



IRANIAN WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

The Birth of a Regional Nuclear Arms Race?

ANTHONY H. CORDESMAN AND ADAM C. SEITZ



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Introduction

Iran presents the most serious single security challenge in the Middle East. Its actions pose a critical potential threat to a region that dominates the world's export of oil, gas, and petroleum products and help shape the ideological struggles within Islam. Its capabilities for asymmetric and proxy warfare have steadily expanded its power and influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Afghanistan. Iran has also succeeded in building ties to hard-line Palestinian movements such as Hamas.

While Iran remains a relatively weak conventional military power, it has already compensated by building up power capabilities for asymmetric warfare in the Gulf region and by creating special elements in its Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps to train and encourage the forces of groups such as Hezbollah. It has exploited its ability to export light weapons—including antitank and antiaircraft guided missiles—and artillery rockets, and even antiship missiles. The shaped-charge components and technology it provided to insurgents in Iraq were the single most lethal weapons technology in that fighting. The same was true of the Russian antitank guided weapons it supplied to Hezbollah before its war with Israel in 2006.

Iran can become a major regional military power, however, only if it can deploy long-range strike forces and equip them with weapons of mass destruction. Iran already has long-range missiles that can hit targets in much of the region and has systems with much greater range-payload in development. There are strong indications that Iran is reaching the breakout point in being able to build nuclear weapons and could be only years away from arming its missiles with nuclear warheads. The very risk of such actions may already have triggered changes in how Israel plans to structure and use its nuclear forces and is forcing the United States to choose between prevention, preemption, containment, and deterrence.

The pace of these developments has increased significantly in the last few years. At the same time, so has the complexity of Iranian actions. It is not possible to meaningfully address these actions and the risks they pose simply by focusing on Iran's nuclear

programs. It is necessary to consider Iran's policies and politics, its command structure, how its search for weapons of mass destruction interacts with its missile and weapons delivery programs, and its options in developing and using other weapons of mass destruction such as chemical and biological warfare.

Iran's actions and capabilities to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction are also being shaped by at least four other major factors. One is the priority Iran is giving to medium- and long-range missiles. Another is the priority Iran is giving to irregular or asymmetric warfighting capabilities. A third is the slow pace of Iran's conventional military modernization and the decline in its conventional military strength relative to its neighbors and the United States. The fourth is its perception of its overall strategic posture relative to those neighbors and the United States.

This means it is necessary to take a net assessment approach to analyzing where these developments may lead. Iran's actions already are producing major U.S. and Israeli reactions and are beginning to trigger new military programs in its neighbor's forces such as missile defense. There are many kinds of arms races that can evolve out of Iran's actions, and each step forward that Iran takes will change the strategic map of the region and perhaps the world.

This analysis takes such an approach. In the process, it focuses on the details of what is and is not known about developments in Iran. These details matter when the stakes are this high, and so does a clear understanding of the level of uncertainty shaping virtually all of the key reporting on Iran's actions. It is easy to downplay or exaggerate, or to act as if it was possible to read the minds of Iran's leaders, have access to sensitive intelligence data, or translate suspicions and probabilities into facts. As this analysis makes clear, however, the unknowns or uncertainties are often the most important aspect of any valid analysis. Moreover, there is considerable evidence that Iran's actions will be opportunistic and driven by future events, rather than part of any fixed or coherent master plan. Accordingly, much of this study is a risk analysis, not a prophecy.

It should also be stressed that its content is heavily dependent on the work of other analysts and think tanks, which are referenced in the footnotes throughout this book. It also draws on the often uncertain work of Iranian opposition groups whose motives are obvious and whose credibility is not. In some cases, intelligence experts were kind enough to provide informal comments, as did other officials and military officers. None of this work, however, reflects any access to intelligence per se or to classified information of any kind. The reader should keep this firmly in mind. It simply is not practical to endlessly qualify every statement or repetitively flag the nature of every uncertainty.

Finally, the last chapter of this book may not be a prophecy, but it is a warning. Far too much of the current literature on the possibility that Iran may acquire nuclear weapons focuses only on proliferation and Iran's possession or nonpossession of a bomb. If Iran does go nuclear, however, it will trigger a massive series of changes in the regional military balance and may well push the Middle East and the United States into a new form of serious nuclear arms race. It is time to examine the potential warfighting impact of Iran's actions. It is also time to remember that history is not

always a history of rational actors taking rational actions. The risks are so great that they can be existential for both Iran and Israel and threaten the entire global economy.

IRAN'S STEADILY LESS CONVINCING EFFORTS AT DENIAL

Iran's first efforts to acquire nuclear weapons technology were detected in the early 1970s, while the Shah (Mohammad Reza Pahlavi) was still in power. While Iran seems to have halted such efforts during the initial period of the Ruhollah Khomeini regime in the early 1980s, it changed its policies after Iraq began to use chemical weapons and long-range missiles during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). By the mid-1980s, Iran was actively developing chemical weapons, acquiring ballistic missiles, and resumed its efforts to acquire nuclear technology with nuclear weapons applications.

Iran continues to deny that it has a nuclear weapons program, but has declared that it has chemical weapons as part of its obligations as a signatory to the Chemical Weapons Convention. Iran has never made a secret of its development of steadily larger and longer-range ballistic missiles, and for nearly a decade it has failed to fully comply with the efforts of the United Nations (UN) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to determine the true nature of its nuclear programs.

It has never been possible to prove that Iran has an active nuclear weapons program using material available in open sources, although a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate issued in 2007 declared that there was classified evidence that Iran had had an organized program and had suspended that program in 2003. Year after year, however, the IAEA has found new indicators of Iranian activities that Iran had not declared and has created a steadily longer list of incidents and weapons-related activities that Iran has failed to fully explain.

In terms of its missile capability, Iran is the only country not in possession of nuclear weapons to have produced or flight-tested missiles with ranges exceeding 1,000 kilometers.¹ Iran's continued expansion of the range of its ballistic missile programs further supports international concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions and intentions.

IRAN'S PROGRESS TOWARD NUCLEAR-ARMED MISSILE CAPABILITY

At the same time, Iran has moved steadily closer to the ability to produce fissile material—the only thing it lacks to make nuclear weapons. While Iran has always managed to find some explanation for most of the activities the IAEA has challenged, the cumulative weight of evidence has grown so large that it is difficult not to believe that Iran is seeking to develop, manufacture, and deploy nuclear weapons and nuclear-armed missiles.

Iran has admitted it has chemical weapons, but has never properly declared its holdings of chemical weapons, and the status of its biological weapons program is

unknown. Iran has, however, managed to conceal enough of its military activities and create enough ambiguity, so that there is no reliable way to characterize its ability to acquire weapons of mass destruction and improved means to deliver them or to estimate the current and future warfighting capabilities of Iran's chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons.

The situation is somewhat clearer in terms of delivery systems. Iran has long had long-range strike aircraft that can be used to deliver weapons of mass destruction, and its force development efforts since the end of the Iran-Iraq War have put a heavy and public emphasis on missiles. Iran already has ballistic missile forces capable of reaching targets throughout the Gulf region, its Shahab missiles have ranges in excess of 1,000 kilometers, and it is developing a range of new ballistic and cruise missile systems that can reach targets in Israel, Egypt, and Turkey, and deep into Europe. Iran has not, however, provided a public picture of whether it will arm its missiles with chemical, biological, radiological, and/or nuclear warheads.

In balance, Iran seems to be developing all of the capabilities necessary to deploy a significant number of nuclear weapons no later than 2020 and to mount them on missile systems capable of striking at targets throughout the region and beyond. It has reached a level of progress where it is conceivable that Iran could build its own nuclear device as early as 2009, although a time frame of 2011–2015 seems more likely for the deployment of actual weapons and nuclear-armed missile forces. Similarly, while Iran may not have a biological weapons program, it is already acquiring all of the equipment and core technology necessary to develop and manufacture them.

