



Islamic Republic of Iran Army soldiers and pilots marching on Islamic Republic of Iran Army Day, April 17, 2012. Photo: Hosein Velayati (CC BY 4.0)

Is Iran Really Turning from Islamic Theocracy to Military Autocracy?

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With the approach of the Iranian presidential elections, there is increased discussion in Iran and in the West surrounding the possible election of a “military president,” who will come from the ranks of the Revolutionary Guards and channel his military skills to the severe domestic and external challenges facing the Islamic Republic. While the standing of the Revolutionary Guards has strengthened in recent decades, and they play a prominent role in politics and the economy, any discussion of the “militarization” of the Iranian state must, inter alia, distinguish between direct intervention in politics by the Revolutionary Guards and the integration of former commanders in politics. In any case, the chances of the Revolutionary Guards taking over the Iranian political system seem slim as long as the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, holds the reins of power. Khamenei’s death could accelerate the process of militarization of the Iranian state and perhaps even prepare the ground for an alternative model of governance, with far-reaching implications for Iran’s domestic and foreign policy.

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The Possible Election of a “Military President” in Iran

With the approach of the Iranian presidential elections, currently scheduled for June 18, 2021, there is increased discussion surrounding the possible election of a “military president” (رئیس جمهوری نظامی). Over the past two years, calls in Iran that support the election of a president from among the armed forces, particularly from the ranks of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), have strengthened. This sentiment has assumed greater urgency given the conflict with the United States and President Donald Trump’s maximum pressure strategy; the severe economic crisis that has plagued Iran following the reinstatement of the sanctions; and the COVID-19 pandemic. The expectation is that a president of this sort could take advantage of his military experience to lead the executive branch and address his country’s problems with greater effectiveness. In April 2020, the reformist newspaper *Shargh* speculated that given the crises that Iran faces and the [loss of public confidence](#) in the political system, the two main political factions (the hardliners and the pragmatists) might nominate former generals as their candidates in the elections, because they could muster greater public confidence than ordinary politicians.

The possibility of the election of a military president has prompted a heated internal debate in Iran. Supporters of the idea point to the charm of those in uniform and argue that a military figure has an advantage in coping with the country’s challenges, due to his command and organizational skills. Opponents, in contrast, argue that managing a country and society is different from commanding military units on the battlefield; historical experience demonstrates that command qualities are no guarantee of success in the political arena, and the Iranian public does not tend to vote for former senior military personnel.

In March 2018, former Majlis member Mohammad-Ali Pour-Mokhtar, who himself was a member of the Revolutionary Guards, said

in an [interview](#) for the news site *Khabar Online* that “there is no doubt that a military president can save the country from its problems.” The sentiment was echoed by the radical political activist Hossein Allah-Karam, who serves as the head of the coordinating council of the Islamic militant group Ansar-e Hezbollah. Allah-Karam [said](#) that “a strategic military man is more fitting for the presidential role,” and that if Iran’s citizens understand that Iran must fulfill “its regional obligation,” there is no doubt that they will vote for a man like this. As a possible candidate for Iran’s presidency, he mentioned the name of the commander of the Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, who was killed by the United States nearly two years later. On the eve of Iran’s presidential elections in 2017, there were reports in the Iranian media of the hardliners’ intention to have Soleimani run as their candidate in the elections, although in September 2016 Soleimani made a [special announcement](#) in which he denied any intention to run in the elections, and emphasized that he intends to remain a “soldier” in the service of the Supreme Leader, the regime, and the Iranian nation until the end of his life.

The calls for former military leaders to run in the elections aroused significant opposition. In April 2018, the Iranian news site *Fararu* [pointed out](#) the poor experience of former senior officers who competed in Iranian presidential elections in the past few decades. In 2001, Ali Shamkhani, former commander of the IRGC navy, who now serves as the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, won [only 2.6 percent](#) of the votes in the presidential elections in which Mohammad Khatami won a second term. Four years later, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, who later became mayor of Tehran, earned [about 14 percent](#) of the vote in the elections won by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Ghalibaf, a former senior officer in the IRGC and commander of the law enforcement forces, is now the Speaker of the Majlis. Former IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaee, who today serves as the secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council and who

also submitted his candidacy in those elections, withdrew from them shortly before the end of the race. In the controversial 2009 elections, which led to riots against the backdrop of claims by the reformist opposition that the results were rigged in order to enable another victory by Ahmadinejad, Rezaee won only 1.73 percent of the votes. In the 2013 elections, won by Hassan Rouhani, Rezaee received 10.6 percent of the votes, while Ghalibaf, who ran again, received 16.5 percent of the votes.

