

# National Security Decision-Making in Iran

KEVJN LIM

Open Briefing: The Civil Society Intelligence Agency  
London, United Kingdom

*This article reviews national security decision-making in the Iranian context by focusing on institutions, formal process and individuals. It specifically examines the Supreme National Security Council, which formalizes and embodies the decision-making process, as well as the Revolutionary Guards, which epitomize both the influence of institutions as well as the centrality of the agent-individual. Despite the plurality of formal institutions and the existence of process, decision-making remains heavily centered on a small group of largely unelected individuals driven as much by ‘regime expediency’ as by mutual give-and-take along informal, microfactional lines. While he may have the last word, even Iran’s current Supreme Leader is constrained by these ideological, negotiational and structural factors. These key figures are closely affiliated either with the politico-clerical founding kernel of the 1979 Revolution, or the powerful Revolutionary Guards—mainly the hardliners in any case—and are instrumental in determining the discursive boundaries of national security, the scope of which this article confines to defense and foreign policy. Finally, how all this coheres in the realm of strategy has as much to do with regime survival as with the art of reconciling ends and means.*

## Introduction

One of the challenges faced by policymakers with regards to the Islamic Republic of Iran is discerning the effective lines of authority in the context of national security decision-making.<sup>1</sup> This ambiguity is nourished by the structure of power as currently exists, the multiple and mutually competing centers of influence, the preponderance of personal relationships and patronage networks, and the deliberate opacity of political processes. While a profuse body of literature has examined the complexities surrounding the various centers of power in Iran’s political wrangling,<sup>2</sup> far sparser still are analyses in English or Persian of the structure, process, and agents of decision-making.<sup>3</sup>

Security decision-making may be thought of as a function of strategic culture, that is the “set of shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives . . . that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives.”<sup>4</sup> In the modern Iranian polity, the *Islamic* (revolutionary-clerical), rather than the often more technocratic *republican* component shapes the discursive boundaries and the way the country’s security policy and concept—particularly threat perceptions—are formulated and framed. Indeed, while Iranian decision-making according to the historical record may not always have been equal to the task of matching ends and means, the determinative principle in question—still arguably a very rational one—remains that of “expediency” (*maslahat*), or in other words regime survival, which from the ruling elite’s perspective has become coterminous with “national interest” (*manafe’-e melli*).<sup>5</sup> The transnational implications of such an outlook weigh in when one considers, among other things, that the

ultimate custodianship of Iran's ballistic missile program lies with the hard-line Revolutionary Guards, who take orders from the clerics, rather than with the regular professional military (*Artesh*).

This article revisits the key decision-makers in Iranian national security, the scope of which is confined to defense and foreign policy, in contradistinction to internal security.<sup>6</sup> The discussion opens with a survey of the institutions with broad decisional influence in national security, before proceeding to examine two specific actors: the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). On the one hand, the SNSC embodies the formal process, especially in the context of the nuclear program. On the other hand, the IRGC epitomizes not only the influence of a specific institution but also that of the agent-individual, including those who have since occupied other key non-IRGC positions in government. By way of an analysis incorporating institutions, process, and individuals, this article attempts to enrich the existing debate. As a caveat, this study neither engages the theoretical underpinnings of decision-making processes<sup>7</sup> nor disputes the notion of Iran as a rational actor for that matter. In addition, it refrains from attempts to capture the sum of personal and network influences that feed into the various stages of Iran's national security decision-making. Finally, any undertaking of this type depends heavily on anecdotal evidence and is therefore, in this sense, inherently problematic, with this article being no exception.

