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CLERICS AND COMMANDERS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EVOLUTION
OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS' ROLE IN THE
POLITICAL ECONOMY OF IRAN

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), also known as the *Pasdaran*, is a unique military institution created to secure the ideals of Iran's revolution as well its territory. Since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, however, the IRGC's role in Iran's political economy has increased significantly beyond that mandate. Unfortunately, the leadership in the United States has demonstrated neither the aptitude nor the desire to understand Iran. Given the IRGC's command of Iran's nuclear development program and encroachment into its foreign policy, it is more important than ever to understand Iran's leadership structure. This study attempts to explain an important part of that structure by considering the influence of the leadership dynamics of Iran along with its economic and religious/social conditions on the IRGC's position within the state, using an historical analysis consisting of secondary sources. Accordingly, the IRGC's rise to power can be traced back to the dual sovereignty written into the constitution of the Islamic Republic. Though the divine sovereignty, embodied by the *velayat-e faqih* (Supreme Leader), is supposed to take precedence over popular sovereignty, embodied by the directly elected President, when the two conflict, Khomeini's successor, Khamenei, a junior cleric, was unable to manage then President Hashemi Rafsanjani. So he empowered the IRGC to compensate, but that choice set into motion a sequence of events that has enabled it to become powerful enough to be a threat to the *velayat-e faqih* himself.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Thesis	1
Hypothesis	1
Theoretical Importance	2
Policy Importance	2
Literature Review	3
Research Goals	8
Research Organization	8
CHAPTER 2: THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF THE <i>PASDARAN</i>	10
The Foundation of the <i>Pasdarán's</i> Economic Ascent	11
The Failed Pushback against the <i>Pasdarán</i>	14
The Spoils and Freedom of Economic Dominance.....	17
CHAPTER 3: THE LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES OF IRAN.....	21
The Current Order	21
Establishing a New Form of Government.....	23
From Consolidation to Restoration	25
The Clerics Strike Back.....	27
The Struggle for Mastery	30
CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS FACTORS	33
The Foundation of the <i>Velayat-e Faqih</i>	33
The Islamic Republic's Fatal Flaw.....	35
The True Heirs to the Shah's Army	37
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION	42
Recapping the Economic Dimension of the <i>Pasdarán</i>	42
Recapping the Leadership Structure	44
Recapping the Social and Religious Factors	46
Alternative Explanations	48

Subjects for Future Research.....	50
All Roads Lead to and from Khamenei.....	52
TABLES	54
END NOTES	55
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	63

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Thesis

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), also known as the *Pasdaran* (Guard), is one of the most unique military organizations. Created by the decree of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in early May of 1979, its original purpose was to guard the Islamic Revolution against supporters of the just deposed Shah and rival revolutionary groups, as its name suggests.¹ However, over time the IRGC's actual role and influence grew significantly beyond that of its initial mandate. What accounts for that change and its present characteristics is the object of this study.

Hypothesis

Though the IRGC's origins lie in the Islamic Revolution, it was in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War that two important changes were enacted to put them on the path to prominence. The first concerned the power structure of the Islamic Republic. As Khomeini neared death, the constitution was changed to allow for his successor Ali Khamenei, a junior cleric, to be qualified for the position of Supreme Leader and to compensate for his lack of influence.² The second was Rafsanjani's creation of *bonyads* (economic foundations) and selecting key IRGC commanders to oversee them. By choosing Khamenei to succeed Khomeini, the clerical regime deepened the political power of the IRGC and allowing its leaders to become involved in Iran's economy broadened its reach beyond the political sphere.³ However, it would never have garnered the power that it has currently if not for the ambiguous nature of sovereignty at the heart of Iran's constitution and within its very name—Islamic Republic. The complex process of decision-

making that resulted from that political system encouraged the development of informal networks with which to wield influence and thus subverted any institution, which could have been used to control the IRGC.

Theoretical Importance

Iran offers a good example of the difficulty of managing civil-military relations. In the Middle East, the military to various degrees, depending on the state's form of government, plays an important role in politics. Generally, the more complicated the political system and the greater degree of participation by the citizenry in the political process, the lesser the role of the military. Because of the religious nature of Iran's leadership, another dimension is added to its dilemma of controlling the military's political ambitions. Like other more participatory states, it uses a highly ideological militia comprised of volunteers,⁴ but because of the dual sovereignty written into Iran's constitution and the lack of an adequate replacement for Khomeini, the IRGC eventually displaced the *Artesh* as the preeminent security institution.⁵ Further, it has begun to or at least has the potential to overtake the clerical regime itself,⁶ which means while they succeeded in controlling the *Artesh*, they have failed to check the political ambitions of the IRGC—the very military organization which was suppose to prevent the overthrow of the Islamic Republic.

Policy Importance

The leadership in the United States did not demonstrate much aptitude for understanding Iran nor seemed to even have the desire to acquire the ability to understand when Iran's leadership dynamics were at least more aligned with its constitution. It does not seem anymore inclined to do so, even though the IRGC's growing influence has made the task all the more

complicated, which makes it all the more important.⁷ The IRGC has begun to interpose itself into the realm of foreign affairs to the point of sidelining the institutions—the Foreign Ministry and the Supreme National Security Council—which actually are responsible for implementing policy.⁸ No matter the approach chosen to respond to Iran’s regional ambitions, without knowing the internal dynamics of the IRGC and its place within Iran’s political system, prudent courses of actions and the opportunities they may spawn will not avail themselves, save by chance.

Literature Review

Militaries do not operate in a vacuum separate from the states they serve. Thus an examination of Iran’s governing structures is necessary. Unfortunately, for the fifteen years after the Iranian Revolution, western analysis produced only a meager understanding of its complex political system, according to James A. Bill. He noted particularly that many western observers predicted the collapse of the revolutionary regime because of the many points of friction both within and between state institutions. They completely missed that the infighting between factions and institutions was the reason for the regime’s survival. Nevertheless, Bill critiques three papers by Mohsen Milani, Bahman Bakhtiari, and Kenneth Katzman, which move the understanding of Iran’s political system in a more enlightened direction by looking at the efforts to institutionalize the ideals of the Islamic Revolution, respectively, within the executive, legislative, and military branches of the state.⁹

Milani examines the evolution of the relationship between the *velayat-e faqih* (Supreme Leader) and the presidency, which he considered to be the two most important institutions to come out the Islamic Revolution. He noted that the revolution’s founders were torn by their

desire for an Islamic state and the need to satisfy the demands of the nationalist and leftist factions for representation. Thus the executive is split between those two different notions of sovereignty—that of God embodied in the Supreme Leader and that of the people vested in the presidency.¹⁰ Even as the former is theoretically supposed to take primacy when the two are in conflict, after the death of Khomeini, it became a much weaker institution, unable to dominate the latter. The expansion of the Supreme Leader's constitutional powers did not change that dynamic, leading to a sharing of power with the presidency and transferring power back to the state.¹¹

Though the Parliament of Iran wields little power, it is the institution which most directly reflects the will of the public, and is no less a stranger to the factional politics of the executive. Bakhtiari charts its development from its domination by the most radically minded to the more pragmatic politicians who were supporters of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. However, given that the candidates must be certified by the Council of Guardians, comprised of senior clerics, the parliament reflects its wishes along with those of the populace.¹² Thus as the relation between the two executives signals the strength of the revolutionary regime so too does the composition of the parliament.

Contrary to Milani, Katzman views the IRGC as the most durable revolutionary institution, pointing out that the *velayat-e faqih* almost died with Khomeini and in his absence has been severely reduced in power. Thus it has not proved itself adaptable, one of the criteria with which he used to determine the degree of an entity's institutionalization, taking up the model devised by Samuel Huntington. The other three criteria are autonomy, complexity, and coherency.¹³ While Katzman rates the IRGC as passing Huntington's test for institutionalization

on all accounts, he nevertheless views it as incomplete given its continued radical orientation. In a way, he does fail it in the end on the autonomy score as it “remains an institutional legacy of Khomeini’s vision.” So rather than fulfill the mission of a professional military of securing the state, true to its origins its allegiance is to the *velayat-e faqih*.¹⁴ However the changes that occurred in the aftermath of Khomeini’s death and the Iran-Iraq war turned the IRGC toward a direction, not easily discernible to most observers in the early 1990s, and one that calls into question Katzman’s conclusion.

In Olivier Roy’s, “The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy,” the rise of the secularization in Iran is highlighted and how it resulted from the end of the dual legitimacy that Khomeini embodied. This was reflected with the election of Khatami in 1997 against the wishes of Khamenei. So the contradiction in the constitution between divine and popular sovereignty was blown wide open.¹⁵ Azadeh Kian-Thiebaut seconded these observations in “Political and Social Transformations in Post-Islamist Iran” and in addition noted that the social changes, which ironically were put into motion by the modernization policies of the regime, reinforced the trend towards secularization.¹⁶

While the reformers were heartened, believing Iran was on the path to becoming a truly participatory democratic state, the IRGC leadership was displeased with the social and political transformations taking place.¹⁷ This bears directly on the challenges of building capable militaries which do not interfere in politics to the point of subverting or even overthrowing the ruling regime. Mehran Kamrava examined this dilemma and the various solutions states have implemented to deal with it in his “Military Professionalization and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East.” He fingers the enhanced corporate identity that comes with institutionalizing

the military as the core problem.¹⁸ It is that problem, intersecting with the social and political changes occurring in the late 1990s, which lies at the crux of what the IRGC would become and how it would get there. For the clerics would not sit by idly and see their power and all they had worked for over two decades crumble into nothingness.