IRAN'S IMPACT ON THE REGIONAL MILITARY BALANCE

Iran's actions have already made major changes in the military balance in the Gulf and the Middle East. Iran may still be several years to half a decade away from becoming a meaningful nuclear power, but even the potential of Iranian nuclear weapons has led Iran's neighbors, the United States, and Israel to focus on an Iranian nuclear threat.

For the United States and Israel, this focus has led to the serious consideration of preventive war. The United States, however, is also examining options for defense and extended deterrence. So is Israel, with the fundamental difference that it sees Iran as a potential existential threat to its very existence.

For the Gulf States, and nations such as Turkey, the prospect of a nuclear Iran has led to consideration of the acquisition of nuclear weapons and missile defenses. All have sought to find diplomatic solutions to halting Iran's program and creating inspection regimes that can ensure that Iran does not covertly develop nuclear weapons or a breakout capability.

At the same time, none of the states involved can count on diplomacy succeeding, and the odds of success have slowly declined as Iran's nuclear and missile capabilities have moved forward. Neither "carrots," such as security and economic incentives, nor "sticks," such as UN sanctions and economic constraints, have so far had much

success. The end result is that military options such as preventive war, deterrence, defense, and the ability to actually fight a nuclear exchange in ways that would cripple or destroy Iran receive steadily greater attention.

IRREGULAR WARS AND “WARS OF INTIMIDATION”

Iran's progress toward a nuclear weapons capability has had additional effects. Every state dealing with Iran must decide whether some form of accommodation is possible and consider its relations with Iran in the context of dealing with a future nuclear power. While a state such as Israel may focus on warfighting, other states—particularly Iran's neighbors—must increasingly deal with an Iran that can use nuclear weapons as a tacit or overt threat to bring pressure upon them. Even the future prospect of an Iranian weapon gives Iran added leverage in the wars of intimidation that shape much of the real-world behavior of nations in the region.

Iran's progress toward nuclear weapons capability also interacts with its growing capability for irregular or asymmetric warfare. It is one thing to deal with Iran's use of its Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps when Iran is a relatively weak conventional power. It is another thing to risk taking decisive action, or retaliating in force against Iran's use of irregular warfare, when this risks creating lasting tension with a future nuclear power—or the risk of escalation if Iran actually deploys a nuclear capability. Furthermore, Iran's ties to Syria, influence in Iraq, links to Hezbollah, and relations with Hamas raise the specter that Iran not only can use proxies to help it fight irregular wars, but also to help it in some future covert delivery of nuclear weapons.

Unlike the Cold War, the shifts in the regional balance caused by Iran's potential nuclear weapons capabilities cannot be simplified into some form of “zero sum game.” There is a wide range of different players with different interests both inside and outside the region. There are no clear rules to the game, or even knowledge of when and whether the game will exist. The playing field also includes critical additional areas such as the Afghan and Iraqi wars, the security of energy exports that are critical to the global economy, and the emerging role of China and Russia. Wild cards such as North Korea and Pakistan, the internal politics of the UN, and the weakening of the U.S. structure of global influence and alliance add still further complications.

THE PROBLEM OF TIME AND COMPLEXITY

Finally, any realistic examination of Iran's nuclear options must look beyond the issue of whether or not Iran crosses the nuclear threshold. It is dangerous to focus on arms control, diplomatic prevention, and preventive war; Iran in 2008 is not Iraq in 1981. Iran has had decades to build up a technology base. Iran has demonstrated that it has at least three different centrifuge designs and that it can now build every element of the production cycle needed to develop weapons-grade U-235 and the

components of fission weapons from a highly dispersed industrial base scattered throughout the country.

There is no way to be certain of Iran's progress or the ability of various intelligence agencies to analyze it. There has been a flood of unclassified analysis, much of it contradictory and with extremely dubious sources, if any. Yet, there have been few meaningful official reports on Iran's efforts. The closest thing to unclassified intelligence has been a few summary statements by senior U.S. intelligence officials and a few pages of declassified summary judgments from the National Intelligence Estimate issued in 2007—judgments so ambiguous and badly written that their meaning has been a subject of continuing debate.

As a result, it is impossible to know how well the intelligence community can analyze and predict Iran's capabilities and how well it can target Iran's forces and facilities. It is equally impossible to determine how lethal any preventive or preemptive strikes can be, how large an attack force might be required, what level of battle damage assessment is really possible, how many restrikes might be required, and what level of persistent surveillance and restrike activity might be needed to achieve a given level of destruction or suppression of Iran's capabilities.

These uncertainties do not mean that there are not workable military options. It may well be possible to seriously delay Iran's efforts and make them more costly and inefficient. At the same time, it is far from clear that prevention is really possible through either diplomatic or military means.

Even successful diplomatic negotiations might lead Iran to dismantle its known facilities while creating, or strengthening, a covert program that any negotiable IAEA inspection regime might fail to detect or verify convincingly enough to lead to decisive international action. Even relatively successful Israeli or U.S. preventive strikes might also end in failure. Iran may have advanced to the point where a determined Iranian government can carry out an indigenous nuclear program in three to five years that supplies at least a few nuclear weapons.

Iran has already shown it has mobile long-range ballistic missiles and is working on cruise missiles. Iran is already deploying an active missile force that could be rapidly turned into a nuclear-armed force, which could then be used in the launch-on-warning or launch-under attack mode—greatly increasing the risks of any preventive or preemptive strike on Iran. The same would be true of arming aircraft and putting them into the same kind of quick reaction mode—one NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) has used through most of its existence.

It is also possible that if Iran is prevented from creating an effective nuclear force, it might be willing to take the risk of planning for covert nuclear strikes, or turning nuclear weapons over to proxies such as Hezbollah. Furthermore, Iran will increasingly have the option of creating an even more covert and unpredictable biological weapons program at a time when technology and equipment for far more advanced and lethal weapons is now becoming available. Nuclear weapons may be the most lethal technology of the twentieth century, but it is far from clear that they will be the most lethal option in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

None of these possibilities are reasons to reject diplomatic options or assume that preventive military action will fail. They are convincing reasons to assume that such options will not necessarily succeed and to show great reservation about simplistic media reports or war plans or speculation by analysts who have no access to intelligence or expertise in real-world war planning.

They also are reasons to consider a future in which Iran at a minimum develops a serious degree of nuclear ambiguity, where no one can be certain whether it has a rapid nuclear breakout capability or a few hidden nuclear devices or “bombs in the basement.” Even apparent success in negotiating with Iran, or in executing preventive military options, could also lead to a future where Iran slowly moves toward an actual test, deployment of weapons, and a steadily improving and less vulnerable nuclear weapons delivery capability.

The situation has already evolved beyond the point where the key question for policy making is whether Iran’s neighbors, the United States and Israel, and the world can live with a nuclear-armed Iran. It is far from clear that Iran’s neighbors, the United States and Israel, and the world have a choice. Iran has already created the equivalent of a game of three-dimensional chess in which there are far more than two players, where no player can see the full situation on the board, and each player has the latitude to make up at least some of the rules without bothering to communicate them to the other players. The fact that no one likes complexity or nuclear threats does not make war avoidable, and the same is true of games that have no predictable rules or end.

Policy, Doctrine, and Command

Iran presents many challenges in analyzing its efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction. One is that a nation that denies it is acquiring such weapons does not have a public strategy or doctrine for using them, much less clear plans to acquire them. A second is that Iran has an extremely complex national command authority, where many key elements virtually bypass its president—as well as other national decision-making apparatuses—and report to its Supreme Leader.

Iran also seems to place its missile systems, and much of its military industry under its Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and it is this force that seems to be responsible for the development and control of any programs to develop, manufacture, and deploy weapons of mass destruction. Making this situation all the more complex and volatile is the growing influence of the IRGC—especially hard-line members—in the Iranian political arena.