## **Institutional Actors in Iran's National Security Decision-Making**

Iranian decision-making reflects the interaction among the formal power structure (instruments of state), informal networks, and *maslahat*. Under the Islamic Republic, the constitutional wing headed by the elected president sits in uneasy cohabitation alongside a politico-clerical superstrate headed by the Supreme Leader or jurisconsult (*vali-ye faghih*),<sup>8</sup> who though formally elected by the Assembly of Experts (*Majles-e Khobregan*), himself ultimately influences the 86-man membership through the Guardian Council (*Shoura-ye Negahban*).<sup>9</sup> Other contradictions abound.<sup>10</sup> The main legislative body, the 290-member Islamic Consultative Assembly (*Majles-e Shoura-ye Eslami*),<sup>11</sup> is likewise popularly elected and approves (or dismisses) the cabinet appointed by the president. However, the Majles is also subject to the approval of the Guardian Council, a body—consisting of six clerical appointees of the Supreme Leader and six lay jurists nominated by the head of the judiciary (himself a Supreme Leader appointee) and approved by the selfsame Majles—whose task is to interpret the constitution and ensure that legislation and electoral candidates (parliamentary, presidential and Assembly of Experts) abide by Islamic law.<sup>12</sup> The Supreme Leader oversees appointments for other positions, including the judiciary and the 38-member Expediency Council (*Majma-ye Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam*), created, as the name suggests, to determine national priorities and adjudicate in disagreements between the Majles and the Guardian Council.

The Iranian constitution provides the broadest framework for national security decision-making, apportioning the formal responsibilities but leaving their interpretation to individual incumbents. It neither renders explicit the Supreme Leader's monopoly of the decision-making process nor offers guidance on how such decisions are to be made; indeed, neither does Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's founding political treatise, *Islamic Government*.<sup>13</sup> Still, current Supreme Leader Sayyed Ali Khamenei is in practice the apex of authority and the commander-in-chief of Iran's armed forces (Art. 110, 4–5), meaning it is he rather than the president who appoints the Chief of General Staff and the heads of the various security organizations, who in turn report directly to the Supreme Leader. This

implies far more than it should, for Khamenei lacks the theological erudition as well as the authoritative charisma of his predecessor, which has been a major aggravating factor in the legitimacy crisis of *Velayat-e Faghih*.<sup>14</sup> More politician than spiritual guide, he has had to rule by a fragile and ever shifting consensus, constantly playing the various competing power centers against each other in a way that guarantees his own political longevity.<sup>15</sup> As Shahram Chubin noted nearly two decades ago:

The system with several centers of power reflects not broad consensus but querulous diversity; policy results from competition and trade-offs, generating inconsistency and contradictions . . . . With little consensus on domestic issues, Iran speaks with many voices on security issues . . . . Khomeini encouraged this situation and used it to enhance his own position as arbiter when he chose to intervene. Since his death, the dispersion of opinion has been aggravated, with the bonds holding the revolution together increasingly subject to centrifugal forces and no single leader of comparable stature emerging to act as arbiter of last resort.<sup>16</sup>

Already a leading conservative stalwart, the need for domestic support induced Khamenei as Supreme Leader to cleave even further rightward, especially toward the IRGC, thereby exacerbating domestic factionalism.<sup>17</sup> More importantly, such a move swayed the calculus of decision-making in favor of the unelected bodies and ensured that the militant hard-line became normative and from which “any departure . . . must be justified.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, given the multiplicity of interests in the domestic arena, Khamenei has also found it a matter of necessity to secure maximal consensus and “has reportedly never taken a decision that runs counter to the consensual will of the Iranian elites,” according to one observer.<sup>19</sup> To this end, “highly formalized tri- or bi-monthly meetings between the Supreme Leader and the Iranian elites are held. All influential figures of the Islamic Republic attend and it is at this occasion that the Iranian multipolar system finds its balance.”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps more than just balance, consensus tends to be the overriding imperative because “the system requires compromise in order to avoid paralysis,” others have argued.<sup>21</sup> The implication is that while Khamenei may call the shots, these are constrained by ideological, institutional, and political factors, and indeed may even be largely limited to his veto power.<sup>22</sup> Despite a deeply divisive domestic arena, substantive matters of national security and foreign policy, such as the nuclear program and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, respectively, tend to elicit relatively greater levels of elite and mass consensus.<sup>23</sup>