The *Fararu* website published statements by prominent political activists from both principal camps warning against the election of a military president who could, they claimed, pave the way to dictatorship. The conservative political activist Nasser Imani claimed that placing the country's affairs in the hands of a dictator contradicts the principles of the Islamic Republic. The reformist activist Esmail Garami-Moghaddam argued that while Iran's citizens admire military figures and respect their central standing in ensuring the country's security, just as a president cannot be a good diplomat or economist, likewise military leaders cannot succeed as presidents. Reformist activist Abdollah Ramezanzadeh also expressed concern that the entry of military figures into the electoral system would lead to factionalism in the armed forces and would weaken them.

In early October 2020 the conservative daily *Jomhuri-e Eslami* published reservations about the idea of electing a military president. An editorial published by the newspaper's editor, Masih Mohajeri, argued that while the participation of retired military figures is not against the law, neither does it serve the national interest. Mohajeri claimed that "the military spirit" of former senior military personnel is not appropriate for civilian and political management. He noted that the fact that Iranian citizens have refrained from voting for candidates from a military background in the past proves that Iranian society is not willing to accept a military leader or someone with a military background as president. It is

preferable, therefore, that military figures serve their country in other ways and not enter the political arena.

Despite the criticism of the possible election of a president with a military background, the public debate on this issue has continued and even intensified, after Hossein Dehghan, former Minister of Defense and advisor to Iran's leader on defense affairs, announced his intention to run in the upcoming elections. In the 1980s, Dehghan was the commander of the Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon and among the founders of Hezbollah. In 1990 he was appointed commander of the IRGC air force, and in 1992 he was appointed deputy chief of the IRGC General Staff. Dehghan's chances of winning in the elections seem quite slim, especially because he is not well-known enough and does not have exceptional public support. However, his military and political experience, his proximity to the Supreme Leader, and the fact that he is considered a centrist who enjoys support among both main political camps might help him.

Dehghan's candidacy reawakened the debate on the suitability of a former military figure for the position of president. In an interview for the *Hamshahri* newspaper, conservative politician Mohsen Rafighdoost, who was one of the founders of the Revolutionary Guards and served as the Minister of the Revolutionary Guards in the 1980s, expressed support for the election of a military figure as president. Rafighdoost argued that under the current difficult economic conditions, it is worth examining which of the candidates is preferable for the country's future, and if a military figure is elected, he can save the nation from the difficult situation.

The Militarization of the Islamic Republic: Exaggeration or Reality?

The recent developments in the Iranian political system have aroused much interest among researchers in the West, who have debated the increasing influence of the Revolutionary

Guards in Iranian politics and the process of militarization of the Iranian state. Following the election of Ghalibaf as Speaker of the Majlis after the parliamentary elections of February 2020, and against the backdrop of preparations for the Iranian presidential elections, [researchers raised](#) the possibility that political power in Iran is moving from “turban wearers” (clerics) to “boot wearers” (military leaders), and that the next stage in the IRGC takeover of the government might come with the election of a candidate identified with the Revolutionary Guards as president of the Republic. The possible candidacy of Dehghan has been [presented](#) as an expression of “the militarization of the Iranian presidency” and of the fact that the IRGC “is in pole position to take Iran’s presidency just as it has taken its [parliament](#).”

Unquestionably, the standing of the Revolutionary Guards in Iran has strengthened in recent decades. Today the IRGC plays a significant role in the Iranian political system, as well as in the economy. Despite the political will of the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, to prevent the armed forces from intervening in political life, IRGC political involvement has continued and even increased. Following the student riots that broke out in Tehran in July 1999, several dozen officers in the Revolutionary Guards signed a [letter](#) to then-President Mohammad Khatami, warning him that their patience had run out and demanded that he take immediate, forceful steps to suppress the demonstrations.

Since then, the Revolutionary Guards have continued to express support for the candidacy of hardline politicians who are faithful to the values of the Islamic Revolution. The appointment of Mohammad Ali-Jafari as commander of the Revolutionary Guards in 2007 signified an important stage in increasing IRGC involvement in politics. In a speech in September 2007, Jafari [emphasized](#) that the Revolutionary Guards are not a one-dimensional military organization, and that their mission is to safeguard the revolution and its achievements

from domestic enemies. Later, Jafari described the Revolutionary Guards as an organization that is not “entirely military” but also “political and ideological.”