The election of Khatami was a blow to the conservative clerics who feared the loss of their power. Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr detail how they worked to concentrate power away from the presidency in “The Conservative Consolidation in Iran.” They found allies in the IRGC which being ever tied to the *velayat-e faqih*, stood to lose power as well, in its view, with the expansion of civil society. This was because the *Artesh* which vastly outnumbers the IRGC would be needed to prevent a coup based on the growing power of the civil society. Therefore, since 1997, the IRGC has become much more prominent in the state apparatus.¹⁹ In contrast to the focus on centralization and containment of factionalism by Gheissari and Nasr’s, Kazem Alamdari looks at the evolution of Iran’s political system in “The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from Populism to Clientelism, and Militarization of the Government,” focusing on the increase in what he calls clientelism, which works against centralization. However, he agrees with their assessment of a rising IRGC and in fact goes further saying that the regime is trending towards a military dictatorship run by the IRGC.²⁰

A monograph report by the RAND Corporation, *Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*, provides evidence for that trend. It points to the fact that much of Iran’s leadership including the parliament and the presidency itself along with his cabinet consists of IRGC veterans. While most analysis of the IRGC looks at it from the perspective of threat assessment, *Rise of the Pasdaran*, views it holistically as a

socioeconomic entity. It also attempts to accurately place the IRGC in its role within Iran's security apparatus as it must contend with rival organizations for influence.²¹

Steven Ward takes an even more comprehensive view, in his book *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*, charting the history of Iran's military from ancient Persia to the present day. Interestingly he remarks that while fielding dual militaries is very unusual for most states, it is only the latest manifestation of an Iranian tradition. Being a military history, it focuses more on the rivalry between the *Artesh* and the *Pasdaran*, concluding that in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War the *Pasdaran* became the preeminent service, the true heirs to the Shah's military.²² A much more detailed analysis of the rivalry was performed by Arasli Jahangir for his master's thesis, "*Pasdaran Incorporated: Evolving from Revolutionary Guard to Praetorian Guard.*" He shows that the clerical regime's violation of the core principle of interservice rivalry—treat each service equally—is what led to the IRGC's transformation from being a check on the *Artesh* to the first military force in modern Iranian history to operate as an independent actor with the potential to overtake the state itself. However, he only touches on the IRGC's role in Iran's economy,²³

Ali Ansari's "The Revolution Will Be Mercantilized" takes up that task, in which he notes that as with its increase in political power, its influence in Iran's economy increased markedly after Khomeini's death and the Iran-Iraq War. Rafsanjani's attempt at integrating the IRGC within the regular military structure had failed. Thus, he thought to liberalize them by granting the IRGC a cut of the state's oil revenue to use as seed money. It had the opposite effect. A majority of the IRGC had actually voted for Khatami, and so its conservative leadership which supported Khamenei purged the IRGC of any reformist elements. However, its

economic power continued to increase in the absence of the reformists among its leadership. As its influence has grown it seems as though it has come to care more about protecting its material interests instead of the Iranian people.²⁴

Another RAND monograph, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, looks at the institutions, including the IRGC, of Iran involved in making and carrying out decisions. Its decision-making process is defined by its overlapping responsibilities and factionalism. Though it may slow the system to a crawl so that informal networks are often more effective than official institutions and channels, it is also the method by which the regime survives,²⁵ as noted almost two decades before by James A. Bill.²⁶

Research Goals

The studies reviewed looked at only one or two factors, such as leadership, economics, and religions/culture to explain the IRGC's rise within Iran's political economy. An attempt will be made to demonstrate the effect of all of them on the nature and role of the IRGC. The study that comes closest to this objective is RAND's 2009 monograph, *The Rise of the Pasdaran*. However, it does not discuss the role that the contradiction at the heart of the Islamic Republic played in the *Pasdaran's* rise to power. By doing so, the rest of the factors that helped determine the political trajectory of the IRGC should logically unfold, and perhaps hint at its destination.

Research Organization

The second chapter covers the effect of that outcome on the development of Iran's economy along with a discussion of how conditions arose that were favorable for the *Pasdaran* to achieve economic dominance. The third chapter examines the leadership dynamics of the Islamic Republic, focusing on the period of reconstruction after the death of Khomeini and the

end of the war with Iraq. Chapter four looks at the cultural and religious factors underlying the avenue the *Pasdaran* exploited to increase their power. Finally, the fifth chapter consists of an overview of the manner in which the *Pasdaran* rose to its present position, a discussion of what may lie ahead for the *Pasdaran*, and subjects for future study.

CHAPTER 2: THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF THE *PASDARAN*

Four major and interrelated issues had to be dealt with in the aftermath of the grueling near-decadal war of attrition with Iraq. First and foremost was determining who would succeed the Ayatollah Khomeini. The second resulted from the choice of Khamenei to become the next Supreme Leader.²⁷ As a junior cleric he did not have strong religious credentials and thus lacked the influence within Iran's political establishment to control then President Hashemi Rafsanjani. (The issues surrounding the choice of Khamenei will be examined later.) Thus when Khamenei sought an ally which would be powerful enough to compensate for his weakness he turned to the *Pasdaran*.²⁸ As a military organization whose allegiance is owed directly to the Supreme Leader and the clerics rather than the government it was a natural fit.²⁹ In return for their loyalty the *Pasdaran* was granted preferable treatment.³⁰

This brings the third issue into view, and the most important one with respect to the direction of Iran's economic system—the danger of the *Pasdaran* attempting to seize power, a familiar scenario that often follows in the wake of a failed military expedition. Aware of this danger, Rafsanjani attempted to integrate them into the conventional military branch, the *Artesh*, which was at odds with Khamenei's desire. Lastly, Iran's economy in disarray, had to be rebuilt which entailed a great deal of reconstruction and infrastructure development.³¹ Further, the government's budget would not be able to cover the costs of refitting its two militaries.³² Thinking that he could kill two birds with one stone, Rafsanjani took the opportunity to keep the leadership of the *Pasdaran* satisfied by encouraging them to enter the economy and thus provide additional funding for themselves via management of Iran's *bonyads* (foundations).³³ So

interestingly, Rafsanjani's solution dovetailed with Khamenei's gambit to ensure the *Pasdaran's* backing against Rafsanjani.

The Foundation of the *Pasdaran's* Economic Ascent

Despite the radical changes brought forth by the Iranian Revolution, the *bonyads* are actually a holdover from the previous regime. The *bonyad Mostazafan* (Foundation of the Oppressed or Mostazafan Foundation) is the direct successor to the Pahlavi foundation whose assets were sequestered and transferred to the new foundation. Supposedly a charitable trust, it is one of the largest foundations and is well-integrated into the economy. It is directly influenced, though not owned by the *Pasdaran*.³⁴

The *Pasdaran's* own business ventures began rather humbly soon after the end of the Iran-Iraq War with Rafsanjani providing the funding by granting it a cut of the state's oil revenues.³⁵ With that seed money, the leadership of the *Pasdaran* began by confiscating several factories, creating the *Moavenat khodkafae* and *Moavenat bassazi*, headquarters of self-sufficiency and reconstruction, respectively. Both established companies in the agriculture, industrial, mining, transportation, road, construction, and trade sectors. Desiring even greater control, the *Pasdaran* shortly after created a reconstruction headquarters to be directly within itself, which in 1990 became the *gharargah sazandegi khatam alanbia* (GHORB). Also called *Khatam al-Anbia* (KAA), it is considered the *Pasdaran's* engineering arm, similar to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Its board is comprised of the chiefs of the *Pasdaran's* military branches, the head of Imam Hossein University, the commanding officer of the IRGC Cooperative Foundation, the head of the *Pasdaran's* Self Sufficiency Directorate, and headed by the commander-in-chief of the Iranian military, the Chief of Joint Forces Command. Employing

25,000 engineers and staff, including roughly 2,500 IRGC members,³⁶ it is one of Iran's largest contractors boasting of receiving 750 large infrastructure development projects and consulting on an additional 170.³⁷

This turn to entrepreneurship was reflective of the changing attitudes of Iranian society to which the *Pasdaran* is tied more than its pretensions to the status of an elite “warrior caste” allow them to admit. Unfortunately for the private sector, their new-found zeal for business did not include notions of fair play. At the time they received their oil income, the exchange rate in Iran was subsidized so that the hard currency they received could be used to import goods effectively at a lower price and then sold to the public at the market rate for a huge profit. Their advantages also extended to their connections in the state bureaucracy, which enabled them to place their members in senior management positions at major Iranian firms. For instance, Mohsen Rafiqdoost, one of the *Pasdaran*'s former commanders³⁸—also Khomeini's driver and relative to Rafsanjani by marriage—became head of the *Mostafazan* Foundation.³⁹ Such networking would prove to be crucial for the *Pasdaran*'s economic expansion.

The economic conditions in Iran during the late 1980s and early 1990s were tumultuous as the Iran-Iraq War had just concluded⁴⁰ with Khomeini dying soon afterward on June 6, 1989,⁴¹ leaving Khamenei as Supreme Leader. So Rafsanjani formed a deal with the bazaar merchants: they would effectively finance the state and in return he would create an unregulated environment conducive to their short-term investments. However, the resulting web of informal relations and oligopolies was hostile to the kinds of long-term investments which would have established a sound foundation for broad-based economic development. Through the 1990s, the *bonyads* made those affiliated with them very wealthy as they controlled and distributed billions

of dollars. Being unaccountable to no one save for the Supreme Leader, politics became defined more by economic transactions than had been the case under the clerics during the 1980s, as the *bonyads* replaced the latter as the generators of wealth. As of the summer of 2009, it is estimated that the *bonyads* control 10-20% of Iran's economy.⁴²

Yet before their dominance began to become entrenched, there was a pushback by the public and some reformist politicians and clerics against the regime in general and the *Pasdaran* in particular. This dissatisfaction was manifested in the election of Mohammad Khatami to the presidency in 1997. It proved more difficult to hold the *Pasdaran* and its bureaucratic allies to account than perhaps he first imagined. During the latter portion of Rafsanjani's presidency, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) was tasked with investigating the business operations of the *Pasdaran*. Much to his consternation, instead of shutting down the *Pasdaran's* profiteering scheme, when they saw how easy it was to implement, they started engaging in the corrupt practice themselves. Khatami rooted out those in the ministry involved, but many of them just moved over into the *Pasdaran* and continued their operations.⁴³