By and large, the Supreme Leader defers to the deliberations of the SNSC, yet receives unmediated inputs from the various security apparatuses, the chief of which is the IRGC’s top brass. Within the Supreme Leader’s Office (SLO), amid a bulging staff of clerical cadres managed by his longtime longtime Chief of Staff, family relation and former deputy intelligence minister Mohammad (Gholam-Hossein) Mohammadi Golpayegani, Khamenei also retains his own personal advisors for foreign policy (Ali Akbar Velayati), military affairs (Maj-Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi and until recently, Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani), strategy (Maj-Gen. Mostafa Izadi), and so on. This key group of advisers is comprised of high-profile former ministers and retired top military commanders who serve as his first line of consultation and whose collective counsel holds great weight.

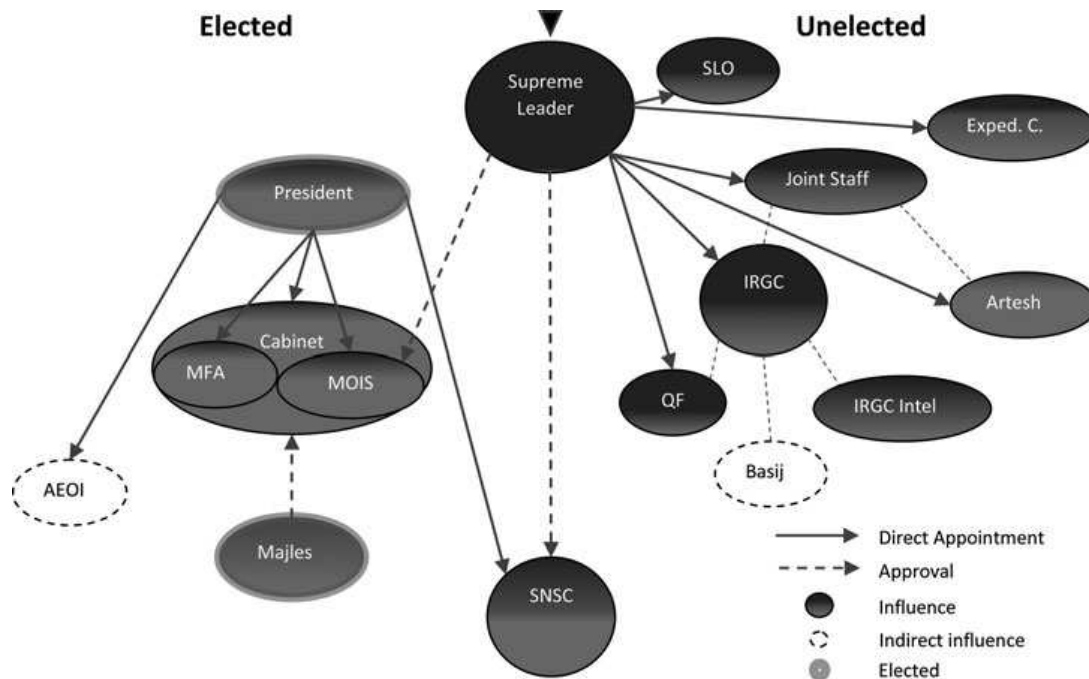
As Iran’s formal second-in-command, the president focuses primarily on the country’s domestic management and the economy. Officially, the president is involved, or at least kept abreast of, national security matters, but this depends on the incumbent. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was clearly a prime mover in many ways and a key national security figure

during the 1990s (an era often dubbed the Second Republic, following the revolutionary war-time fervor of the 1980s),<sup>24</sup> and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's neo-conservative outlook gave unprecedented impetus to the rise of the IRGC in domestic politics, irrespective of whether he himself played a central role in security decisions. Conversely, the role of the executive under Mohammad Khatami was, to cite one observer, "crucial in the formal decision-making process, in non-crisis situations or vis-à-vis countries that have little security significance for Iran and in cases where the system needs a show of legitimacy."<sup>25</sup> As of the time of this writing, Hassan Rouhani's role and mandate in relation to the nuclear program, Iran's most prominent challenge alongside the economy, and his longstanding backing by Khamenei betrays a degree of reconsolidated authority within the presidency.