IRAN'S POLICY AND DOCTRINE

Iran's public policy toward weapons of mass destruction is one that claims Iran is pursuing the path toward arms control and does not intend to deploy such weapons. Unlike its capabilities in asymmetric warfare, where Iran's political and military leaders make many public statements about Iran's intentions and policies, Iran consistently denies it has nuclear weapons, states that it no longer has chemical weapons, and states that it has rejected the option of developing biological weapons. In case after case affecting Iran's efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction, there is no clear data on its intentions as well as no reliable or unambiguous data on its actions and capabilities.

At the same time, Iran's leaders do make extreme statements about many security issues. If these statements are taken at face value, they can be interpreted to show that Iran may be hard or impossible to deter, might be reckless in escalating in a crisis,

and might use weapons of mass destruction against Israel. It is more likely that such statements are designed to deter or intimidate outside powers, to reassure Iranians, and are for domestic political consumption, but this is no certainty. The fact that leaders use extreme language is no historical guarantee that they do not mean what they say.

Iran's Rhetoric of Denial

As will be discussed in detail in later chapters, Iranian leaders have been so consistent in denying that Iran has or would use weapons of mass destruction since the end of the Iran-Iraq War that it is almost redundant to present a range of such statements. At the same time, it is equally possible to trade an almost endless list of extreme statements regarding what Iran would do in war, and a list of threats to Israel and the United States.

Nuclear Weapons

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and other ranking Iranian decision makers continue to deny that Iran has, or intends to create, a nuclear weapons program. At the same time, they advocate the destruction of Israel and its supporters—and make other extreme and threatening statements—making it difficult to decipher what Iran's true intentions and policy are in regard to its nuclear ambitions.

Some of the efforts by Iranian officials to clarify their public religious and political views on nuclear weapons have, however, been issued in ways that create confusion about Tehran's actual intentions. In an August 10, 2005, statement to an emergency International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meeting, then Iranian nuclear negotiator Sirus Naseri read a statement to the IAEA Board of Governors from the Islamic Republic, which asserted the following:

The Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has issued a fatwa that the production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons are forbidden under Islam and that the Islamic Republic of Iran shall never acquire these weapons. President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, who took office just recently, in his inaugural address, reiterated that his government is against weapons of mass destruction and will only pursue nuclear activities in the peaceful domain.¹

The reported fatwa seems to have been issued by Ayatollah Khamenei in September 2004 at Friday prayers. Yet, one month later, Iranian legislator Hojatolislam Mohammad Taqi Rahbar asserted that the bill to ban nuclear weapons was “not expedient,” because Iran is in a region of proliferators. He went on to say that “there are no Shari’a or legal restrictions on having such [nuclear] weapons as a deterrent.”²

More recently, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei asserted on June 3, 2008, that “no wise nation” would pursue nuclear weapons, but also stated that Iran would continue to develop a nuclear program for peaceful purposes.³

Chemical and Biological Weapons

Statements and actions by ranking Iranian officials have made it equally difficult to assess Iran's intentions regarding its chemical weapons programs, and any analysis of Iran's biological weapons effort must be even more speculative than an analysis of its chemical and nuclear weapons efforts and the details of its missile programs.

As might be expected, Iran has continually denied that it has active chemical or biological weapons programs, and it is a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and Biological Weapons Convention.

Iranian decision makers have often made statements that condemn the use of chemical weapons, while at the same time advocating the strategic and tactical advantages of possessing such weapons, as well as Iran's right to possess this "defensive" capability—to an extent echoing their public stance on nuclear weapons policy.

In 1988, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Rafsanjani was quoted as saying that "chemical and biological weapons are a poor man's atomic bombs and can easily be produced. We should at least consider them at least for our defense; although the use of such weapons is inhumane, the [Iran-Iraq] war taught us that international laws are only scraps of paper."⁴

Ayatollah Rafsanjani has made many statements to this effect. Another such statement that gets at the heart of the Iranian perspective of the need for a chemical and biological weapons program follows:

With regard to chemical, bacteriological, and radiological weapons training, it was made very clear perhaps during the [Iran-Iraq] war that these weapons are very decisive. It was also made clear that the moral teachings of the world are not very effective when war reaches a serious stage and the world does not respect its own resolutions and closes its eyes to the violations and the aggressions which are committed on the battlefield. We should fully equip ourselves both in the offensive and defensive use of chemical, bacteriological, and radiological weapons. From now on you should make use of the opportunity and perform the task.⁵

Iran's Ambassador to the 3rd Conference of States Parties (CSP) to the CWC, which was held in the Hague in November 1998, stated that Iran had worked on chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War, but that "following the establishment of the cease fire (in July 1998), the decision to develop chemical weapons capabilities was reversed and the process was terminated."

H.E. Dr. G. Ali Khoshro, then Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister of Legal and International Affairs, made a similar statement to a CWC Review Conference held in April and May 2003:

I have to recall the fact that due to the lack of reaction by the international community against Iraqi chemical weapons attack during the 8 year imposed war, in the last phase we got the chemical capabilities, but we did not use it, and following the cease fire we decided to dismantle. We did destroy the facilities under the supervision of the OPCW

[Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons] inspectors and we got the certificate of the destruction of CWPF [chemical weapons production facility].⁶

Some official statements have contradicted their previous statements or other official's statements, regarding Iran's CW program. One such example of this is comments made by Iranian nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalil to the United Nations (UN), which contradict statements made by Ambassador Mohammad R. Alborzi, director general of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, to the OPCW regarding Iran's chemical weapons history.

On 23 January 2008, speaking in Brussels Iranian nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalil states that: "I assure you that the (chemical) weapons have no place in our defense doctrine." The context is made in the context of a discussion about Iranian actions during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–1988 and is intended to support the proposition that Iran made no use of chemical weapons during that conflict. [This assertion may contradict a statement made at the OPCW in 1998 that Iran possessed CW in the latter stages of the war.]⁷

But previously, on 18 November 1998, Ambassador Mohammad R. Alborzi, director general of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, delivered Iran's CW declaration during a session of the Conference of the States Parties (CSP) to the CWC in The Hague, Netherlands. In his statement, he admitted for the first time that Iran had once possessed CW, in the waning years of the Iran-Iraq War. But he claims that, "... following the establishment of cease fire, the decision to develop chemical weapons capabilities was reversed and the process was terminated."⁸

Iran's Rhetoric of Extremism

One can find many examples of extreme rhetoric from Iran's leaders and senior officers. It should be noted, however, that they do not make explicit threats to use weapons of mass destruction and that much of its most extreme rhetoric is issued in a context where it has little operational meaning and poses little risk to Iran. Nevertheless, this extreme and threatening rhetoric amid Iran's progressing nuclear and missiles programs creates further insecurity in a region plagued by ongoing violent conflicts. The most extreme of these statements have been directed toward Israel and its supporters.

Over the past several years, Iranian leaders—most prominently Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—have made numerous statements calling for the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people. Some examples of such extreme rhetoric follow:

In a Friday sermon on December 15, 2000 (shown on Iranian TV), Ahmadinejad declared, "Iran's position, which was first expressed by the Imam [Khomeini] and stated several times by those responsible, is that the cancerous tumor called Israel must be uprooted from the region."⁹

A little over a year later on January 15, 2001, at a meeting with organizers of the International Conference for Support of the Intifada, Ahmadinejad stated, "The foundation of the Islamic regime is opposition to Israel and the perpetual subject

of Iran is the elimination of Israel from the region.”¹⁰ Iranian journalist Kasra Naji translated this sentence from the original Farsi as follows: “It is the mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to erase Israel from the map of the region.”¹¹

It is important to note that these statements were made prior to Ahmadinejad’s election to the second highest office behind the Supreme Leader—and the highest democratically elected office—in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The election of such a hard-line candidate, whose extremist rhetoric was widely known throughout Iran, can thus be seen as having similar extremist opinions as the electorate of Iran.