Ironically the very programs of modernization which powered the *Pasdaran's* economic fortunes as well as the Revolution itself also resulted in the twin developments which would cause much of the public to turn against them—increasing urbanization and literacy.⁴⁴ In combination with the turn towards economic matters, the general public began to demand more political liberties, which made the ruling clerics and the leadership of the *Pasdaran* nervous. They feared that such sentiments would mean the end of the ideals of the Revolution, and at least as importantly their own power. In fact, even in the *Pasdaran*, many of whose members are conscripts, the majority actually voted for Khatami. Thus, its leaders sought to roll back the tide

first within their own ranks by purging any elements that were sympathetic to the reformers, increasing the conservative nature of the institution. For the next several years, however, they kept a lower profile, biding their time while their economic assets continued to grow, increasing their financial independence. They would accomplish that by setting up front companies by which they could then take over whole sectors of Iran's economy.⁴⁵

The Failed Pushback against the *Pasdaran*

Up until that time, the *Pasdaran* commanders were content to gain their profits through commissions and use their state connections to bring in profitable contracts. Under that system, they had benefitted from their close relations with the clerics and the Supreme Leader, enabling them to receive contracts for large construction projects, often on a no-bid basis. While many, especially in the private sector, felt that the *Pasdaran*-affiliated firms had an unfair advantage, each time such contracts were granted a state official was ready with an explanation to justify the lack of competition.⁴⁶ Even with competitive projects, GHORB's formidable size and use of conscripted soldiers as labor allowed it underbid private firms which have also been handicapped by the *bonyads*' special access to credit at state-owned banks and the breaks they are granted on taxation and import duties, providing opportunities for corruption.⁴⁷ Further, the economy's most advanced technology is produced under the *Pasdaran*, as it monopolizes the commercialization of military technology. This was the result of the military industrial companies, created by the Shah in the early 1960s to increase Iran's self-sufficiency in weapons manufacturing, being handed to the *Pasdaran* by Khomeini.⁴⁸

The *Pasdaran* justifies its economic activities by claiming that such a role is actually stipulated in the constitution of the Islamic Republic under article 147.⁴⁹ Then commander of the

Pasdaran, Yahya Rahim Safavi, went further, believing that not only did the *Pasdaran* have the authority but was also required to perform such a role.⁵⁰ Also cited is Article 150, which assigns the role of guarding the Revolution to the *Pasdaran*. However the *Pasdaran* has interpreted that competence so broadly as to render the constitution meaningless beyond what the will of Khamenei commands, which currently supports the *Pasdaran*. Thus, they can lay claim to any project they see fit to sequester.⁵¹

Their efforts accelerated upon the expiration of Khatami's second term in 2005.⁵² The Council of Guardians, a twelve-member body of six clerics and six Islamic jurors, denied many reformists candidates the chance to run in the 2004 parliamentary and 2005 presidential elections.⁵³ This winnowing left the door wide open for conservatives to get elected to parliament, many of which were former members of the *Pasdaran*. Of those running for president, four were *Pasdaran* alumni, including Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who ultimately won.⁵⁴ With their newfound political power they were able to steer scrutiny away from their extralegal activities and expand the scope of their economic influence.

A little more than a month before Ahmadinejad's victory, Khamenei reinforced this further by issuing a decree that reinterpreted Article 44 of Iran's constitution such that it effectively nullified its stipulation of a planned economy. In addition to the state and private sectors, Article 44 defined a cooperative sector consisting of enterprises dealing with production and distribution. Khamenei's five-year privatization plan consisted of cutting the state budget by 20 percent annually, so that by its end 25% of the economy would be transferred to the cooperative sector. His decree was codified into law on January 28, 2008. Privatizing \$110-120

billion in assets, Ahmadinejad boasted that Iran had achieved in a mere five years the same level of privatization as the Eastern Europeans, who required twenty years.⁵⁵

However, Iranian economists expressed concern over the decree mainly because they feared that state monopolies would actually be strengthened rather than diminished by the measures. The lack of transparency in the privatization process meant that the domestic private sector was largely barred from buying state assets. Moreover, they feared competition would be curtailed as antitrust legislation was not forthcoming and the current law made foreign direct investment difficult. These fears turned out not to be unwarranted as Ali Larijani, the parliamentary speaker, criticized the law noting it did not include “the genuine private sector,” which had only acquired 19% of the state-owned enterprises (SOE) over the period from 2005-2009. The public nonstate sector purchased 12.5% with the remaining 68.5% being transferred to the cooperative sector.⁵⁶

Beyond a dearth of competition, the most serious consequence of Khamenei’s decree was the transfer of assets from the open to the more opaque areas of the public sector such as the foundations and their subsidiaries owned by the *Pasdaran* and the *Basij*. Such purchases are funded by their credit and finance institutions which they claim are noninterest Islamic banks but on the contrary perform everything but interest-free loans.⁵⁷ This decrease in transparency was highlighted when the Management and Planning Organization (MPO) criticized the bidding process and the quality of GHORB’s work. Its case was certainly credible, as just the year before on June 25, GHORB was awarded a no-bid contract by the National Oil Company of Iran for the fifteenth and sixteenth development phases of the South Pars Gas Field. Given that this is one of Iran’s most valuable gas development projects, it is unsurprising that several members of

parliament demanded an inquiry into the bidding procedure. Yet, their calls for an inquiry were ignored. Despite this and many other similar anomalous cases, instead of investigating GHORB to discover the extent of its malfeasance, Ahmadinejad placed the MPO under his control by decree in July 2007.⁵⁸

The Spoils and Freedom of Economic Dominance

A couple cases since that decree was issued demonstrate the growing economic power of the *Pasdaran*, resulting from their increased political influence. In 2009, the subsidiary *Mehr-e Eghtesad-e* Iranian Investment Company was caught engaging in fraud over the purchase of an *Angouran zinc minde* in Zanjan Province for a mere \$186 million when the real value is closer to \$1 billion. The fraudulent deal prompted a firestorm of criticism with one cleric, *hojattolah eslam* Mohammad-Taghi Vaezi exclaiming, “It would have been better if they had given it away.” When the Supreme Audit Court examined the deal, they discovered that not only were all three of the firms competing for the sale of the same corporate family but that the signatures on their applications were all in the same handwriting. With this evidence, the court struck down the deal.⁵⁹

The other example occurred in May the following year and was even more egregious, perhaps because it involved an oil and natural gas development project, an area which the *Pasdaran* dominates. President Ahmadinejad himself told GHORB commanders and executives a couple months before in February to be prepared to receive more oil and gas development contracts “to satisfy the domestic needs of the country.” In March, GHORB was granted a no-bid contract worth \$7 billion upon the withdrawal of Turkish companies from the third phase of the South Pars oil and gas fields development project. On May 13, 2010, GHORB’s commander,

General Rostam Qasemi, told Ali Larijani that the *Pasdaran* was taking over the third development phase. In doing so he replaced energy giants Shell and Total.⁶⁰

Perhaps the most brazen instance of the *Pasdaran*'s interference in an infrastructure development project actually came before the election of Ahmadinejad, in August 2004. Yet it calls attention to the *Pasdaran*'s most flagrant extralegal activities—its smuggling operations. The Turkish company Tepe-Akfen-Vie was under contract to operate the new Imam Khomeini International airport, south of Tehran. On its first day of operations the *Pasdaran* forced the second airplane to abort its landing and blocked the runway to prevent any further attempts, making clear that they would not accept foreign management of the airport. Officials annulled the contracts at a substantial penalty and the *Pasdaran* forced the impeachment of transportation minister Ahmad Khorram.⁶¹ It is probable that in addition to expressing displeasure at their engineering branch losing the contract to the Turks they were protecting their smuggling operations as they would have much less control over a foreign firms' security procedures.⁶²

The *Pasdaran* have enormous control over the borders and airports,⁶³ which affords them the opportunity to deal in the trade of illicit goods including luxury items, cell phones, makeup, subsidized gas, drugs, and alcohol. Their operations are very profitable earning them an estimated \$12 billion annually, the magnitude of which suggests the contraband must be smuggled using *ekeleh-ha-ye namar'i* (invisible jetties) operating along the 1,500-mile coastline of the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean.⁶⁴ However, this profiteering over items which are not in keeping with the ideals of the Revolution to say the least has caused divisions between the old guard who fought in the Iran-Iraq War and the new guard who have no memory of the

Revolution.⁶⁵ However, in spite of these divisions, the *Pasdaran* has demonstrated dominance in the trade and energy portions of the economy.

Along with their ability to procure favorable budgets with its network of lobbyists, influential faction in the parliament, and access to the Supreme Leader, their sources of revenue beyond what the government grants them not only afford them influence but also independence from state control. Their most important revenue stream likely flows from the huge financial assets of the *bonyads* generated (as mentioned previously) by active *Pasdaran* and its alumni since the early 1990s. These funds were distributed on a patronage basis to commanders and veterans by the Supreme Leader as Khamenei sought to seal their loyalty, but as the *bonyads* are not accountable to state institutions their transactions lack transparency and oversight. This was the tradeoff that Khamenei made to secure his position.⁶⁶

The *Pasdaran's* gains do not come, though, without some drawbacks themselves. Their increased economic power makes them vulnerable to both external and internal forces. The United States and the international community through the United Nations have focused recently on sanctioning specific companies affiliated with and individuals among the leadership of the *Pasdaran*. While the affect of such measures is debatable with some saying that they may actually increase the *Pasdaran's* economic influence, as they could always just set up other front companies, and thrive in a space of reduced competition,⁶⁷ where they are vulnerable is the source of their revenue stream—the financial institutions.⁶⁸ Also, within Iran resentment is growing especially among the middle class and the bazaar merchants who are not allied with the *Pasdaran*, against their corrupt business practices. The *Pasdaran* hopes to overcome this through its state connections and its rural development programs, many of which are now run by

the *Basij*.⁶⁹ However, as has been the case since the protests over the results of the 2009 presidential election, the stability of the present regime is not the guarantee against the loss of their power they hope it to be. Further their development programs are in part the reason for the backlash amongst the educated masses in the first place. This means that if they are attempting to purchase the support of the rural population with development programs to offset the animosity of the urban classes, their efforts are likely to be self-defeating in the long run, as the latter's relative numbers continue to grow.⁷⁰ Lastly, it is possible that they may succumb to the factionalism endemic to the rest of Iran's state institutions, if its leaders decide to fight over the spoils or differences in worldview.⁷¹

Nevertheless, for the foreseeable future, the independence the *Pasdaran* has carved out for itself presents the rather startling situation where for the first time in the modern history of Iran a military institution has the potential to overthrow the state and form a new regime.⁷² This begs the question, "Why would the Supreme Leader be willing to secure their loyalty in a manner that included such a high risk scenario," particularly given that the *Pasdaran* was created by Khomeini to safeguard the clerical regime and the ideals of its Revolution. The answer to that query lies within the power structure of Iran's leadership.

