IRGC RESHUFFLING AIMED AT BOOSTING POLITICAL ROLE

Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the independent elite military force, has recently undergone a major transformation in its command authority with the apparent aim of boosting its political role in Iran. The new leadership assigned by the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, includes key appointments to the newly formed thirty-one command units of the Revolutionary Guard.

The most important posts have been filled with figures like Mohammad Hejazi, appointed to the head of Sarallah, a powerful military unit in the IRGC, and Jafar Assadi, named the new commander of the ground forces. In addition, the appointment of Hojjatoleslam Hussain Taeb as to the head of the Basij force, a volunteer militia recently integrated as a military unit within the Guard, has followed the promotion of Hussein Hamedani as his successor, each filling positions previously held by officers appointed during the pre-Ahmadinejad era.

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The new commanders are prominent hard-liner figures, sharing a long record of military experience during Iran’s eight-year war with Iraq (1980-1988) and enjoying close relations with the Supreme Leader. For instance, Taeb, a cleric and a military commander, who has previously served in the office of the supreme leader, and Hejazi, former vice-commander of the Basij Corps, are key Khamenei loyalists. They also have close connections with a number of ideologue legislators in the parliament and cabinet ministers in the administration of Ahmadinejad, who is also an ex-serviceman.

By and large, these promotions can be seen as latest efforts by the Revolutionary Guard to become a key player in the country’s domestic politics. The Guard’s initial push to enter Iranian politics came in the late 1990s, during which rivalry between reformists and conservatives had reached a tense stage. The first significant political entry, however, occurred during the 2004 parliamentary elections, when a number of ex-servicemen were allowed to run for elections by the conservative Guardian Council.

The victory of Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential elections expanded this political strategy, bringing to view the most important effort by the Guard to establish its firm grip on power. Through a network of patronage, institutional supervision over various commercial sectors and, more importantly, control over Iran’s nuclear program, the Revolutionary Guard has now become a leading political force with influence over Tehran’s policy-making decision.
Reviewing the Iranian print press in recent months, the latest appointments seem to be an indication of a growing competition between the hard-liner forces that back the Revolutionary Guard and revisionist conservatives, led by the Speaker of the Parliament, Ali Larijani, who seek a diplomatic solution to the current nuclear dispute. At the core of the tension is the question of national interest: what is best for Iran, and how to ideally develop Iran’s nuclear program without isolating the country from the global economy.

In this political context, the role of the supreme leader appears to be one of a mediator between the factions, though his tough stance on the nuclear issue has increasingly resembled the Guards, who are at pains to convince him that diplomacy with the West is contrary to Iran’s national interest.

Hunkered down in paranoia due to a mounting sense of military threat, coupled with the latest U.S.-led sanctions over its financial activities, the reorganization of the leadership marks a strategic attempt by the Revolutionary Guard to discredit domestic politicians who advocate diplomacy with the West. With the Iranian public as the main target audience, the move is a reminder that a totally alert military force serves as the surest way to thwart American and Israeli threats.

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On the military level, the changes also reflect a tactical shift toward the centralization of power in order to enhance the control of hard-liner Guard elites over the military force. Such tactic also carries the advantage of eliminating the possibility of espionage within the organization of the military, a source of considerable anxiety for conservative clerics in light of efforts by Washington to acquire information about the Guard’s internal activities.

On the political level, however, the promotion of hard-liner officers is a way to send a powerful message to the opposition working within Iran’s civil society. Aimed at evoking fear in the minds of dissidents, the Guard is displaying a total readiness against its domestic foes. More importantly, the message is also aimed at those lower and middle-ranking officers within the Revolutionary Guard who are mostly pro-reform and skeptical about economic and political policies endorsed by the conservative establishment.

In essence, the upper-echelon of the Revolutionary Guard espouses a self-perception as spiritual warriors with the task to defend the Islamic Republic against both internal and external enemies, a perspective that views a strong military force as the best insurance against Western aggression. The concept holds that the ideal way to counteract a perceived American attack, supported by predominantly hostile Sunni Arab states in the Persian Gulf, where U.S. maintains large troop base, is to establish prominent armed forces equipped with a high-tech weaponry system. Power respects power when it is backed by a display of force, as the latest missile tests best demonstrate.

As prospects of diplomatic failure over the nuclear issue increases so will tension between competing centers of power in Tehran’s factional-ridden politics. With the mounting political crisis, the hard-liners will have the support of the Revolutionary Guard to marginalize those who seek diplomacy and provoke military confrontation as a way to legitimize their claim to power. A growing sense of military attack would, therefore, only encourage the militant Right to seek repressive measures against Iran’s civil society in order to maintain political hegemony.

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