



Indoctrination of the Revolutionary Guards

By Ali Alfoneh

The Iranian political leadership has used clerical commissars and ideological indoctrination to maintain civilian control over the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). But examination of its indoctrination infrastructure and training material reveals that rather than keep out of politics, the IRGC has repudiated its own indoctrination and now encourages the officer corps to intervene politically. The IRGC's political indoctrination effort now trains new cadres, loyal first and foremost to the IRGC, to direct the Islamic Republic.

In most authoritarian regimes, political indoctrination enables civilian influence over the armed forces. The KGB's commissars, for example, kept an eagle eye on the Red Army, immediately purging any officer who deviated from the Soviet leader's line. Iraqi president Saddam Hussein used a small cadre of his own commissars to keep an eye on his officer corps lest any attempt a coup. In the Islamic Republic, however, indoctrination efforts actually work to strengthen military control over both civilian and clerical centers of power.

The IRGC is, at its core, an ideological organization charged with safeguarding Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's vision for an Islamic Republic.¹ The 1982 Statute of the Guards argues that ideological guardianship is impossible without proper ideological-political indoctrination. Article 11 of the statute tasks the IRGC with "[e]ducating and training members of the Guards in accordance with Islamic values and . . . ideological, political and military fields in order to obtain the necessary capability to execute the missions it is tasked with."²

Just a year ago, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called for renewed indoctrination of the IRGC.³ The aim of the indoctrination is to create a "devout and revolutionary man"⁴—or, in the words of Hojjat al-Eslam Mohammad Toyserkani, the

chief of the IRGC's Ideological-Political Directorate, to "remake members of the Guards . . . into true believers with regard to their spiritual, ethical, behavioral adherence to divine values, and even in physical appearance and inner being."⁵ The indoctrination effort is based upon the four principles of religion, obedience to the supreme leader, revolutionary character, and fellowship in a people's army.⁶

In Tehran, as in Washington, personnel are policy. The Statute of the Guards mandates that the chiefs of the IRGC's ideological-political, publication, and propaganda bureaus, along with their subsidiaries at various levels of the IRGC, should be chosen from among clergy accepted by the supreme leader or his representative in the Guards.⁷ Today, these individuals are midrank clerics.⁸ Toyserkani has deputies in four of the Guards' five branches: Hojjat al-Eslam Seyyed Ali-Reza Adyani in the IRGC Navy, Hamid Ghanbari in the IRGC Air Force, Hojjat al-Eslam Ramezan-Ali Kouhestani in the IRGC Ground Forces, and Hojjat al-Eslam Ali Rezai in the Basij.⁹ Public sources do not identify Toyserkani's deputy in the Quds Force, the IRGC unit charged with exporting revolution.

According to article 15 of the statute under which the Guards are organized, the Ideological-Political Indoctrination Directorate "decides the content of the ideological-political indoctrination education of the members of the Guards and the

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Basij, planning and execution of the aforementioned training and recruitment, and training of instructors,” although an amendment requires the supreme leader or his representatives in the Guards to ratify the unit’s programs and publications.¹⁰ The difference between the IRGC chief’s role in initiating the ideological and political indoctrination program and the relegation of the representative of the supreme leader to a reactive role is, in practice, significant.

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IRGC educational centers host the indoctrination courses and sessions. Martyr Mahallati University in Qom, founded in 1982 and formerly known as the University of Islamic Science and Culture, serves as the most advanced center for training ideological-political instructors of the Guards.¹¹ Seyyed Al-Shohada Educational Center in Tabriz is the ideological-political training facility of the IRGC Ground Forces,¹² while the IRGC uses a number of provincial centers to host training for IRGC units now organized along a provincial structure. Together, these institutes employ perhaps four thousand “political guides.”¹³ Tasking Martyr Mahallati graduates with indoctrination, however, amounts to asking the IRGC to supervise itself. There are no checks and balances. Political guides compound the problem. Most are likely to be graduates of instructor training programs at Martyr Mahallati or other IRGC universities and so do not bring an outside element of civilian control.

Indoctrinating to Intervene

A systematic content analysis of the IRGC indoctrination curriculum is not possible because most IRGC products are not open source, but the Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Ministry has released a sample of indoctrination materials entitled *Political Questions and Answers* on its web portal.¹⁴ The *Political Questions and Answers* series reads like a long-distance learning program. The latest edition available on the website, dated April 15, 2008, presents questions such as:

- “How effective is the role of the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] director general, and does he act in a deceiving way?”