CHAPTER 3: THE LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES OF IRAN

From the beginning of the Iranian Revolution to the present, the leadership structures of the Islamic Republic have undergone significant changes. The one that has proved to be most important throughout its development is the shifting power between the Supreme Leader and the President, representing the two sources of legitimacy undergirding the Islamic Republic. Such shifts occurred both constitutionally and informally. Thus it is important to note the nature of the individuals holding the leadership positions as well as the nature of the positions themselves. To gain a better sense of the former, first a delineation of the responsibilities and powers of the latter under the present system will be given. With that in hand, an accounting of the shifting power structure of the Islamic Republic will shed more light on the mechanisms which allowed the *Pasdaran* to attain its great political influence, and how that path arose in the first place.

The Current Order

At the head of the Islamic Republic sits the Supreme Leader who is appointed for life by the 86-member body called the Assembly of Experts. Based on Khomeini's notion of the *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the jurist), the position was codified into Iran's constitution in which he is mandated to both set the government's general policies and oversee their implementation. In addition to ratifying the public's choice of president and directly appointing senior officials, he may place numerous representatives within the state bureaucracy to act as his eyes and ears. Importantly, he is the commander-in-chief of Iran's armed forces and appoints the commanders of the *Pasdaran*, the *Artesh*, and the Joint Staff.⁷³

The second highest ranking official behind the Supreme Leader is the President whose duties include daily administration and enforcing the constitution. As leader of the executive

branch he implements the laws passed in the Majlis, Iran's parliament, or referenda and signs treaties and other international agreements. The cabinet members are appointed by him upon ratification by the Majlis. He also appoints the heads of the *bonyads*, a power of great import as was discussed previously with Rafsanjani. While the power that the Supreme Leader wields vastly exceeds that of the President the positions have overlapping areas of control such as national security, as the latter is chair of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), Iran's principle defense policy board.⁷⁴

As the only elected body, the 290-member Majlis is the only branch of the government which reflects the will of the people, at least in part, since the candidates must be vetted by the Council of Guardians. Its powers include oversight of government budgets, crafting legislation, ratification of international treaties, and reviewing the president and his ministers.⁷⁵ Given that the Council of Guardians must approve the candidates and that the elections within that context are by and large fair and free, the composition of the Majlis reflects both the wishes of the public and the Supreme Leader.⁷⁶ Thus the composition of the Majlis can be an indicator of the strength of the relationship and the concordance between the Supreme Leader and the President, as will be seen.

The function of the 12-member Council of Guardians is as its name suggests, to guard the Revolution. It accomplishes this by screening candidates for the presidency as well as the Majlis, and using their constitutional authority of review to block legislation which they deem unIslamic. Thus it is the legislative expression of the dual, but unequal, sovereignty at the heart of the Islamic Republic. However, when the Majlis and the Council of Guardians are in deadlock, the Expediency Council, a body of 35-40 members currently chaired by Rafsanjani,

steps into resolve the matter. In addition to the Council of Guardians, the 1979 constitution created an independent judiciary branch, which nominates the six lay members of the Council of Guardians. The head of the judiciary is chosen by none other than the Supreme Leader.⁷⁷

Establishing a New Form of Government

The structure described above includes some modifications of the original constitution established in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. Being in its formative stages, the revolution needed a figure such as the Ayatollah Khomeini to consolidate and begin the process of institutionalizing his vision for a new government based on his idea of the *velayat-e faqih* (whose origins will be related in the next chapter).⁷⁸ Unfortunately for him and his Islamist disciples, he was not able to institute a pure theocracy with the clerics ruling without hindrance from any republican institutions. For among the potpourri of revolutionaries, there existed nationalists and leftists as well as Islamists, who demanded that republicanism be incorporated into the new government. The result was an Islamic Republic with both theocratic and republican elements to match its two sources of sovereignty—divine and popular.⁷⁹

If the latter was nonnegotiable, the Islamists had their own demand—the new republic must be completely compatible with the *velayat-e faqih*. The question then became how to resolve theocracy, which the Jewish historian Josephus—who coined the term—defined as a government whose rulers claim to act on behalf of their deity, and republicanism based on popular sovereignty where the will of the people is supreme. Ayatollah Mohammed Hosayn Beheshti who wrote the *velayat-e faqih* portion of the constitution understood the two were contradictory. He rationalized that in voting for the Islamic Republic the people had voted for *maktab* (Islam) and therefore limited their future choices. Thus Islam would determine the

nature of the republic rather than vice versa such that when at any point the two conflicted Islam would take precedence.⁸⁰

In so far as a solution could be found, Beheshti's proved sufficient for the public and the clerics. However, given that the source of political and religious power is embodied in the *faqih*, as Beheshti noted, two qualifications were necessary for an individual to be fit for the position. He must be both a leading *marja* and have the support of the majority of the people. In this vein the framers of the Islamic Republic imbued the *faqih* with powers exceeding that of the Shah under the 1906 constitution. Moreover, given Khomeini's informal powers due to his charisma and history of uncompromising opposition to the Pahlavi dynasty, he was akin to a fourth branch of government more powerful than the three formal branches.⁸¹

Yet the *faqih* was not considered a dictator, as it was believed that such a person would be above earthly temptation and abuse. On the contrary, looking uncomfortably at the example of Libya and Iraq, the framers were very much worried about a strong president overthrowing the new government to establish a dictatorship. Thus the popular executive was split between a Prime Minister and a President with the latter placed under the former.⁸² The mechanism was shown to work as both Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan and President Bani-Sadr tried to challenge Khomeini, who had worked to develop the revolutionary institutions into a mini-state within a state, and failed miserably. When Khamenei assumed the office of the Presidency he accepted his subordinate position both to the *faqih* and the Prime Minister resolving the constitution's lack of a mechanism to overcoming differences between the two executives.⁸³ Yet the tension between the institutions themselves is seen right from the beginning and would grow much more prominent as the nature of the Islamic Republic and the manifestations of both its

sovereignties evolved. This friction-driven evolution which results from the tension between the Islamic Republic's dual sovereignty is the key to understanding how events would unfold after the death of Khomeini and why Khamenei was chosen to succeed him.

From Consolidation to Restoration

With the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the Islamic Republic entered a new phase coming from consolidation and institutionalization to recuperation and reconstruction. The looming death of Khomeini afforded the opportunity to make the modifications to the 1979 constitution necessary to meet those challenges so that the republic could survive.⁸⁴ The changes were also needed because the Ayatollah Ali Montazeri was forced to resign as Khomeini's designated successor. Montazeri had begun to espouse political views which Khomeini realized made him undependable to carry on his legacy and the other grand ayatollahs could not be relied upon either as they disagreed with clerical rule.⁸⁵ So the clerical regime was presented with a dilemma. The constitution required someone who was a *marja*—supported by the public—and was a competent manager. Since Khomeini rejected all the ayatollahs who supported him as not fitting the latter criteria he decided to relax the religious requirement.⁸⁶

This is an interesting choice for a theocratic government because the logical solution would seemingly be to relax the managerial requirement given that the constitution itself demands that Islamic authority take precedence. Yet Khomeini, author of the *velayat-e faqih* himself, chose then President Khamenei, a mere *hojattolah eslam* (middle-ranking cleric), to succeed him, and his clerical supporters concurred with his decision. So either they considered leadership ability to be inextricably tied to religious authority or their faith in Islam was not quite what they claimed it to be and the whole ideal of the *velayat-e faqih* in the end was nothing more

than an elaborate religious cloak for autocracy. No matter the case, the clerics of the prestigious seminaries in Qom bristled upon hearing of Khamenei's succession, introducing a point of contention not from dissidents but from within the clerical regime's own ranks.⁸⁷

In addition to relaxing the requirements for the Supreme Leader, his constitutional powers were actually increased to compensate for Khamenei's lack of religious credentials. On the recommendation of both Khamenei and Rafsanjani, the powers of the presidency were also increased as they felt that the problems of the Islamic Republic during its first decade boiled down to the weakness of that office. Yet as mentioned previously, there was tension between both the office and the two personalities. Khamenei felt he must carry on the legacy of his predecessor to secure the allegiance of the latter's network of supporters as to consolidate his position, while Rafsanjani sought to "normalize" the Islamic Republic, attempting to push it towards a more pragmatic disposition.⁸⁸ In part, Khamenei's need to shore up his support was to check Rafsanjani's influence, which was actually greater than his, evidenced by his conspicuous absence in the foreign press during his first year as Supreme Leader. The headlines instead bear Rafsanjani's name over reports on his economic plans and initiatives to rebuild Iran. More fundamentally, the tension resulted from the reality that the two of them now embodied separately what Khomeini encompassed alone.⁸⁹

At first Khamenei moved cautiously, remaining neutral in factional disputes⁹⁰ but even as he grew more confident and assertive his lack of political and religious influence meant power flowed away from the *faqih* so that the state, became the central player in the Islamic Republic for the first time.⁹¹ Thus the revolution had transitioned from a period of consolidation and institutionalization to reconstruction and restoration, as Khomeini had died and the country had

been ravaged by nearly a decade of war. That transition would not have occurred without Khamenei's concurrence which he may have given out of recognition that the *faqih* did not have the power necessary to implement the policies to begin the long road to rebuilding Iran so that the Islamic Republic could survive. Rafsanjani took advantage of this weakness and attempted to centralize power. He did this by trying to resolve the differences between the Shah-era and revolutionary institutions. For instance, he created a unified command structure for the IRGC and the regular armed forces. However, he left the *bonyads* untouched as their capital was crucial to funding the reconstruction of Iran.⁹² Even more importantly, Khamenei while initially partnering with Rafsanjani actually supported his measures for his own reasons which were at odds with those of Rafsanjani, the main one ironically enough being the desire to contain his influence. Thus it is hardly surprising that the two reached an impasse as Khamenei's confidence grew stronger. .