During Rouhani’s presidency, senior figures in the Revolutionary Guards echoed the criticism of the President’s policy. Underlying this criticism were the President’s efforts to reduce the influence of the Revolutionary Guards in politics and the economy, and his

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conciliatory foreign policy. In a [speech](#) at Imam Sadiq University in Tehran in December 2013, Jafari expressed his reservations about the increasing Western influence in the management of the country’s affairs. In addition, he referred implicitly to Rouhani’s statements regarding the need to distance the Revolutionary Guards from politics, and claimed that since the most significant threat to the Islamic Revolution is in the political arena, the IRGC, committed to defending the achievements of the revolution, cannot remain silent in face of this threat.

Meanwhile, the IRGC has continued to expand its economic involvement, mainly by means of the organization’s construction corporation, Khatam al-Anbiya. In late December 2016, then-Defense Minister Dehghan [declared](#) that dozens of central economic projects on the national level in the fields of oil, gas, transportation, dams, water distribution, and communications are currently carried out by this corporation. While the removal of the economic sanctions following the signing of the nuclear deal in the summer of 2015 provided an opportunity for the entry of foreign companies into the Iranian economy, which could have threatened Revolutionary Guards economic interests, their reinstatement following President Trump’s withdrawal from the JCPOA largely thwarted

President Rouhani's intentions of reducing IRGC economic involvement.

The involvement of the Revolutionary Guards in managing the country's affairs was likewise recently reflected in the [COVID-19 crisis](#). Similar to past emergency situations such as natural disasters, this crisis has also been characterized by the increasing involvement of the Revolutionary Guards in actions to contain the outbreak and provide aid for those affected, for example by disinfecting streets, setting up hospitals, carrying out COVID-19 tests, and supplying medical equipment, logistics, and manpower. The increasing involvement of the Revolutionary Guards, which is a function of the considerable resources at its disposal, is necessary for it not only in order to ensure the organization's economic interests, but also to maintain political strength in the internal balance of power in Iran, especially in competition with the President, to improve its public image, and to deepen its penetration of society, which serves security interests related to regime stability.

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Yet despite these developments, the interrelationship between the Revolutionary Guards and the Iranian state and political system is more complex, and demands an informed and sober examination.

First, the academic debate surrounding the possible militarization of the Iranian political system has continued for over a decade, especially since the election of Ahmadinejad as President in 2005. Even though Ahmadinejad was apparently not an official member of the IRGC, and served as a volunteer in the Basij militia during the Iran-Iraq War, he is considered one of the closest allies of the Revolutionary Guards. After his election in 2005, his political adversaries claimed that the IRGC and the

Basij had played a central role in his election; Ahmadinejad himself rewarded the organization by appointing former IRGC figures as ministers. According to researchers Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kourosh Rahimkhani in their book [Postrevolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook](#), 18 out of 45 members of Ahmadinejad's first government and 19 out of 42 members of his second government were former members of the Revolutionary Guards—a record number of ministers who were former members of the organization since the revolution in 1979.

Ahmadinejad's controversial victory in the 2009 elections and the riots that broke out in their wake further strengthened the claims of a "military coup" by Ahmadinejad and the Revolutionary Guards. Researchers in the West saw the developments in Iran as proof of the increasingly significant role of the IRGC in Iranian politics. A few of them [depicted](#) the elections as a reflection of "a silent revolution" that "has moved Iran even further from its revolutionary theocratic and republican ideals, towards a militarised security state."

In June 2009, two researchers [speculated](#) that the elections would further strengthen the connections between Ahmadinejad and the Revolutionary Guards, and lead to the Iranian theocracy becoming an ideological military dictatorship. An article published in the *Washington Quarterly* in winter 2011 [held](#) that Iran had become a "praetorian" state, and that the 2009 elections were an expression of "a de facto coup by the emerging militant class and its preferred candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, against the clerical oligarchy that came to power through the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution."

However, the disagreements that arose in April 2011 between Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader following Khamenei's refusal to accept the resignation of Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi quickly turned into a severe political crisis among the Iranian leadership, and Ahmadinejad finished his presidency politically battered and isolated, after two years

of unprecedented power struggles among the top political echelons. In this confrontation, [the Revolutionary Guards allied themselves](#) clearly and unequivocally with the Supreme Leader and against the President, in an effort to protect not only the stability of the regime but also its interests.

Second, discussion of the militarization of Iranian politics requires distinguishing between attempts by senior commanders in active service in the armed forces to influence politics, for example by means of public support for hardline candidates in election campaigns as described above, and the integration of former officers within the political system, which mainly reflects changes in the make-up of the Iranian political elite.