In an address to the “World without Zionism” Conference held in Tehran on October 26, 2005, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stated that “our dear Imam [Khomeini] ordered that this Jerusalem occupying regime [Israel] must be erased from the page of time. This was a very wise statement.”¹²

In a February 2008 message to Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary General of Hezbollah, the Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, General Mohammad-Ali Jafari, wrote, “In the near future, we will witness the destruction of the cancerous microbe Israel by the strong and capable hands of the nation of Hezbollah.”¹³

Ayatollah Ahmad Janati, a member of President Ahmadinejad’s inner circle and Chairman of the Guardian Council of the Constitution, told reporters during the 22 of Bahman parade (marking the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran) that “every year there is a bigger crowd, the slogans are more enthusiastic, and the Islamic regime’s situation is getting better and better.” He then added that “the blind enemies should see that the wish of these people is the death of America and Israel.”¹⁴

Yahya Rahim Safavi, one of the “hard-core” founders of the IRGC and its former commander in chief, is now senior advisor to Supreme Leader Khamenei. In a speech in February 2008, he declared that “with God’s help the time has come for the Zionist regime’s death sentence.”¹⁵

Safavi has also continually referred to Israel as impure, unhygienic, and contaminated. In remarks at a memorial ceremony for assassinated terrorist Imad Mughniyeh held in the city of Hamadan on February 23, 2008, he stated that the “death of this unclean regime [Israel] will arrive soon following the revolt of Muslims.”¹⁶

There is, however, another side to Iranian rhetoric that is more cautious and balanced, if sometimes self-contradictory. In 2005, Khamenei began a concerted effort to limit the damage done to Iran by Ahmedinejad’s rhetoric by insisting that Iran did not seek the military destruction of Israel, and a senior adviser to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned that provocative Iranian statements could hurt the country’s cause in its nuclear dispute.¹⁷

But this did not stop Hossein Shariatmadari, a close confidant of Khamenei who serves as one of his major mouthpieces, who wrote an editorial in the Iranian daily *Kayhan* on October 30, 2005, in which he argued, “We declare explicitly that we will not be satisfied with anything less than the complete obliteration of the Zionist regime from the political map of the world.”¹⁸ On October 4, 2007, Shariatmadari stated, “‘Death to America’ and ‘Death to Israel’ are not only words written on paper but rather a symbolic approach that reflects the desire of all the Muslim nations.”¹⁹

It may be that Khamenei toned down his own rhetoric, but allowed his hand-picked editor-in-chief of *Kayhan* to maintain his original ideological position on the destruction of Israel to the Iranian public, or Khamenei may be leaving the possibility of improving relations with the West while simultaneously preaching against the state of Israel and its allies including the “morally corrupt” United States.

In a January 3, 2008, address to students in Yazd, Ayatollah Khamenei said,

Cutting ties with America is among our basic policies. However, we have never said that the relations will remain severed forever . . . the conditions of the American government are such that any relations would prove harmful to the nation and thereby we are not pursuing them . . . any relations would provide the possibility to the Americans to infiltrate Iran and would pave the way for their intelligence and spy agents . . . relations with America has no benefit for the Iranian nation for now. Undoubtedly, the day the relations with America prove beneficial for the Iranian nation I will be the first one to approve of that.²⁰

Former president Khatami has also presented more moderate views. In a speech at the University of Gilan on May 3, 2008, Khatami addressed how the Islamic Republic should export revolution. He asked,

What did the Imam [Khomeini] want, and what was his purpose of exporting the revolution? [Did he wish that] we should export revolution by means of gunpowder or groups sabotaging other countries? . . . He [Khomeini] meant to establish a role model here, which means people should see that in this society, the economy, science, and dignity of man are respected . . . This was the most important way of exporting the revolution.”²¹

By proposing that Tehran should expand its influence more by soft power than by insurgency, Khatami tacitly acknowledged that the sponsorship of militias, insurgency, and terrorism enjoys state sanction and does not constitute rogue behavior.

Iranian officials disapproved of Khatami’s acknowledgment of these activities, and 77 members of the Majlis called for the Ministry of Intelligence and Security to investigate Khatami, in an attempt to maintain plausible deniability.²²

In balance, the actions of Iran’s leaders have also implied that they are more cautious than some of their words imply. Most seem to be aware of the risks of hard-line rhetoric, and their actions generally seem cautious and pragmatic. It also seems clear that lower-ranking actors within the Iranian national security system rarely dare to conduct operations without at least tacit approval of the senior leadership. In fact, individuals hesitate to make decisions without authorization from above.

This emphasis on consensus makes “rogue operations” by security officials unlikely. This scarcely means, however, that it is possible to predict how Iran’s leaders will behave once they have significant numbers of nuclear weapons and missiles, or how their subordinates would behave if the leadership was lost, became divided, or could not communicate.

THE IMPACT OF IRAN'S NATIONAL COMMAND STRUCTURE

It is equally difficult to be certain of the way Iran's leaders approach the development of missiles and weapons of mass destruction, and Iran's national command structure presents significant uncertainties. Much depends on interpersonal dynamics, and access to the Supreme Leader. More formally, Iran's command-and-control structure is one of overlapping and parallel structures that confuse Iranians and foreign observers alike.

Decision Making in Iran

Identifying the key decision makers in Iran is desirable in assessing risks, in trying to establish lines of accountability, and in seeking to ensure that any Western diplomatic outreach is targeted at those who have the power to affect regime behavior. Unfortunately, it often is not clear where power really resides and the exact role of hard-line elements is hard to determine. So is how Iran's leadership structure actually functions, how it views any specific approach to acquiring weapons of mass destruction, and how various elements compete for power.

Major policies—such as confrontation with the United States and Israel, or support for radicals abroad—seem to require consensus among the regime's leadership, but the implementations of agreed policies may vary widely due to the intertwining of Iran's formal and informal decision-making processes, as well as the disconnect this creates in the implementation of policies.

The names of officials who hold formal positions in Iran's power structure are clear. In early 2009, for example, the names of the senior officials in overt decision-making positions were the figures listed in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 Key Iranian Decision-Making Figures

Chief of State:	Supreme Leader (Fa'iqh) Ayatollah Ali Hoseini Khamenei
Head of Government:	President Mahmoud Ahmédinejad ²³
Speaker of the Majlis (Parliament):	Ali Larijani ²⁴
Head of the Expediency Council:	Hashemi Rafsanjani ²⁵
First Vice President:	Parviz Davudi
Chairman of the Guardian Council of the Constitution:	Ayatollah Ahmad Janati
Iran's Chief Nuclear Negotiator:	Saeed Jalili ²⁶
Spokesman for Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC):	Ahmad Khademolmelleh
Supreme Leader's Representative to the IRGC:	Mullah Saeedi (dep. Mullah Mojtaba Zolnouri)
Head of the IRGC's Political Bureau:	Brigadier General Yadollah Javani
Iranian Foreign Minister:	Manouchehr Mottaki
Deputy Interior Minister:	Mohammad-Baqer Zolqadr ²⁷
Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces:	Major General Hassan Firouzabadi
Special Military Advisor to Khamenei:	Yahya Rahim Safavi ²⁸

The National Command Authority and Formal Decision-Making Institutions

At least on paper, Iran has a coherent formal structure for security decision making. Iran's institutional structure also reinforces oversight, or at least knowledge, of security operations. The Iranian constitution endows the Supreme Leader with tremendous authority over all major state institutions, and Khamenei has found many other ways to further increase his influence.

In practice, the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government all operate under the authority of the Supreme Leader. He seems to be the final decision maker in all major national security decisions, and this seems to include the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, doctrine and plans for using them, and the authorization of their use in war.

Khamenei's Growing Authority

Khamenei is the head of state, the commander in chief, and the Islamic Republic's top cleric. Indeed Article 57 of the Iranian constitution grants the Supreme Leader absolute power, stating that the "powers of government in the Islamic Republic are vested in the legislature, the judiciary, and the executive powers, functioning under the supervision of the absolute religious leader." Moreover, the Council of Guardians, the constitution's official interpreter, has ruled that this clause defines only the Supreme Leader's minimum prerogatives.²⁹

Despite the theocratic basis of the state of Iran, it does have some democratic characteristics. At the same time, elections have little meaning if the opposition is not allowed to run, and the elected have little power. Iranian democracy is severely constrained by the authoritarian aspects of Islamic rule. Under the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the system of *Velayat-e-Faqih* on which it is based, the ultimate power in Iran resides in the religious authority, the *Faqih* and his office; which rely on the IRGC to enforce their will.³⁰ This relationship between Iran's clerical leadership and the IRGC has become increasingly important to help it stave off internal pressure for political and economic reform as well as external pressure resulting from international concern over Iran's nuclear program.