The Clerics Strike Back

Rafsanjani's second term as President proffered the conservative faction the chance to roll back the influence of the more pragmatic factions, which favored reconciliation with the West, and for Khamenei to solidify his position. They suffered a large setback when their chosen candidate Ali Nateq-Nouri lost the presidential election to Mohammad Khatami in 1997. Thus, the conservative faction was put on the defensive, especially its leader, Khamenei, as Khatami's victory stood as a challenge to his authority demonstrating that he was neither popular nor respected. Worse still, he was shown to be unable to fulfill the demands of his supporters just as he was beginning to establish his own network apart from that of his predecessor. Remember that their original plan was to roll back the pragmatists represented by Rafsanjani, as

they feared it would mean the end of the Islamic Republic, but instead not only was that objective unable to be fulfilled, now they had to deal with the real reformers who actively and openly declared their support for a true republic. So the alliance that had been forged with the *Pasdaran* from the beginning took on a heightened importance as the conservatives looked to them to save the regime from the reformers.⁹³

Apart from its loyalty to Supreme Leader, the *Pasdaran* was self-motivated to protect the regime. If the expansion of civil society were to pose a sufficient threat to require a violent putdown, the *Artesh* rather than the *Pasdaran*, which outnumbered them three fold, would be called upon to fulfill that task. In such a scenario, the *Artesh* would likely challenge their current status and power, or worse garner the ambition to takeover themselves. Were that to happen, the *Pasdaran* rightly feared that it would face a fate similar to the purge of the *Artesh* in the wake of the Revolution, which certainly has not forgotten it. Finally, gaining political power would block the United States from using the reformers or the *Artesh* to instigate a velvet revolution, incidentally, a prospect, the present commander of the *Pasdaran*, Mohammad Ali Jafari believes to be the greatest threat to the Islamic Republic.⁹⁴

In that vein, it may also have sought to chill the recently warming relations between the United States and Iran since the 9/11 attacks spawned cooperation to take on their common enemy—the Taliban. The interception of the *Karine A*, a ship which was allegedly hauling weapons to the Palestinian Authority, may have, accomplished that aim, in part.⁹⁵ As it was in the political interest of the IRGC to have a more hostile United States divert attention away from its growing influence, it is not implausible that it undertook the operation independently.⁹⁶

A number of methods were used to hold back the reformers from implementing any changes seen to be a threat to the regime. In addition to using shock troops associated with the *Pasdaran* and MOIS to crackdown on reformers violently, the clerics control of the Guardian Council, Expediency Council, and the judiciary to effectively circumscribe Khatami and the Majlis from carrying out the reforms their supporters were so hopeful would emerge. Freedom of the press and efforts to strength civil society were squelched. It also took advantage of the parastatal networks, which result from the state apparatus' maze of bureaucracies with overlapping duties, to bypassing the reformers entirely, enabling Khamenei to implement policies with those whom he had chosen and controlled.⁹⁷

After inoculating the regime from the reformers the next step was to take back control of the Majlis and the presidency as to seal their hold on power. For the eight years Khatami was in office, there were in effect two parallel governments, and the reformists' support was still strong. Thus the clerical regime decided essentially to stage a constitutional coup whereby the Council of Guardians would use its power of selection to screen any electoral candidates that held even a whiff of reformist credentials. In the presidential elections, the Council of Guardians approved only 6 out of 1010 candidates, later on adding two on the order of the Supreme Leader. Half of the candidates who passed their screening were IRGC commanders and two of the others were clerics. The four commanders were Ali Larijani, the former director of state TV and radio networks, Mohammad Baqer Qalibal, the former police chief of Tehran, Mohsen Rezaie, speaker of the Expediency Council, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the mayor of Tehran, who ultimately won the election.

Besides the disqualification of the reformist candidates, two factors that led to Ahmadinejad's victory were the IRGC/*Basij* and his anti-establishment message. While Rafsanjani acidly denounced what he claimed was the regime's orchestrated defamation campaign against him and his family, he chose not to contest the election, knowing from his long time in politics that such a challenge would be useless. Two of the other losing candidates, Mehdi Karoubi and Mostfa Moin, joined him in denouncing the regime, claiming that well-financed elements of it had illegally supported Ahmadinejad's campaign. Mohammad Reza Khatami, Moin's running mate and son of the outgoing president, went further declaring that they "were defeated by a garrison party."⁹⁸ He went on to say the following:

Until 3 days before the election, everything was fine, then after a military coup was launched, of which we only learned later, an order was given to a specific military organization to support a specific candidate, a person whom all the left-wing and right-wing pre-election polls had shown to be the least favorite among 7 candidates.⁹⁹

His words receive some support in the expression of gratitude General Mohammad Baqer Zolqar, deputy commander-in-chief of the IRGC gave to the *Basij* in a speech. If their claims are valid such actions would not only be illegal but also violate Khomeini's principle of the military's neutrality where politics is concerned.¹⁰⁰

The Struggle for Mastery

Though the consensus appears to be that the *Pasdaran* increased its political footprint after their electoral victories, it must be pointed out that when Barbara Slavin interviewed Mohsen Rezaie, the second commander of the *Pasdaran*, he insisted that its political influence has not changed greatly. He claimed that it is just that the media pays more attention to its veterans which have long played active roles in the government.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, this is the point where the *Pasdaran's* economic power and clerical ties translated into formal political

power, having won control over numerous town and city councils, about a third of the seats in the Majlis, and of course the presidency. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an ex-*Basiji*, began appointing security and military people to cabinet positions, demonstrating the increasing militarization of the regime¹⁰² to the point where the *Pasdaran* commanders have all but sealed their seizure of power.¹⁰³ As the *Pasdaran's* star rose, the clerics including Khamenei's fell. The way was now open for the *Pasdaran* to further its economic dominance, increasing its ability to resist the regime both financially and politically, as was mentioned at the end of the previous chapter.

Such was the increase in its power that for a time the relationship between the Supreme Leader, the clerics, and the IRGC was unclear. Was it rule by politburo with the Supreme Leader acting as a mere figurehead for the IRGC/clerical government? Or, was Khamenei truly in charge, managing both the clerics and the IRGC? Though it initially looked as if the relationship was closer to the politburo with the SNSC acting as the executive, it is clear now that Khamenei's preference is to rule personally. Yet this does not mean that he will not face a challenge by the IRGC, especially if he is weakened by a challenge from Rafsanjani, bringing the post-Khomeini Islamic Republic full circle.¹⁰⁴

Though Khamenei still controls the oil revenue he can no longer take his base of support amongst the clerics and the IRGC and *Basij* for granted. In the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election, Khamenei's authority declined sharply as many clerics, including the influential groups of clergy in Qom and members of parliament, demanded in public (albeit unsigned) letters that the Assembly of Experts determine whether he is still fit to be Supreme Leader. Just as importantly, he is in danger of losing his military muscle in the IRGC as its

control of Iran's political economy is nearly complete. At some point they may see fit to give him an offer he cannot refuse.¹⁰⁵

Perhaps Khamenei erred in openly siding with Ahmadinejad, but he may have only accelerated trends which were put into motion the day he took over from Khomeini. The dispersal of both religious and political authority resulting from his ascension is more in line with the majority of Shia tradition. This suggests that the foundation upon which Khomeini built the Islamic Republic is not resilient enough to adapt to changing circumstances, evinced by the *Pasdaran's* rise at the clerics' expense. How that foundation combined with the *Pasdaran's* sense of itself to enable it to exploit the leadership structures for its own advantage is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS FACTORS

The Islamic Republic is an odd formulation having both republican and theocratic elements. Though its constitutional basis has been discussed, what informed the ideas behind that basis and how did those ideas affect the evolution of the revolutionary government, particularly with respect to the role of the *Pasdaran* as its guardian? How were they able to gain prominence over their security peers when the factional nature of the clerical regime and the *Pasdaran* itself suggests that it could have seen its power divided and thus kept it in check? Also, what of the future? As was mentioned in chapter two, the dominant economic player has shifted in the past from the clerics to the *bonyads* and then to the *Pasdaran* itself, implying that it may at some point be surpassed by another collection of networks. Yet, the *Pasdaran* has unique qualities which cast some doubt on that trend, namely a strong identity among its officer corps and close proximity to the Supreme Leader. Further, the clerics have been weakened by the increasing secularization of Iranian society, opening the way for the *Pasdaran* to ascend all the way to the top.