- “What is the reason behind the delay of presidential elections in Lebanon?”
- “Why does the media refer to a new Cold War?”
- “Why has [French president Nicolas] Sarkozy gotten closer to America (Bush)?”
- “How do you assess statements of [Iraqi president] Jalal Talabani with regard to the 1975 agreement [which delineated the Iran-Iraq border]?”¹⁵

The November 17, 2007, version focuses on domestic questions and asks:

- “What is the difference between political and economic privileges? Which has primacy?”
- “What is the role of the Ideological-Political Directorate in crisis management, especially when it comes to sanctions regimes?”
- “What are the characteristics of the internal and external enemies?”
- “Why do some IRGC commanders intervene in politics despite the statements of his holiness the Imam [Ayatollah Khomeini]?”
- “What is the composition of the parties and groupings competing in the next parliamentary elections?”

There are also questions relating to history—“Why did the Islamic Republic continue the war [against Iraq] after the liberation of Khorramshahr [in 1982]?”—and foreign policy:

- “Are Iran’s [close] relations with Iraq and Afghanistan political, or are they due to religious and sectarian affinity?”
- “What are the reasons behind the Islamic Republic of Iran’s support to the Hamas government . . . and the Lebanese Hezbollah movement?”
- “What is the possibility of cooperation of Arab countries with the United States against Iran?”
- “What is the role of Iran in ideological infiltration of the region?”
- “Will Palestine ever be free and will Israel collapse?”

Most of the answers justify rather than deter the Guards’ intervention in politics. For example, the proper answer to the question about why IRGC commanders intervene in politics despite Khomeini’s statements against the practice is:

Statements of his holiness the Imam [Khomeini] with regard to nonintervention of the armed forces

in politics referred to membership of military forces in political parties, partisanship in favor of one party against other parties, and the like. The activities of the Guards are of a different sort. For example, if a political group active in the country propagates the idea of separation between religion and politics, or if another political party is in favor of providing a foreign government with certain privileges, the Revolutionary Guards considers itself obliged to protest and obliged to announce the protest in public since ideals such as the Guardianship of the Jurist and integrity of the country have been attacked. Such matters are a part of guarding the ideals of the Revolution. Therefore one must not consider this as an example of armed forces intervention in politics. It is only within the fields of duties of the Guards.¹⁶

Similarly, the proper answer to the question about the composition of the parties and groupings competing in the next parliamentary elections is: “Political parties have not really been formed and survived. . . . The parties and factions center on individuals rather than programs.” On such grounds, the indoctrination material expresses its concern about survival of the “Islamist nature” of Iran should too much power devolve to ordinary politicians.¹⁷

The rest of the answers reflect a paranoid worldview in which “Satanic powers” such as the United States and Israel constantly seek to topple the Islamic Republic, and this, in turn, necessitates IRGC intervention in politics to guarantee regime survival. Such assertions are, indeed, a constant theme of IRGC publications.¹⁸ Indeed, the first issue of the Defense Ministry’s *Negah-e Rouz* [View of the Day] dealt with “[c]ultural and societal strategies of the United States against the Islamic Republic of Iran.”¹⁹ The publication continues to label almost every Western academic conference or research institute addressing Iran or Islam as “Zionist.”²⁰

Contradictions and Implications

While ambitious, the indoctrination effort suffers from a weak and often contradictory theoretical foundation in several ways. First, there is a contradiction between religion and guardianship. Shia Islam gives each member of the community the right to choose his or her own source of emulation among the ranking Shia clergy. The indoctrination effort deprives individual Guardsmen of their right to choose among sources of emulation and forces

subjugation to Khamenei, who has not achieved the rank of grand ayatollah. In an attempt to address this conflict, the IRGC has developed a cult of the supreme leader, which leads to contradiction between serving as a people’s army versus simply being Khamenei’s militia.

Second, there is also a contradiction between religion and revolutionary character. Traditional Shia Islam is conservative, quietist, and in opposition to politicization of religion as prescribed by the revolutionary character of the IRGC. This is probably why the IRGC leadership must rely on its own theological universities to train its cadre, as other universities and seminaries may not be in line with the IRGC’s own views of religion.