Khamenei has used his broad mandate to exercise control not only over all three branches of government but also economic, religious, and cultural affairs through a range of government councils and representatives, such as the IRGC—whose commander in chief is appointed by the Supreme Leader—and the political guides he imbeds in the IRGC headquarters.³¹ Also Khamenei has made anti-Americanism the cornerstone of his Islamic ideology to fall back on and rally the Muslim world behind him and retain his legitimacy as the Supreme Leader.

Although many Iranians may disapprove of Khamenei as a leader, he has succeeded in expanding his power and his influence in the Islamic world. According to a study by Karim Sadjadpour at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, several factors have helped Khamenei consolidate power domestically:³²

- A vast network of commissars stationed in strategic posts throughout government bureaucracies, dedicated to enforcing his authority
- The weak, conservative-dominated parliament, headed by Khamenei loyalist GholamAli Haddad-Adel (whose daughter is married to the Leader's son)
- The rapidly rising political and economic influence of the Revolutionary Guards, whose top leaders are directly appointed by Khamenei and have always been publicly deferential to him
- The political disengagement of Iran's young population, prompted by the unfulfilled expectations of the reformist era
- Most significant, the 2005 presidential election, which saw hard-liner Ahmadinejad trounce Khamenei's chief rival Hashemi Rafsanjani in a second round run-off

The Relative Roles of the President and the Supreme Leader

The Supreme Leader has influence in both the formal governmental security organizations as well as in the IRGC and its subordinate entities. The president exercises only indirect influence over the IRGC and its subordinate entities through the Ministry of Defense.

The president of Iran does exercise considerable day-to-day authority and has formal control of budget planning, but the Supreme Leader's power makes him a far more important official in shaping both Iran's security policies and its civil society. Under article 110 of the 1979 constitution, the Supreme Leader retains the constitutional right to declare war and call for general troop mobilization. He is also the supreme commander of both the IRGC and the regular army (Artesh).³³

The Supreme Leader has the power to override any decision that the elected government makes, including the president. The religious authority also vets all candidates for any public office, and those deemed insufficiently Islamic or insufficiently supportive of the regime are barred from running.³⁴

Presidential and parliamentary candidates must pledge in writing that they are committed, in theory and in practice, to the Iranian constitution, Islam, the absolute sovereignty of the Supreme Leader, and the late Khomeini.³⁵ This process gives the Supreme Leader control over who is selected to run for office, while still giving legitimacy to the governing bodies through an electoral process. A major lever of power is the Supreme Leader's ability to appoint and dismiss senior government officials.

The Iranian president appoints the cabinets, but they remain subservient to the Council of Guardians and the Expediency Discernment Council. The Council of Guardians also has the authority to veto any law approved by the Majlis—a power that the president does not even possess. But despite these authoritarian characteristics, most Iranians perceive the regime as legitimate.³⁶

The Supreme Leader receives advice on national security and defense matters from two military officers in his office, and he receives reports on foreign affairs from a foreign affairs advisor. Although the Faqih is the commander in chief of the armed forces, he disposes of his responsibilities toward the defense establishment not

through any direct chain of command. According to the formal system, the Faqih works through other bodies in exercising his control.

The SCNS, which is chaired by the president, is the key national defense and security assessment body. Representatives of the Artesh, the IRGC, other security agencies, and the Faqih sit on the council.

In short, the president's role in policy making is limited compared to those of the Supreme Leader. Major policy issues, such as Iran's nuclear program, are largely in the hands of the Supreme Leader and not the president. Other shifts in policy, such as Iran improving relationship with the West—namely, the United States and Israel, are also left largely to the Supreme Leader. Furthermore, any major policy shift by Iran would not come from a change in the Iranian presidency, but from a change in policy instituted by the Supreme Leader.

Informal Decision-Making Mechanisms

More broadly, almost every aspect of Iran's formal decision-making process can be ignored or bypassed in favor of personal relationships and interactions. Family, kinship, educational affiliations, and support from various clerical personalities and factions play a central role in military politics in general, for both the IRGC and the Artesh. Personal networks are almost always stronger than institutional power.³⁷

Revolutionary organizations, which together may control more than half the state budget, operate outside the purview of Iran's executive structure.³⁸ The judiciary is also a power center, able to wield immense influence beyond even the confines of the court system.

Iran may develop better structured approaches to defining its national command authority if it acquires significant nuclear forces. Today, however, Iran's institutions overlap both on paper and in reality. The IRGC and the Artesh have duplicate services, further confused by overlap with Iran's intelligence and clerical bodies.

It is hard to tell whether the advantages of this system outweigh the liabilities. Multiple security institutions do make a successful coup or takeover far more difficult. The problem is that the overlapping nature of the security institutions also makes a coherent security policy far more difficult and can create serious problems in a crisis or war.³⁹

The Growing Role of the IRGC

Iran's security organizations are numerous, often overlapping and have an uncertain command-and-control structure. Iranian decision making is misleading and confusing on paper and the reality is far more complex. The many informal mechanisms, and the importance of individual ties, make it difficult to give transparency to Iranian command, control, and decision-making apparatuses.

It is the IRGC, however, that seems to control the critical aspects of Iran's efforts to develop and deploy weapons of mass destruction, and which seems likely to establish the chain of command to the Supreme Leader for control over the storage, use, and

release of such weapons. The IRGC has always had an informal role in Iran's decision-making apparatus, but the IRGC has become a leading political force with influence over Tehran's policy-making bodies.

The IRGC routinely exploits its access to the Supreme Leader's office, volunteers advice on national and foreign policy matters to the Leader and his key staff, and actively aims to influence policy and debate on security issues. The IRGC also exercises its influence through contact with conservative-leaning clergy in Qom, who have considerable influence in the judiciary, the Interior Ministry, the Expediency Council, and the Council of Guardians.⁴⁰

The White House and the Department of State, under the Clinton and Bush administrations, have sometimes treated the IRGC as if it were a rogue element of the Iranian system. However, the IRGC's evolution and role suggest that the group has seldom engaged in activities not sanctioned by the Iranian leadership. In reality, the IRGC represents the core of the Iranian state, and Iran's reformists are those who, by acting on their own without either state support or any ability to deliver on promises are, in the Iranian context, the true rogue elements.

A Broadening Role in Politics and Government

The IRGC became a major political force in the 2004 parliamentary elections, when a number of ex-servicemen were allowed to run for elections by the conservative Guardian Council. Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 presidential elections seems to have expanded this political role, although there often seem to be tensions between the president and the Supreme Leader.

Ahmadinejad is an ex-member of the IRGC and has surrounded himself with a number of other ex-IRGC officers as well as has developed ties to some active IRGC commanders. The IRGC further expanded its political role in the 2008 parliamentary, and the subsequent appointment of active and retired IRGC elites into key decision-making positions and bodies has strengthened the formal and active role of the IRGC in Iranian politics.

A look at the structure and personnel of the Iranian government and its history of involvement in terrorism and insurgency demonstrates that the IRGC and the Qods Force are, in fact, the opposite of rogues—they are deliberate creations of the Islamic Republic's government, are tightly controlled by the government, and exist to serve the government's policy objectives in Iran and abroad.

Many in the Islamic Republic's current leadership—at least the nonclerical portion—spent their formative years at the front serving with the Revolutionary Guards.⁴¹ As they enter politics, these IRGC members operate not only according to the official hierarchy, but also according to the extensive networks they developed during their IRGC service.