The Foundation of the *Velayat-e Faqih*

For most of its history, Shia Islam held the view that clerics should remain outside positions of state power, exercising influence indirectly. However around the late 18th century,¹⁰⁶ during the Qajar dynasty,¹⁰⁷ clerical leadership became institutionalized, with the emergence of *mujtahids*. These were the clerical leaders from whom individual Shia had to choose to follow as disciples. The *mujtahid* had the authority to hand out diplomas for religious scholarship and take religious offerings, establishing an independent source of revenue, enabling them to resist the rule of the Qajars.¹⁰⁸ Though they had decreased in stature during the Pahlavi

dynasty,¹⁰⁹ in that period Khomeini devised his notion of the *velayat-e faqih*, extrapolating from that clerical system to one where a grand *mujtahid*—the *marja-i taqlid*—would be chosen for all to follow.¹¹⁰

Khomeini justified this by interpreting the infallibility of the Twelve Imams literally. Such a leader would serve as the vicegerent of the Hidden Imam until his return,¹¹¹ similar in principle to the Catholic belief that the Pope whose Latin title is *Vicarius Filii Dei*, (Vicar of Christ) represents God on earth. The major difference, of course besides the person being represented, is that while both espouse the view that the clergy should interpret scripture for the masses, Khomeini believed that that also implied a direct political as well as a religious role. Thus did the Islamic Republic conjoin the two corresponding legitimacies—the *velayat-e faqih* (the mandate of the jurist) and the *agah be zaman* (one who understands his time) with the latter providing the basis for leading the masses.¹¹²

Khomeini felt that he and he alone had the characteristics required of such a leader. Indeed, he was formidable. “First, and above all else, he was the most emotional and inventive charismatic leader of recent times,” his influence extending to millions of Muslims across the world. He empowered them by evoking within them a personal as well as a collective identity, one based in historical rootedness filling them with pride and even a feeling of superiority. This personal charisma then inculcated a symbiotic relationship between himself and his followers with belief in his special abilities acting as the conduit of his leadership. In addition to this personal charisma, he possessed the charisma emanating from his position as the highest ranking ayatollah in Shia Islam.¹¹³ These qualities allowed him to embody the twin ideals of the

Revolution, but upon his death there was no one to take his place, spawning a conceptual as well as a political dilemma.¹¹⁴

The Islamic Republic's Fatal Flaw

As was discussed in the previous chapter, with the death of Khomeini, the dual legitimacy was no longer embodied within a single leader. Answering the question over which basis for rule takes precedence became of paramount importance. The clerical regime chose the political role as the most essential, but that was only the immediate dilemma. Other problems cropped up as outgrowths both of that choice and the nature of the Islamic Republic from its inception. Again as brought up before, if politics takes precedence what of the Islamic Republic's constitution which demands the opposite? Yet, the dilemma was that if the dual sovereignties were divided into two positions with it would mean admitting the defeat of the Islamic Revolution and Khomeini's vision of clerical rule would come to an end. Khomeini tried to have Khamenei declared a *marja*¹¹⁵ but Qom already incensed at the selection of a mere *hojattolah eslam* was known to heavily disapprove of such a move so it was dropped.¹¹⁶

Entrenching further with his choice of Khamenei as his successor, however, only sharpened the contradictions so that the price paid for continuing the Revolutionary ideal of clerical rule was the politicization of religion, and paradoxically at the same time the de-clericalization of the body politic. This was evident even before the election of Khatami in the composition of the Majlis whose membership by 1996 was down to 50 clerics from its peak of 125 in 1987. In addition, six of the clerical members of the Expediency Council were stripped of their right to vote on non-constitutional matters.¹¹⁷

The clerics and Iranian people are divided over how to confront these conceptual and political contradictions, or indeed, whether to confront them at all. Given the paradoxical nature of the problems that have arisen it is difficult to classify the various factions as simply reformist or traditional. Therefore, Olivier Roy established a criterion based on each group's position on the *velayat-e faqih*. The hardliners are those who favor the status quo. Those who could be called the reformist hardliners (though he does not label them as such) favor the institution of the *velayat-e faqih* but believe that Montazeri should have succeeded Khomeini rather than Khamenei. The two other factions reject the concept of the *velayat-e faqih* outright. However, while the traditionalists reject both Khamenei and his office, the other more moderate faction rejects only the latter. These positions are unsurprising as the lower ranking clerics have the most to lose, a rather curious aspect of the Revolution being that it was the *hojattolah eslam* who gained positions of power rather than the grand ayatollahs.¹¹⁸

Yet the dilemmas themselves do not present the whole story, though they hint at it. Is it possible that in order for the *velayat-e faqih* to function as Khomeini designed, politics had to take precedence? A more careful look at the constitution of the Islamic Republic and the modifications made a decade into its history provides supporting evidence that it does, as politics trumped religion from the beginning. *Sharia* is subordinated to state law as there are discrepancies between their conceptions of citizenship and equality of the sexes. Consider, also, the manner in which even the Supreme Leader is appointed. Traditionally, a marja was selected by his peers with little public say in the matter, but given that the Supreme Leader has no peer the Assembly of Experts is charged with appointing him. Though that body is elected by the public, the Council of Guardians selects the candidates. As the members of that clerical body are

appointed by the Supreme Leader rather than the ayatollahs as would be dictated by tradition the political institution again is primary. Looking at the Expediency Council once more illustrates the same pattern. For what purpose did Khomeini create that body? To be sure, he intended it to ameliorate the gridlock resulting from the Council of Guardians' veto power over the Majlis, but in effect it deprived the clerics of the last say on legislative matters.¹¹⁹

Why is the initial relation between the two legitimacies relevant for the evolution of the *Pasdaran's* power? If political legitimacy was placed above religious legitimacy from the very beginning that strongly supports the case for the argument that the concept of clerical rule itself was unstable and that the *Pasdaran's* increase in power was but one artifact of that instability. That artifact is then just the outcome of the particular relative power configuration of the various players involved and the dynamics of Iran's leadership structures flowing from it. It is unstable because in order for the *velayat-e faqih* to function as a principle of governance it must subvert its own supporting ideology, leading to its eventual unraveling over time, as popular sovereignty must stand above divine sovereignty, exactly the opposite of its founding tenets. The increasing secularization of Iran, which ushered Khatami into the presidency, provides support for that conclusion. Nevertheless, that does not necessarily speak to a weakening of Islam, but rather to a decline of its influence in the political sphere.

The True Heirs to the Shah's Army

The logical time bomb alone, however, cannot account for the *Pasdaran's* ascension. It had to contend with its peer security institutions including the MOIS and even the *Artesh* which retained some residual influence, particularly as elements of Iran's leadership became wary of the *Pasdaran*.¹²⁰ The conflict between the dual sovereignties only set the door ajar. What

enabled it to be widened and then kept from being shut? Unfortunately for Khamenei, the informal networks which worked so well to secure his position also gave the *Pasdaran* the means to lock out its competitors and fend off attempts by other factions. Though Roy's classification is useful for examining the responses to the conceptual and political challenges in the post-Khomeini era, a more conventional division (albeit with a bit more differentiation than simply reformists and conservatives or leftists and rightists) is better suited for dealing with the relationship between the *Pasdaran* and the institutions of the Islamic Republic. In the RAND monograph, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of the Leadership Dynamics of Iran*, David Thaler et al. divide Iran's ideological factions into four categories—the traditionalist conservatives, reformists, pragmatic conservatives, and the principlists.¹²¹

The axis of difference here runs along more practical policy matters rather than theoretical conceptions of the state. Traditional conservatives are the largest faction, supporting the continuance of the status quo, as their base of support lies with the lower-middle class, many of the bazaar merchants, and the lower-ranking clerics who stand to lose power in any formal rebalancing. Their antagonists, the reformers, began in the 1980s with moderate clerics arguing for a more liberal order and the spawning of a civil society, peaking in influence with the election of Khatami. The pragmatic conservatives may be thought of as reformist-lite. Centered on Rafsanjani, they push for more economic openness and increasing ties with the United States, while holding to traditionalist social mores. Finally, the principlists share much in common with the traditional conservatives, but as with the reformists they decry the corruption of Iran's leadership, especially its clerics. Thus, they seek a return to the pure principles of the Revolution. This is the faction dominated by the IRGC, which gained power in the Majlis and

the presidency through Ahmadinejad on the support of the religiously devout and the poorest classes.¹²² It must be pointed out as well that these factions cut across government institutions and economic classes such that the *Pasdaran* itself is factionalized.¹²³ Much of its troop strength is filled by conscripts, going back even to the Iran-Iraq War. Thus, it is unsurprising to find similar divisions within the *Pasdaran* itself. As was noted previously, the majority of its members voted for Khatami in the 1997 presidential election.¹²⁴

While the *Pasdaran* has its own trouble with factionalism that has not been an insurmountable impediment. On the contrary, not only did it maintain enough coherence to increase its power but it accomplished that by taking advantage of the informal networks both in the economic and political/security spheres.¹²⁵ What accounts for that coherency even as its expanding financial assets and political clout gave its members the incentive to satisfy their own self-interest, adding to the strain of divisions over differences in world view? The *Pasdaran* had developed a corporate identity. Forged initially in the fires of the Iran-Iraq War, it grew stronger with the *Pasdaran*'s increasing professionalism under Khamenei.¹²⁶

States in the Middle East have long struggled with the dilemma of the professionalization of their militaries. Each of them desires to enhance their security by modernizing the equipment and procedures of their militaries, but as they grow more capable with the process of professionalization so does the threat of a military coup. This results from the sense of corporate identity that the officer corps acquires as well as their military training and discipline.¹²⁷

Samuel Huntington defined professionalization as complete civilian control over the military, a condition not yet achieved by the states of the region including Iran. So to counter the risk of a military takeover, various control mechanisms, depending on the nature of the state and

its history, operate to contain any such aspirations. These include the use of loyal tribal forces and/or mercenaries, deliberately transforming ideological officers into civilian autocrats, and the creation of an armed force of highly ideological nonprofessional irregulars. Iran opted for the latter.¹²⁸ Yet that solution is problematic itself because even apart from its influence outside the military, the *Pasdaran* became the true heirs to the Shah's army, in the words of Steven Ward's *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*.¹²⁹

This development is in opposition to Huntington's theory of military professionalization leading to a less politicized armed force.¹³⁰ In part this is due to the *Pasdaran's* political origins as an irregular force, and that their professionalization in terms of training was acquired on the battlefield rather than formal instruction,¹³¹ but also to the access to informal networks. That access empowered them relative to other military security organizations including the *Artesh* and the MOIS through their connections with the alumni and their proximity to Khamenei.¹³² Ideally, a nonpolitical military provides advice on matters of security to civilian leaders who then formulate the policies for the military to execute. Thus, the information input supposedly flows through the proper channels producing the output.¹³³