Since the Revolution, and even more so following the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War (1988) and the death of Khomeini (1989), the political elite has undergone changes that are reflected in part in the increasing presence in politics of former members of the armed forces, especially the IRGC, which is considered the central and leading military organization in Iran, clearly favored by the authorities over the regular army. This trend can be explained by the armed forces becoming a central means of social and political mobilization, as in other states in the Middle East. This process is occurring in parallel with an ongoing decline in the number of clerics represented in the political institutions elected by the public. For example, [the number of clerics in the Majlis](#) has declined from 164 in the first Majlis (1980-1984) and 153 in the second Majlis (1984-1988), to only 16 in the tenth Majlis (2016-2020) and 31 in the current Majlis.

Furthermore, former senior commanders who enter politics do not necessarily represent the particular interests of the armed forces and the Revolutionary Guards. The reformist daily newspaper *Shargh* recently [claimed](#), correctly, that some of the potential candidates in the upcoming Iranian presidential elections cannot be referred to as military figures. According to the newspaper, the hardline camp is trying to

emphasize the military past of its candidates, such as Mohsen Rezaee, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Ali Shamkhani, or Hossein Dehghan, in an effort to enhance their problematic public image due to their being conservative politicians. While Ghalibaf served in command positions in the Revolutionary Guards and the internal security forces for a long time, he has also served as a politician for many years. Rezaee too retired from the Revolutionary Guards almost 30 years ago, and today he can be considered an economist more than a soldier. Dehghan likewise filled senior positions in the IRGC and the Ministry of Defense, but in recent years has served in positions that are not military, such as the head of the Martyrs Foundation, advisor to the Supreme Leader, and member of the Expediency Discernment Council.

A third point: the chances of a true militarization of the Iranian state are quite slim as long as Supreme Leader Khamenei continues to hold the reins of power. The Revolutionary Guards have indeed grown stronger under Khamenei, who needs them in order to ensure the stability of his regime, but the IRGC also needs him as a source of legitimacy. As Ali-Reza Eshraghi and Amir Hossein Mahdavi [noted](#), the Revolutionary Guards can enjoy the best of both worlds, as an organization that maintains a distance from the business of government and intervenes only when it sees fit. They noted that if the IRGC were to manage the country's day-to-day affairs, they would have to implement adjustments and compromises that could undermine their revolutionary image. In addition, it can also be argued that Khamenei himself benefits from the duality that characterizes the Iranian system—on the one hand institutions that are elected by the public, chief among them the presidency, and on the other hand institutions that are not elected by the public, such as the Revolutionary Guards. This reality enables him to maneuver better among the various power centers, and consequently he does not have a

genuine interest in allowing the IRGC to take over the elected power centers.

Toward the End of the Khamenei Era

The death of Khamenei could accelerate the militarization process of the Iranian state, and even prepare the ground for a transition to an alternative model of governance and to Iran's becoming a military autocracy. At this stage the Revolutionary Guards do not have an independent political standing, and they both need and are subordinate to the Supreme Leader, but this could change in the future. It is possible that in the first stage the Revolutionary Guards would try to strengthen their direct influence on the next leader and strive for a kind of dual government based on a religious leader with more limited powers and a "military" president from the ranks of the IRGC. Such a government could later develop into autocratic rule by a military leader. Iran already experienced a similar process when the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, army officer Reza Khan, ruled starting in 1921 as Prime Minister under the last Qajar Shah (king), Ahmad Shah, until he brought about his overthrow and proclaimed himself Shah in 1925. Given the legitimacy crisis of the Islamic regime in Iran and the ongoing erosion of the clerics' standing, it is not clear if the Revolutionary Guards would need the Supreme Leader over time in order to receive religious legitimacy.

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The IRGC takeover of the Iranian political system could have far-reaching implications for the state's domestic and foreign policy. Many former members of the IRGC, primarily those who participated in the Iran-Iraq War, who grew up in Iran and had almost no exposure

to Western education and influence, are identified with the new hardline faction. They call for returning to the values of the Islamic Revolution, which in their view were sidelined during the presidencies of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). With regard to foreign policy, they frequently adopt a hawkish, ultra-nationalist, and defiant approach toward the West, based on a worldview that holds that the West is in processes of decline, and that Iran must implement a forceful policy in striving for regional influence and even international power. This stance could influence Iran's policy on central foreign issues, including the nuclear program, Iranian aspirations in the region, and its approach toward the United States and its allies in the Arab world and toward Israel. However, former members of the IRGC and the Revolutionary Guards as a whole should not be seen as a monolithic bloc. Members of the Revolutionary Guards come from different and diverse political, social, and economic backgrounds; thus they also represent a range of political views.

At the end of the day, the future of Iranian politics depends on additional factors, including the relations between Iran and the West, social and demographic processes, and the economic situation. All of these influence the interrelationships between the Revolutionary Guards and the political system, and the nature of the Islamic Republic after the Khamenei era.

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