Khamenei's Control over the IRGC

Supreme Leader Khamenei uses several kinds of leverage to control the IRGC. First, as the commander in chief of the armed forces, he appoints the IRGC's

commander in chief and chief officers. Second, as the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, he controls a vast web of representative offices imbedded in the IRGC provincial commands.

This network of Khamenei's representatives in offices at the various IRGC headquarters operates parallel to the IRGC's command structure. These representative offices form an extensive organization with tens of thousands of members, who control the IRGC and align it to Khamenei's guidelines. These appointed representatives report directly to Khamenei.

The purpose of these "political guides" is to maintain high-level control over and oversight of the IRGC's more senior officers and commanders. Their task is to control and ensure adherence among IRGC ranks to the political and ideological guidelines of the regime's Supreme Leader. They are also responsible for selecting and training suicide bombers and overseeing IRGC personnel in order to ensure that they comply with Khamenei's guidelines and policies.

According to reports by the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI)—an organization that the U.S. Department of State reports has strong ties to a terrorist group called the Mujahadin-e Khalq Organization (MEK), Khamenei's chief representative at the IRGC in 2008 was Mullah Saeedi.⁴²

Saeedi appointed Mullah Mojtaba Zolnouri as his deputy. He also created a commanding unit for the Supreme Leader division. During the restructuring of the IRGC, Mullah Saeedi appointed a provincial "political guide" for each province of the 31 provinces to work alongside the provincial IRGC commander.

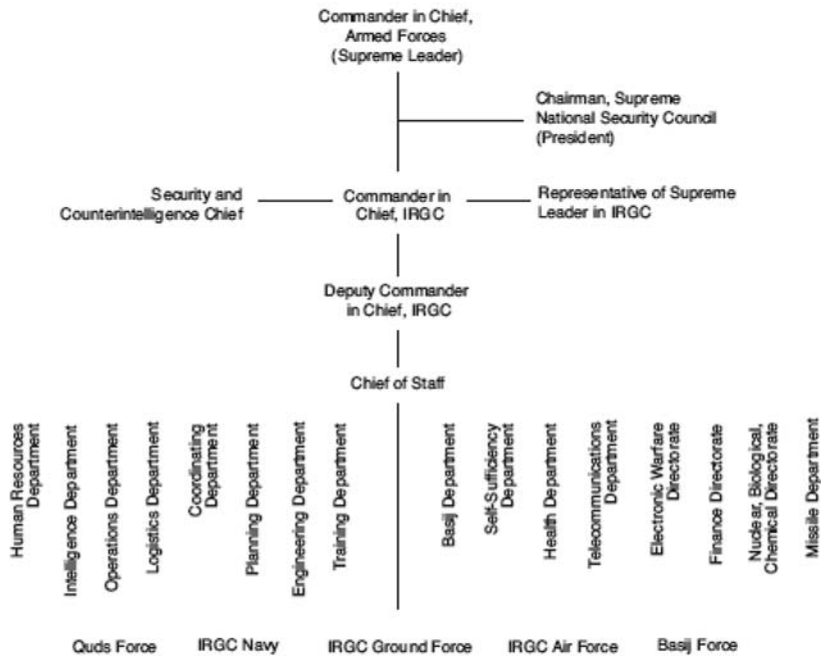
These provincial representatives report to the Supreme Leader's office in Tehran. Each of the representatives stationed at a provincial brigade has a distinct headquarters, which includes the departments of "supervision," "political and ideological guidance," "public relations," "administrative and finance," along with a "political bureau." The political bureau is responsible for fundamentalist ideological training and reviewing the files of IRGC personnel to evaluate their credentials for promotion.⁴³

Mullah Saeedi told Iran's official IRNA news agency that "the purpose of creating these political guides in the Pasdaran was to perform an effective role in increasing the participation of the public in the elections."⁴⁴ These political guides are comprised of mullahs and IRGC personnel at the political bureau. They can also be seen as lying on the already blurred line of Iran's formal and informal decision-making apparatuses within the IRGC and the Iranian government.

The relationship between the IRGC and the Supreme Leader gives the IRGC more influence in the Iranian government and the policy-making process, while at the same time it helps the Supreme Leader to retain a tight grip on the political and military entities in Iran.

The IRGC Command Structure

The growing influence of the IRGC in nearly all aspects of Iranian society has made the IRGC's command structure a key to understanding Iran's posture and



American Enterprise Institute (AEI) for Public Policy Research paper No 7, Ali Alfoneh, "What Do Structural Changes in the Revolutionary Guards Mean?," AEI, September 2008.

Figure 2.2 IRGC Organizational Chart (August 2008)

decision-making process. An illustrative picture of the IRGC decision-making apparatus is shown in Figure 2.2—but it should be noted that Iranian reporting does not provide accurate data and sources are somewhat contradictory.

New Face of the IRGC

On September 1, 2007, Khamenei promoted Mohammad Ali Jafari, then coordinator of the IRGC Research and Command Center, to the rank of major general and the post of commander in chief of the IRGC. Jafari is only the seventh in the organization's history. A list of IRGC commanders is shown in Figure 2.3.

An article published in *Rooz* on September 3, 2007, stated that Jafari is not as close to the political centers of power as his predecessor Safavi and that he focuses on military, rather than political, affairs. However, he is closely associated with Expediency Council Secretary-General and former IRGC commander Mohsen Rezai.⁴⁵

In his first official speech as the IRGC commander in chief on October 20, 2007, Jafari talked about the new strategy and stated,

Based on the guidelines issued by the Leader of the Islamic Republic, the strategy of the IRGC has been modified. Its main task now is to confront internal threats . . .

Figure 2.3 IRGC Leaders (IRGC Commander in Chief)

Name	Year of Birth	Place of Birth	Educational Background	Tenure
Zamani, Abbas-Agha (Abou-Sharif)	1939	Tehran	Bachelor's degree in Islamic law	1979
Mansouri, Javad	1945	Kashan	N/A	April 22, 1979–?
Douz-Douzani, Abbas	1942	Tabriz	Introductory theology; unfinished studies in Arabic literature	1980–1981
Rezai, Morteza	N/A	N/A	N/A	1981
Rezai, Mohsen	1954	Masjed Soleiman	High school diploma	1981–1997
Safavi, Yahya Rahim	1958	N/A	High school diploma	1997–2007
Jafari, Mohammad Ali	1957	Yazd	IRGC War College	2007–present

Note: N/A = not available.

Source: Adapted from American Enterprise Institute (AEI) for Public Policy Research Paper No. 7, Ali Alfoneh, “What Do Structural Changes in the Revolutionary Guards Mean?,” AEI, September 2008.

Maintaining internal security normally lies within the purview of the State Security Forces and other security organs. However, if the magnitude of security challenges were to cross a certain threshold, with the permission of the Leader and the Supreme National Security Council, the IRGC would have to take overall charge of the situation.⁴⁶

Jafari set vital objectives for his forces: first, having up-to-date intelligence about the perceived enemy's movements and activities, and second, increasing the regime's missile capabilities. On November 1, 2007, Jafari characterized the 33-day war in Lebanon as the embodiment of the IRGC's new strategy and claimed,

Since the enemy's material and technological capabilities are superior to ours, we must move towards appropriate policies and means, enabling us to fulfill our requirements and ultimately force the enemy to experience defeat as it did during the 33-day war . . . One of the Americans' vulnerabilities in the region is that they have established a presence all around Iran. Thus, they cannot keep themselves out of our firing range.⁴⁷

IRGC Restructuring

Upon his appointment to commander in chief, Jafari immediately implemented a major restructuring to move the IRGC's primary focus from external defense to internal security. The changes are more cosmetic than actual, but they do signal a renewed crackdown on reformism and civil society.