However, the assumption behind that process is that there is no asymmetry in knowledge concerning matters of security and that the proper channels are not circumvented. Both are not true in the case of Iran, resulting in a situation where the decision-making process warps back in on itself such that the *Pasdaran* currently has a greater role in foreign policymaking than the SNSC, whose influence is also dependent on the person who is appointed to be Khamenei's representative in the council. As Khamenei is the center of gravity of the decision-making process, any government institution under his control cannot be managed by any government,

implying that his subordinates willingly submit to his command. While it was assumed, until the mid-2000s, that this was due to a lack of autonomy, after the election of Ahmadinejad, the alumni have gradually taken over the security apparatus (as they did with the economy) which was supposed to be an equal participant in the decision-making process.¹³⁴ Further, the *Pasdaran* was able to exploit their information advantage to increasingly exclude the MOIS from being a competing source of expertise, leaving it as the only truly independent political actor among its peer security institutions.¹³⁵

Khamenei had an impossible challenge to overcome, in the form of a constitutional contradiction. As he did not have the charisma of Khomeini, he could not embody the *agah be zaman*,¹³⁶ necessitating a great deal of reliance on patrimonialism, which he could not completely execute because of his close relationship with the *Pasdaran*. Compounding this was the unintentional replacement of one professional military, the *Artesh*, for another, the irregular force designed to suppress it.¹³⁷ This error was compounded even further by the corporate identity that enabled the *Pasdaran* to resist factionalism, such that those schisms acted as an accelerant rather than a retardant. The unraveling of Khamenei's patrimonial strategy may explain his seemingly desperate move to explicitly offer Ahmadinejad support. That decision may be seen as the final wobble of an unstable constitutional conception of rule of the clerics. In any case it is not in keeping, historically, with most of the traditional practice of Shia Islam in Iran, as evidenced by the rejection of the *velayat-e faqih* by most of the grand ayatollahs. With the rise of secularization and increasing support even among the traditional clerics for the development of a civil society, the ruling clerics' only hope to maintain their relevance, paradoxically, may be to relinquish the power of the state.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Since its inception, the *Pasdaran* has taken a remarkable path to power. From its lowly origins as a loose collection of vigilante groups forged into an irregular armed force to protect the Revolution particularly in its early stages to the preeminent security institution it has seen a vast increase in its power.¹³⁸ This study began with a look at the economic factors which propelled that rise, as they encompass a number of turning points in the history of the Islamic Republic and the *Pasdaran*. With the death of Khomeini, both Rafsanjani and Khamenei showed favor to the *Pasdaran*'s leadership, though for different reasons. Moreover, the latter's objective introduced the basics of the tension between the theocratic and democratic elements of the Islamic Republic, embodied foremostly in the Supreme Leader and the President, which leads to the crux of how the door was cracked open for the *Pasdaran* in the first place.

Recapping the Economic Dimension of the *Pasdaran*

The initiative to encourage the *Pasdaran* to enter the economy expanded their political role beyond their limited, internal security sphere, eventually enabling greater access to and independence from the state apparatus.¹³⁹ Giving the *Pasdaran* control over the reconstruction of Iran's infrastructure solved several problems at once, though it created new ones which were not anticipated at the time. The *Pasdaran* was kept satisfied having its own source of funding through the necessary rebuilding of Iran, while avoiding the unpleasant budget compromises of funding two separate militaries in addition to rebuilding their war-torn infrastructure, which they otherwise would have been forced to confront.¹⁴⁰ Yet, the encouragement of corruption in conjunction with the increasing urbanization that came with development provoked resentment against the regime, resulting in the election of Khatami to the presidency in 1997.¹⁴¹ This was

the turning point from which the clerics have never fully regained the power they had during the Islamic Republic's first decade.

Instead of listening to the cries of the public for a more liberal order, the clerics, fearing for their rule and the ideals of the revolution, sought to resist those demands by closing ranks with the *Pasdaran*. The consequences of that decision and the entry of the *Pasdaran* into the economic sphere were compounded with the movement to denationalize the economy, whose centrally planned nature was demanded by Article 44 of the constitution. In the wake of Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 presidential elections, Khamenei issued a decree which basically nullified Article 44. Rather than being a true privatization, however, the measure was designed to transfer state assets from the more transparent government institutions to the more opaque ones, primarily the *bonyads*, many of which the *Pasdaran* controlled, rather than private firms. Thus, the *Pasdaran* was able to utilize its new assets to gain control of entire sectors of Iran's economy, accelerating the increase in their power after having first held, then beaten back the reformists.¹⁴²

None of this might have occurred, however, without the dilemma the Islamic Republic faced upon the death of its founder, Khomeini. A successor had to be found with at least decent religious credentials and an ability to manage the state, but this was complicated by the tension between the positions of Supreme Leader and the Presidency which was magnified by the mismatch in influence between Khamenei and Rafsanjani and their respective positions. While Khamenei met the modified requirements to become Supreme Leader, his influence paled in comparison to Rafsanjani's, who succeeded the former as president.¹⁴³ If Khamenei had had the necessary clout to handle Rafsanjani on his own, he may not have empowered the *Pasdaran* to

the same degree to compensate. Though, Rafsanjani still would have handed the management of the *bonyads* to *Pasdaran* commanders, Khamenei would not have given such a blank check in their contracting practices which were crucial to building up the wealth necessary for their future political and economic advances. Moreover, neither would their room for maneuvering against competing security institutions been as great without quite such proximity to Khamenei.

Recapping the Leadership Structure

Two important points then come from looking at economic factors. One, the *Pasdaran's* independent source of funding was the key material catalyst needed to increase their power and just as consequential, the basis for Iran's leadership structure has the potential for great instability. That of course begs the question of from whence that instability arises. It is the contention of this study that its source is the dual sovereignty of the Islamic Republic. The necessity to modify the constitution in order for Khamenei to be qualified to become the new Supreme Leader supports this view, as he had neither the religious credentials nor the popular mandate possessed by Khomeini. Therefore, the leadership dynamic displays potential instability in two different ways—the Supreme Leader has to embody both sovereignties and he must be similar in ideology to and/or possess greater power than the president, the latter being more important. For example, though President Bani-Sadr was not of one accord with Khomeini he did not have the constitutional nor informal power to defy him, leaving the Supreme Leader comfortably safe.¹⁴⁴ Yet that was not the case with Khamenei and Rafsanjani.

As the highest ranking cleric Khomeini fit the concept of the *velayat-e faqih* like the proverbial glove, but even his vast reservoir of charisma was insufficient to hold back the demands of some of the faction's desire for a republic.¹⁴⁵ This had to be reconciled in the

constitution with a completely theocratic state which was nonnegotiable for the Islamists. Of course, it was an impossible task as the author of that resolution well knew given that the one required submission to divine authority and the other to popular authority.¹⁴⁶ Fortunately for the fledgling revolutionary state Khomeini was able to embody both. While, Khamenei lacked that capacity, as long as the ruling elite in the Majlis, Presidency, and the Supreme Leader were united on the continuation of clerical rule, the political system was stable.¹⁴⁷ That ceased to be the case with Khatami's electoral victory, leading to de facto dual governance, pitting the reformers, who sought to implement a liberal, civil society using the government institutions under their control, against the clerics led by Khamenei and aided by the *Pasdaran*. The latter blocked the former at every turn using intimidation and informal channels to circumvent the formal governing bodies.¹⁴⁸

Yet the decision to ally themselves more closely with the *Pasdaran* did not have the effect of stymieing the decline of clerics' influence. It merely shifted it to the *Pasdaran* as was evident after the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005 and many veteran and active *Pasdaran* members were elected to the Majlis in 2004. After weathering the reformist storm, the clerics worked to restore stability through the use of a powerful governing body still under their control—the Council of Guardians. That body has jurisdiction over which candidates meet the requirements to run in elections for the presidency and the Majlis so they simply filtered out the reformist candidates, clearing the way for candidates from the *Pasdaran* to assume positions of power. The *Pasdaran* further consolidated their power at the cleric's expense as Ahmadinejad began to fill his cabinet with alumni.¹⁴⁹ It is an interesting question as to whether that influence would have been better served if they had satisfied themselves with a limited defeat, siding with

an emerging civil society, but one in which they had still had a prominent place. The *Pasdaran* at the time was not so powerful as to be able to overthrow them but now it grows ever stronger, especially as Khamenei ages.

The clerics chose to cling to their power instead. On the contrary, their efforts resulted in the waning of their power in tandem with the waxing of the *Pasdaran*'s. In their defense, though, that outcome would not have been obvious to the casual observer, especially if they had not factored in the development of the *Pasdaran*'s acute sense of itself as an institution apart from the regime, to which it still remains loyal. This strong corporate identity was forged during the Iran-Iraq War through the camaraderie and training acquired in battle. In contrast to their design as an ideological irregular army, that experience also increased their professionalization, quite unintentionally on the part of the clerics, which only served to strengthen their identity. This worked to ameliorate their factional divisions as it grew more prominent.¹⁵⁰ On the contrary, factionalism in the state apparatus as a whole gave it the advantage against its peer security institutions, particularly given its proximity to Khomeini and connections through the alumni, even before the 2004 and 2005 elections.¹⁵¹

Recapping the Social and Religious Factors

In one of the ironic turn of affairs for Iran's political leadership, the survival of the Islamic Republic could only be purchased at the price of forsaking its most basic tenet—that religion must take precedence over politics.¹⁵² Along that line of thought, it is difficult at first glance to explain why Khomeini thought Khamenei was a good choice. In the opinion of the author, there are really only two possible explanations for his decision, given the specific constraints of the Islamic Republic, rather than those resulting from some general criteria for

state leadership. The first is that Khomeini's faith failed him at the crucial moment, and instead of at least choosing an ayatollah let alone passing over the constitutionally demanded leading *marja*, he placed politics before religion to secure the Islamic Revolution even being at least somewhat aware of the complications that could arise for its leadership structure. Though such reasoning may be unconventional, it is not unreasonable to hold Khomeini to the standards which he himself set for political leadership in the Islamic Republic.