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In effect, this deprives the traditional theological seminaries of their monopoly as independent power centers interpreting divine law. Such an attempt also paves the way for the IRGC to infiltrate religious space in Iran. While the traditional religious establishment in Iran may be hostile toward, or, at best, skeptical of, the United States and Western notions of liberalism, it remains hostile to elements of populism and superstition—such as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s millenarianism.²¹ Should the IRGC universities shut traditional seminaries out of training the new generation of clerics, past and present military officials—such as Ahmadinejad—can claim direct contact between themselves and the Hidden Imam in order to receive revelations and bypass traditional clergy and, in theory, the supreme leader himself. Indeed, according to traditional Shiite jurisprudence, the Mahdi returns during an era of corruption and chaos²² and must contend with the opposition of Islamic clerics as he “introduces the ‘true Islam.’”²³

Third, there is a contradiction between religion and the principle of the IRGC being a people’s army, especially as the urbanized Iranian population grows more secular in its outlook and values. The IRGC has worked to address this conflict in two ways: by prioritizing the recruitment of members from more traditional rural areas and by using religious police and Basij paramilitaries to impose their interpretation of religion upon the public.

Both methods are unsustainable. Iran is increasingly an urbanized society, and the pool of rural recruits is shrinking. Rigid enforcement of IRGC values upon a resistant urbanized population drives a corrosive wedge between the public and the IRGC.

This contradiction is compounded when the role of the supreme leader is considered: how can the IRGC be a people's army and be obedient first and foremost to one man? Supporting the personality cult around an unelected supreme leader encourages IRGC disrespect for elected offices such as the presidency and the parliament in the Islamic Republic. Mounting popular demand for economic and political reforms in the face of the supreme leader's opposition places the IRGC in the middle of a potential conflict, one that will be compounded with the death of the elderly Khamenei, given the lack of any apparent successor.

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Paradoxically, the idea of obedience to the supreme leader and preservation of revolutionary values can also be contradictory. The Iranian leadership has often been willing to subjugate revolutionary to practical considerations. It has, for example, supported Christian Armenia in its military conflict with Shiite Azerbaijan, and it has lately provided aid and assistance to the Taliban, a militant Sunni movement, despite the Taliban's ideological and sectarian hostility toward Iran. The IRGC has tried to resolve this problem through the use of vigilante groups such as Ansar-e Hezbollah that operate outside legal channels to pressure the government to conform to revolutionary values, even when the supreme leader is willing to compromise.

Conclusion

Rather than protect Khomeini's vision of clerical rule, IRGC indoctrination has created a cycle of weakening civilian control over the military and a dynamic that threatens the primacy of traditional Shia clergy inside Iran, even those who have conformed to Khomeini's views of clerical rule. Indoctrination materials reinforce a

paranoid worldview and encourage involvement in politics. This, in turn, reinforces the trend of militarization within the Islamic Republic, as the IRGC stages, in some ways, a slow, creeping coup d'état in which it has become the predominant power within the context of the Islamic Republic in reality, even if not in name.

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Notes

1. Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, art. 150.
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5. "Re'is-e Edareh-ye Amouzeshe-ha-ye 'Aghidati-Siyasi-ye Sepah Dar Goftego Ba *Sobh-e Sadeh*: Tarbiyat-Mehvari Mabna-ye Harekat-e Mast" [Ideological-Political Directorate Chief of the Guards in Conversation with *Sobh-e Sadeh*: Education-Centrism Is the Foundation of Our Movement], *Sobh-e Sadeh* (Tehran), May 8, 2008, available at www.sobhesadeh.ir/1387/0347/p09.pdf (accessed February 7, 2009).
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15. Aghidati-Siyasi-e Vezerat-e Defa'e, *Porsesh Va Pasokh-e Siyasi* [Political Questions and Answers] (Tehran: Aghidati-Siyasi-ye Vezerat-e Defa'e, April 15, 2008), available at www.siyasi.ir/content/view/2973/1 (accessed January 18, 2009).

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17. Ibid.

18. See Aghidati-Siyasi-e Vezerat-e Defa'e, available at www.siyasi.ir/component/option,com_remository/func,select/id,9 (accessed February 11, 2009).

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20. Ibid.

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22. Mohammad-Javad Mashkour, *Tarikh-e Shi'e Va Fergheh-he-ye Eslam*, 5th ed. (Tehran: Ketabforoushi-ye Eshraqi, 1993), 132.

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