The IRGC has five branches consisting of a grounds force, an air force, a navy, the paramilitary Bassij Force, and the extraterritorial Qods Force. According to the NCRI (an organization that the U.S. Department of State reports has strong ties to the terrorist group Mujahadin-e Khalq Organization (MEK), some of the changes these branches have undergone in the course of the new strategic shift include the following:⁴⁸

1. Although the Qods Force takes its ongoing and daily operational orders from the IRGC, its strategic policies and executive orders come directly from Khamenei, who is the regime's commander in chief of the armed forces.
2. During Jafari's tenure, the IRGC relieved the conventional navy of its control over the Persian Gulf operations and took direct charge of those operations itself.
3. The capabilities of the IRGC's air force, which controls the regime's missile development program, has been considerably bolstered. This is because, according to Jafari, the missile program is one of the fundamental tenets of both the regime's defensive and also offensive strategies in the current circumstances.
4. The Bassij Force has been the focal point of the changes currently being implemented by Jafari. He set the stage with the slogan of "The IRGC's duties now have an internal focus" (to safeguard the regime's hold on power). Jafari began by removing then Bassij Force commander Mohammad-Hossein Hejazi from his post, appointing him instead as chief of the IRGC headquarters. He personally took over the command of the Bassij Force and chose a cleric, Hassan Taeb, as his deputy. Then in June 2008, in the course of the new round of changes, Jafari promoted Taeb to take over the Bassij command, with Hejazi appointed as his deputy.
5. The IRGC's ground forces have been restructured into 31 provincial brigades, with the Bassij Force units also reorganized in all provinces and reporting to IRGC provincial command.

This reorganization represents the most significant and unprecedented changes since the 1985 order by Rohallah Khomeini to equip the IRGC with an air force and a navy in addition to its ground forces. In the course of these extensive changes, the IRGC will shift focus from being a centralized force to having 31 distinct provincial brigades, the commanders of which will be given wide-ranging discretions.

When the restructuring is complete, each of the 30 provinces in Iran will have an IRGC brigade. Tehran will be the only province with two brigades (31 brigades in total across the country). The representation of the regime's Supreme Leader at the IRGC has also been given a higher profile. Supreme Leader representation now includes a deputy, a coordinator, and a headquarters in Tehran, as well as representatives—or political guides—embedded in each provincial brigade, each with his own headquarters established in the province. Figure 2.4 illustrates the IRGC organizational structure at the provincial level as of July 2008.

Soon after his appointment of Jafari to IRGC commander in chief, Ayatollah Khamenei ordered a massive purge of IRGC commanders whose services to the regime dated back to the eight-year war with Iraq. Most have been replaced by a next

Figure 2.4 IRGC Organizational Structure at the Provincial Level (July 2008)

Province	IRGC Unit	IRGC Commander	Previous Position	IGGC Deputy	Previous Position
Ardebil	Harzrat-e Abbas	Col. Jalil Baba-Zadeh	Ardebil Harzrat-e Abbas BDE chief	Col. Ghanbar Karim-Nezhad	Ardebil Basij chief
Azerbaijan, East	Ashoura	Cmdr. Mohammad-Taghi Ossanolou	31st Armored 'Ashoura Div. chief	N/A	N/A
Azerbaijan, West	Shohada	Brigadier General Mehdi Mo'ini	West Azerbaijan Shohada IRGC	Cmdr. Said Ghorban-Nezhad	West Azerbaijan Basij chief
Bushehr	Imam Sadegh	Col. Fath-Allah Jamiri	Bushehr Basij chief	Col. Abdol-Reza Mataf	Bushehr Basij deputy
Chahar-Mahal and Bakhtiari	Ghamar Bani-Hashem	Brigadier General Mohammad-Soleymani	Fars senior IRGC commander	Cmdr. Mehdi Jamshidi	N/A
Esfahan	Saheb al-Zaman	Brigadier General Gholam-Reza Soleymani	Senior Esfahan IRGC commander, 14th Imam Hossein Div. chief	N/A	N/A
Fars	Fajr	Brigadier General Gholam-Hossein Gheib-Parvar	25th Karbala Div. chief	Cmdr. Mohammad-Reza Mehdian-Far	Fars Basij chief
Gilan	Qods	Cmdr. Hamoun Mohammadi	Iran-Iraq War veteran	Cmd. Nazar Alizadeh	Gilan Basij chief
Golestan	Neynava	Brigadier General Naser Razaghian	Gorgan-based 1st Brigade of 25th Karbala Div. chief	N/A	N/A
Hamedan	Ansar al-Hossein	Cmd. Abdol-Reza Azadi	Hamedan IRGC chief	Cmdr. Mehdi Sedighi	Ansar BDE deputy, Quds training camp chief, Mottahari training

Hormozgan	Imam Sajjad	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	camp chief, Ansar al-Hosseini Div. deputy
Ilam	Amir al'emenin	Brigadier General Seyyed Sadeq Kaki	Hamedan IRGC senior commander, 3rd Ansar al-Hosseini Brigade of the 4th Be'sat Div. chief	N/A	N/A	N/A
Kerman	Sar-Allah	Cmdr. Rouhollah Nouri	Hanzeh Seyyed al-Shohada base chief	Cmdr. Gholam-Ali Abou-Hamzeh	Kerman Basij chief	
Kermanshah	Kermanshah IRGC	Cmdr. Mohammad-Nazar Azimi	4th Be'sat Inf. Div. chief	Cmdr. Bahman Reyhani	N/A	
Khorasan, North	Javad al-A'eme'h	Cmdr. Ali Mirza-Pour	N/A	Cmdr. Hossein-Ali Yousef-Ali-Zadeh	Khorasan North Basij chief	
Khorasan, Razavi	Imam Reza	Cmdr. Ghodrat-Allah Mansouril	5th Nasr Div. chief	Cmdr. Hashem Ghiasi	Khorasan Razavi Basij chief	
Khorasan, South	Ansar al-Reza	Brigadier General Gholam-Reza Ahmadi	Khorasan South Basij chief	N/A	N/A	
Khuzestan	Vali-ye Asr	Cmdr. Mohammad Kazemeini	7th Vali Asr Div. chief	Cmdr. Mehdi Sa'adati	Khuzestan Basij chief	
Kohkilou-yeh/ Boyer-Ahmad	Fath	Cmdr. 'Avaz Shahabi-Far	48th Independent BDE chief	Col. Ali-Asghar Habibi	N/A	
Kordestan	Beit al-Moghaddas	Allah-Nour Nour-Allahi	Kordestan Basij chief	N/A	N/A	
Lorestan	Abol-Fazl al-Abbas	Cmdr. Shahrokh	Independent 57th Hazrat-e Abolfazl BDE chief	Col. Teymour Sepahvand	Lorestan Basij chief	

Markazi	Rouh-Allah	Cmdr. Mohammad-Taghi Shah-Cheraghi	Golestan Basij chief	Cmdr. Nour-Khoda Ghasemi	Chief of 1st Rouhollah Inf. BDE of Arak 17th Ali Ibn Abi-Taleb Div.
Mazandaran	Karbala	Brigadier General Ali Shalikar	25th Karbala Div. chief	Cmdr. Ali-Garmch-i	Mazandaran Basij chief
Qazvin	Saheb al-Amr	Brigadier General Salar Abnoush	12th Hazrat-e Qa'em BDE chief	N/A	N/A
Qom	Ali Ibn-e Abi-Taleb	Brigadier General Akbar Nouri	17th Qom Ali-Ibn-e Abi-Taleb Inf. Div. chief	N/A	N/A
Semnan	Hazrat-e Gham'em al-Mohammad	Col. Mohammad-Hossein Babayi	Kerman Basij chief	N/A	N/A
Sistan and Baluchistan	Salman	Brigadier General Rajab-Ali Mohammad-Zadeh	N/A	Col. Habib Lak-Zayi	Sistan and Baluchistan Basij deputy
Tehran	Seyyed al-Shohada	Cmdr. Ali Zazli	Deputy operations chief of IRGC Central Command	Cmdr. Morteza Shaneh-Saz	Tehran Basij chief
Tehran, Greater	Mohammad Rasoul-Allah	Brigadier General Abdollah Eragh	Greater Tehran Basij chief	N/A	N/A
Yazd	Al-Ghadir	Brigadier General Mohammad-Ali Allah Dadi	Independent Al-Ghadir BDE chief	N/A	N/A
Zanjan	N/A	Cmdr. Seyyed Mehdi Mousavi	N/A	N/A	N/A

Note: "Cmdr." is used when the exact rank is unknown. N/A = not available.

