these projects, to now attack the economic involvement of the Guards. The Guards’ involvement in the economy, he stressed, was one of the roles they played in defending the revolution and its achievements. The President’s criticism of the Revolutionary Guards was likewise rebuffed by Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Revolutionary Guard’s Quds Force. In a speech at a conference in Kashan province on July 4, Soleimani stated that no one is entitled to weaken or attack the Revolutionary Guards, as they serve to protect the country and its citizens, and without them, the state would not exist. Criticism of the President was also leveled by Abdollah Abdollahi, head of the construction unit of the Revolutionary Guards, who rejected the disapproval of the Guards’ involvement in the economy and criticized the recent deal signed by the government with the French energy giant Total.

The mounting confrontation between Rouhani and the Revolutionary Guards must be understood against the background of the President's sweeping victory in the May elections, and the significant successes of the reformist camp in the elections for the local councils. The President criticized the Revolutionary Guards during the election campaign, accusing them of attempting to thwart the nuclear agreement, and now appears to be trying to take advantage of the public support he received in the elections to promote his aims, which include reducing the Guards' involvement in politics and the economy. However, Rouhani's success in overcoming the opposition of the Revolutionary Guards, which fear for their economic interests and their budget (which is determined by the government), depends on the backing of the Supreme Leader who, since the elections, has actually stepped up his criticism of the President. In a meeting with senior regime officials held in June, Khamenei publically humiliated Rouhani by ridiculing him for not doing enough to improve the country's economy. He warned Rouhani against dividing Iranian society as did former President Abolhassan Banisadr, who was impeached in 1981 and forced into exile due to his differences with Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution. Other senior members of the conservative establishment have joined in the criticism of the President and accused him of factionalism. In an unusual act, the spokesperson of the judiciary warned against a recurrence of *fetneh* (civil war, a term used by the regime to refer to the popular riots after the Iranian presidential elections in the summer of 2009), while also making reference to impeached President Banisadr.

Against this background, Rouhani was harassed during a Global Jerusalem Day (June 23) rally in Tehran by a number of hardline demonstrators who shouted derogatory slogans at him, such as "the American cleric" and "Rouhani, you will share the same fate as Banisadr." Following this incident, supporters of Rouhani launched a social media campaign under the title: "I support Rouhani." These personal attacks and the name-calling of the president are extremely unusual in Iran and reflect the intensity of the rift between the President and the conservative establishment under the leadership of Khamenei, as well as the Revolutionary Guards.

In his confrontation with the Revolutionary Guards, President Rouhani can rely on his broad public support, which was manifested in the elections. Still, his ability to promote his policy is limited not only due to doubts regarding the extent to which he enjoys the backing of the Supreme Leader, but also in light of developments in the international and regional arena. The policy of the Trump administration, which views Iran as a primary enemy, the sanctions proposed in the US Congress, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's statements that the administration intends to help elements within Iran make a "regime change by peaceful means" all serve to strengthen the conservatives, led by the Supreme Leader, who hold that the United States is striving to overthrow the regime and

cannot be trusted. The increasing Saudi pressure – manifested inter alia in the Qatar crisis and Riyadh's support for a conference convened by the opposition group Mojahedin-e Khalq in Paris on July 1 – has provided a tailwind for the conservative approach, which maintains that Iran needs to enhance its deterrence capabilities, in part by strengthening the Revolutionary Guards and the country's capabilities in the realm of ballistic missiles.

In conclusion, the internal political confrontation in Iran did not subside following the elections, and is liable to intensify further with the anticipated appointments to Rouhani's new government. Also controversial is the possibility, reported in the Iranian media, that the President may appoint a defense minister not from the ranks of the Revolutionary Guards but rather from the regular Iranian army. The intensifying confrontation between the President and both the Revolutionary Guards and the conservative establishment holds great significance for the struggle that can be expected to heat up, apparently in the coming years, over the succession to the position of Supreme Leader. Major power holders, including Rouhani and the Revolutionary Guards, will seek to play a central role in this struggle, with the aim of influencing the successor to the Supreme Leader.