The second is much simpler—he had no choice. Why would he have no choice? This led to the final and most fundamental question. From whence did the justification for clerical rule come in the first place? The importance of this question is that it alludes to the origin of the instability in the conception of clerical rule, which is what the *Pasdaran*, after all, was designed to protect. As it was that instability that gave rise to the conditions that brought Khomeini to power, the answer to that question then provides an explanation of how the *Pasdaran* began its path to power.

Earlier in the conclusion the argument was recounted from chapter 3 that the schisms at the Islamic Republic's founding were the cause of the split institutionally in the Islamic Republic. While this caused structural problems as its theocratic and democratic institutions are incompatible, to which the creation of the Expediency Council attests, that says nothing of the strength of the conceptual basis for clerical rule itself, as defined by Khomeini. Looking at the historical roots for his interpretation of the infallibility of the Imams, led him to conclude that the clerics should rule through the state, and that the leader of that state should be the leading *marja* enabling him to fulfill the role of the *velayat-e faqih*.¹⁵³ Yet the second criteria, that he must

have the fealty of the people, being one who has the understanding of his time, was arguably even more important.¹⁵⁴

Therefore, the contradiction in Khomeini's conception of rule by the Shia clerics is similar to that between the constitutional institutions demanded by its dual sovereignties, which forced him to choose Khamenei to succeed him over much more religiously qualified candidates, even though the constitution demands that religion take precedence over political considerations. Paradoxically, that choice, in the end, was forced upon him because of his belief system, even though he would certainly have preferred a more qualified candidate. So in addition to the irreconcilability of divine and popular sovereignty within the constitution, clerical rule is irreconcilable unto itself, requiring the opposite of its basic tenet in order to function. That latter contradiction left Khomeini no choice but to pick Khamenei. The former provided the catalyst for the empowerment of the *Pasdaran* by putting into practice the division of the sovereignties between the Supreme Leader and the President in Khamenei and Rafsanjani, respectively.

Alternative Explanations

A combination of factors that are external—and to a lesser extent—internal to the *Pasdaran* have been put forth to explain its rise. Yet is that case really so unique? There are several other instances of militaries expanding beyond their narrow sphere within authoritarian states rather different from the Islamic Republic. In *Rise of the Pasdaran: The Domestic Role of the IRGC in Iran*, Frederick Wehrey et al. assert that the expansion experienced by the Chinese and Pakistani militaries are comparable to that of the *Pasdaran*. Though they do so in order to gain insight into the latter's future, one could also argue that if China's developmental history is similar, the factors fingered in this study were not consequential for the *Pasdaran*'s evolution.

(The same cannot be said for Pakistan as it has experienced several periods of military rule throughout its history, whereas the Islamic Republic has never been overtaken by a military dictatorship). The counterargument is that it is possible that there are just many paths to military expansion depending on the nature of its corresponding state, but that point is moot here as the differences are relevant as will be shown.

Even as the People's Liberation Army economic ventures grew out of the familiar circumstance of the state seeking to supplement its military's government funding¹⁵⁵ there is a key disparity between Iran and China which can be inferred from Wehrey et al.'s comparison. In the case of China, it is telling that the military leadership was forced to hand over its business operations by the civilian leadership whereas Wehrey et al. hypothesize that any such turn to pragmatism and technocratism would come from within the IRGC itself.¹⁵⁶ In addition, China's military leadership itself apparently had grown weary of handling their business operations, agreeing with their civilian masters' rationale for divesting them of their assets.¹⁵⁷ This implies greater factionalism within the Islamic Republic as opposed to the Chinese state, which would work to inhibit the kind of control the latter's leadership was able to impose upon its military. Instead, this quality has allowed the IRGC to operate as a state within a state, maintaining and expanding its influence.

Indeed, as was mentioned in the chapter on leadership, Khomeini actually set up his own network to create a mini-state within a state to protect his new revolutionary regime against the democratic elements of the Islamic Republic.¹⁵⁸ This also points to the religious dimension of Iran's government that China's does not possess. The IRGC was able to step into that pocket of sovereignty created by that religious dimension when Khamenei took over that network and

began creating one of his own.¹⁵⁹ So while there are similarities, there are key differences aligning with the arguments of this study which account for the lack of diminishment of the *Pasdaran*'s influence.

Even more generally, some may argue that the case of the *Pasdaran* really needs no other explanation than Graham Allison's second model of group decision-making—the organizational paradigm. He argued that expansion is endemic to all organizations as they seek to survive, in a manner similar to a biological organism. They define their health in terms of their autonomy and are thus compelled to increase the size of their bureaucratic turf, budget, and personnel.¹⁶⁰ However, to the extent that dynamic was at work, the clerical regime would have kept it at bay if the Supreme Leader desired it. This finds support in the first decade of the *Pasdaran*'s existence, as Khomeini doggedly maintained its political neutrality, keeping it hemmed within the security sphere.¹⁶¹ After Khomeini died, the political environment was certainly conducive to the “colonizing activity” described by Allison,¹⁶² but that impetus alone cannot account for the mechanics of why the next Supreme Leader, Khamenei, allowed them to do so when he had the constitutional power to thwart them.

Subjects for Future Research

Though the author believes his argument better accounts for rise of the *Pasdaran* than the alternatives presented above, there are nevertheless other lines of inquiry which could shed more light on the evolution of the *Pasdaran*. Concerning its future, a more detailed understanding of its inner workings is required to better discern whether it will remain cohesive enough to continue gaining in power. If so, such an understanding would also yield insight into whether the dominant group will choose to take over from the clerics and what relationship would be

sought with them in the event of a takeover. Its past history also offers further avenues of research, over the role of religion in its development.

Olivier Roy, for instance, recounted Professor Ervand Abrahamian's contention that the Iranian Revolution was really the last of the leftist, third world uprisings against imperialist powers wrapped up in the cloak of Islam.¹⁶³ Discovering to what extent Islam was the driving force behind it would reveal the ceiling for the clerical regime's support though not necessarily its floor. Nonetheless, it might be possible to parse the legitimacy of the regime somewhat from its nature, regardless of whether it had been more democratic or more theocratic. Extending that line of reasoning, examining some counterfactuals concerning how the IRGC would have developed under different leadership and constitutional structures (Table 2) offers a kind of test for the fulcrum of this study's argument that the Islamic Republic was constructed on unstable foundations.

For example, how would the *Pasdaran* have developed under a purer Islamic theocracy as opposed to the compromise that became the Islamic Republic? Would it have been able to increase its influence and if so, could it have done so over the same time frame? Tentatively, the answer to the first appears to be yes and no to the second. For the concept of the *velayat-e faqih* has problems of its own, apart from any form of state to which it could be applied, but with no formal constitutional power center to rival the Supreme Leader, it would likely have taken some time for one to develop within the informal networks of Iran.

What of the *velayat-e faqih* itself? If Montazeri had succeeded Khomeini instead of Khamenei would the IRGC have been kept in its proper place? That is trickier to answer, especially when combined with the first counterfactual, as the former only tests the stability of

the *velayat-e faqih* while the latter tests both that of the *velayat-e faqih* and that of the constitutional leadership structure at the same time. In any case, a thorough examination of all three scenarios would demonstrate the relative importance of both instabilities to the rise of the *Pasdaran*.

All Roads Lead to and from Khamenei

No matter the strength of the elements of each factor's influence, the thread that ties all of them together is the Supreme Leader, which for most of the Islamic Republic's history has been Khamenei. This is unsurprising as this study has argued that the other elements were either the cause or the effect of his succession. Through him the *Pasdaran's* development of the rural areas led to an increase in urbanization and education which fueled the reformist movement, whose origins lie in the decline in the legitimacy of clerical rule. That legitimacy was supported by an unstable foundation in the *velayat-e faqih*, only finding a consistently functional expression in Khomeini himself. Yet, even his charisma and stature were not enough to overcome the factional disputes at the start of the Revolution, thus requiring a constitutional structure which was itself a contradiction, only hastening the day of reckoning for clerical rule upon Khomeini's death. This is made fairly clear by their desperate collusion with the *Pasdaran* to fend off the reformists which may well have been the decision that seals their fate.

As was stated above, it remains to be seen whether the *Pasdaran* will retain enough cohesion to continue their ascension and thus its ability to take the reins of the state. Nevertheless, in the short to medium term, its power will continue to increase as the clerics rely upon it to an ever greater extent for the maintenance of their rule. If its trajectory holds through Khamenei's death it will be in a position to determine who the next Supreme Leader will be. On

the other hand, it may decide to forgo the figurehead route completely and rule openly as a military dictatorship. The path that prevails will depend on which faction wins out between the old and new guards, as the former remain much more committed to the ideals of the Revolution, decrying the corrupting influence of its commercial operations. As the former retire and are replaced by the latter, the second option does not appear to be out of the question. Such an outcome would be the greatest irony of all as Khomeini's legacy will have crumbled at the hand of the very organization meant to secure it.

TABLES

Table 1: Elements of Three Factors Affecting Iran's Political Economy

	Government Policy	Political Actor	Political Institution
Economic	Reconstruction contracts	Khamenei	Supreme Leader
	Privatization	Rafsanjani	Presidency
		Khatami	<i>Pasdaran</i>
Leadership	Altering the Constitution	Khomeini	Supreme Leader
	Banning Reformists from elections	Khamenei	Presidency
		Rafsanjani	Council of Guardians
		Ahmadinejad	
Culture	Professionalization of the <i>Pasdaran</i>	Khomeini	Supreme Leader
	Succession of Khamenei	Khamenei	Constitution
	Development of Rural Areas	Alumni	<i>Pasdaran</i>

Table 2: Counterfactual Scenarios

Supreme Leader	Islamic Republic	Islamic Theocracy
Khamenei	actual	IRGC rises more slowly
Montazeri	?	?

END NOTES

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- ²⁵ David Thaler, et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 2010), 35, 38.
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