Source: Adapted from American Enterprise Institute (AEI) for Public Policy Research Paper No. 7, Ali Alfoneh, "What Do Structural Changes in the Revolutionary Guards Mean?", AEI, September 2008.

generation of lower ranking “second-tier” commanders (i.e., those who held subordinate posts during the eight-year war with Iraq).

The most important IRGC posts have been filled with prominent hard-line figures such as Mohammad Hejazi, head of Saraallah—a powerful military unit in the IRGC; Jafar Assadi, commander of ground forces; and Hojjatoleslam Hussain Teab, chief of the Bassij force.⁴⁹

Militarily, the changes should be viewed as reflecting a tactical shift toward centralization of power in order to reinforce and enhance the control of hard-liner IRGC elites over Iran’s military forces. This shift also carries with it the advantage of eliminating the possibility of espionage within the organization of the military.

Politically, the appointment and promotion of hard-liners can be viewed as a way to send a message to the opposition within the Iranian civil society and lower/mid-ranking officers in the IRGC who are pro-reform.

IRGC and Iranian Nuclear Program

Jafari’s rise to power has been accompanied by shifts in the IRGC that seem likely to have strengthened its role of shaping and controlling Iran’s missiles and weapons of mass destruction. On August 21, 2005, Khamenei issued an order for the creation of an IRGC Research and Command Center, with Mohammad Ali Jafari as its coordinator. This was done in the course of crafting the desired strategy effectively conforming to the regime’s new strategy. In accordance with Khamenei’s orders, Jafari warned, “If the enemy were to wage an attack against us, we would threaten its interests all over the world.”⁵⁰

The IRGC’s Growing Role in Weapons Programs

The elections and appointments of current and past members of the IRGC to ranking political decision-making positions have given the Guard Corps even greater influence over Iran’s overall defense and nuclear strategy and policy.

The IRGC has several functions, including operating most of Iran’s surface-to-surface missiles and is believed to have custody over potentially deployed nuclear weapons, most or all other chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons, and to operate Iran’s nuclear-armed missile forces if they are deployed. It operates or controls much of Iran’s military industries as well as dual-use and “civil” operations. As a result, the links between the IRGC and Iran’s nuclear program have been so close that its leaders were singled out under the UN Security Council Resolutions passed on December 23, 2006, and March 24, 2007, and had their assets frozen.⁵¹

In a presentation before the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on March 20, 2006, Alireza Jafarzadeh—a longtime spokesman for NCRI, a hard-line opposition group affiliated with the MEK (designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. Department of State)—stated that “one institution that plays a pivotal role in the regime’s nuclear program is Imam Hossein University, which is operated by the IRGC.”⁵²

He went on to say that “a number of nuclear experts have been transferred to the Imam Hossein University following reorganization in the regime’s center for nuclear research. One of the high-level experts in the IRGC by the name of Mohammad Tavalaei is working at the Imam Hossein University’s research center.”⁵³

“The Defense Ministry’s nuclear program is also under the control of the IRGC. The highest ranking nuclear officials within the Defense Ministry are commanders and officers of IRGC.” The details of some of these individuals, as presented by Alireza Jafarzadeh, are as follows:

Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, has been a member of Scientific Board of the physics college at Imam Hossein University since 1991. He teaches a class, one day per week at this college. He is the director of the nuclear program at the Center for Readiness and New Defense Technology.

Mansour Asgari, is a member of the IRGC. He graduated in 1990 and is a member of Scientific Board at the physics college in IRGC’s Imam Hossein University and he teaches at the university 1 day[s] per week. Currently, he is one of the laser experts at the Center for Readiness and New Defense Technology, and works under the supervision of Fakhrizadeh.

Mohamad Amin Bassam is a member of the IRGC. Currently he is one of the laser experts in the nuclear division of the Defense Ministry. He works under the supervision of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. He is based and works at Parchin military complex in Tehran, where he conducts research on laser tests.⁵⁴

Below is a list of the 21 top nuclear physicists of Imam Hossein University who are commanders and cadres of the IRGC, as presented by Alireza Jafarzadeh:⁵⁵

1. Fereydoon Abbasi	Chair, Physics group
2. Mohsen Fakhrizadeh	Member, Scientific Board
3. Abolfazl Behjat-Panah	Member, Scientific Board
4. Mohsen Shayesteh	Member, Scientific Board
5. Ardeshir Bagheri	Member, Scientific Board
6. Amir-Reza Madani	Member, Scientific Board
7. Mohsen Torkaman-Sarabi	Member, Scientific Board
8. Yousef Hatefi	Member, Scientific Board
9. Javad Ahmadi	Member, Scientific Board
10. Massoud Abdollahzadeh	Member, Scientific Board
11. Seyyed Ali Aghajani	Member, Scientific Board
12. Mohammad Ali Torkaman-Motlagh	Member, Scientific Board
13. Tayeb Madani	Member, Scientific Board
14. Ibrahim Hajali	Member, Scientific Board
15. Mahmoud Abbassi	Member, Scientific Board
16. Mansour Asgari	Member, Scientific Board
17. Javad Khalilzadeh	Member, Scientific Board
18. Ismail Ahmadi Azar	Member, Scientific Board
19. Parviz Hossein-Khani	Member, Scientific Board
20. Hamid Kharazmi	Member, Scientific Board
21. Parviz Parvin	Member, Scientific Board

The growing IRGC control and influence over the defense industry, economy, and special weapons programs creates growing concern as to what the world can expect from a nuclear Iran controlled by military hard-liners. This also creates concern as to not only the international security implications of continued conventional weapons proliferation, but also the possibility of unconventional weapons proliferation.

As is described in the next chapter, the IRGC is also deeply involved in the country's nuclear, missile, and other weapons proliferation activities, and it maintains a special branch—the Qods Force—responsible for providing funds, weapons, improvised-explosive-device technology, and training to terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas and insurgents attacking Coalition and Iraqi forces in Iraq.⁵⁶

A Nuclear Iran and Proliferation Issues

This raises the issue of whether the IRGC might play a future role in providing aid to other proliferators. Much of the nuclear material and technology that Iran now possesses came from outside assistance, whether it be from state actors—such as equipment, training, and technical expertise from North Korea, Russia, and China—or nonstate actors—such as the blueprints and technical expertise provided through the A. Q. Kahn network.

If and when Iran attains self-sufficiency, it might provide this same type of assistance to states and nonstate actors seeking nuclear technology or material, either through formal or informal networks, knowingly or unknowingly. In fact, Iran has already professed an interest in supplying some kind of aid to nations seeking this type of technology once it reaches self-sufficiency in its program.

On August 28, 2008, Iran indicated that it would be willing to share its nuclear technology with Nigeria to boost electricity production. A deal was signed at the end of three days of talks between the nations.⁵⁷ Both countries stressed that the nuclear program was for peaceful purposes only, but this display of Tehran's willingness to share nuclear technology and know-how just exacerbates international fears of nuclear proliferation to nations with inadequate and unproven nuclear safeguard programs and procedures.

A few months later on October 5, 2008, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki indicated that Iran is willing to supply other countries with nuclear fuel after it has reached self-sufficiency.⁵⁸ If these statements do represent Iran's policy on nuclear proliferation once it goes nuclear, this creates serious international security issues that current nonproliferation institutions are ill-prepared to deal with.

Another concern is that Iran could supply nuclear, biological, or chemical materials or weapons to extremist or terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah or Hamas entities. Iran, or entities within Iran, currently supports a number of extremist, insurgent, and terrorist movements both regionally and globally with funding, weapons, and training. Certain key political figures within the Iranian government have acknowledged support for some of these groups on occasion, but are cautious about doing so on other occasions.