The constitution stipulates that the Supreme Leader also consult with the Expediency Council, which has a hand in designing general policies (*siyasatha-ye kol*), or "grand strategy," as former deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Maleki put it.<sup>26</sup> The Expediency Council's membership includes the "who's who" of Iran's political class and allows their views to be accommodated in one institution, raising the "incentives for Iran's top elite to opt for consensus."<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it has been heavily identified with one person and was particularly potent when—again—Rafsanjani was both its chair and the country's president, since the head of the executive could, by his chairmanship of the council, directly affect decisions taken by the legislature.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, Rafsanjani's political fortunes have been in gradual decline since the 1990s, deteriorating even more sharply after he supported the Green Movement protests of June 2009. While he remains council chair, a parallel arbitral body led by another powerful clerical figure was established by Khamenei in 2011, following sharp disagreements between then President Ahmadinejad and Majles speaker Larijani,<sup>29</sup> which was partly interpreted as a move to sideline Rafsanjani. Still, Rafsanjani remains a founding father of the revolution with the widest popular support, a key figure behind Iran's nuclear program, and his endorsement (and that of Khatami's) crucially boosted Rouhani's presidential bid in the final days of the electoral campaign, all of which suggests that Rafsanjani still plies significant influence in domestic and foreign policy.

Other than budgetary responsibilities, the Majles is empowered to influence general policy and possesses an important veto and the authority to call to account the highest elected officials (as happened, for instance, with Presidents Abolhassan Bani-Sadr and Ahmadinejad), and even impeach them if necessary. Moreover, parliamentary approval is required for important foreign policy decisions such as ratification of treaties and agreements. The parliamentary committee for national security and foreign policy, currently chaired by Ala'eddin Boroujerdi, specifically keeps track of and is briefed on key national security matters.<sup>30</sup> Although the committee's influence may be indirect, given that Boroujerdi, unlike Majles Speaker Ali Larijani, lacks permanent formal membership in the SNSC's deliberations, he is known to have participated in key intra-SNSC forums such as the Supreme Nuclear Committee.<sup>31</sup>

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) plays a somewhat ancillary role in national security matters.<sup>32</sup> It oversaw the policymaking and expert committees for the nuclear dossier in the country's dealings with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the United Nations (UN), but only for as long as calm prevailed. When controversy exploded over the nature of Iran's nuclear ambitions, responsibility for the sensitive nuclear negotiations was transferred to the SNSC. A month after assuming office in 2013, President Rouhani charged Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, with whom he worked closely from 2003–2005, with this latter responsibility. While this was indubitably aimed at "softening Iran's edges" after the unbending tenure of Saeed Jalili as chief nuclear negotiator, it is still hardly tantamount to responsibility for the nuclear program per se. More commonly,



**Figure 1.** Iran’s national security structure, relational patterns, and relative influence.

through its embassies abroad, the MFA provides diplomatic cover for intelligence and special operations conducted by security organizations. Like the MFA, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI)—currently led for a second time by former foreign minister and nuclear engineer by training Ali Akbar Salehi—also plays an indirect role, since it oversees the technical and scientific aspects of the nuclear program, the specificities of which in turn inform strategic decisions.

Probably more influential is the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), which reportedly enjoys the best financing and political support among the government ministries.<sup>33</sup> Much of the ministry’s brief is keeping an eye on political, social, ethnic, and religious dissidents, both overseas and at home, and particularly the *Mojahedin-e Khalgh*,<sup>34</sup> a task it carries out in close collaboration with the judiciary. Indeed, MOIS ministers—Mohammad Mohammadi Rayshahri, Ali Fallahian, Ghorban-Ali Dorri Najafabadi, Ali Younesi, Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Ezhe’i, Heydar Moslehi, and, at present, Mahmoud Alavi—are required by law to be clerical appointees carrying the rank of *mojtahed* (qualified to independently interpret Islamic law), and are typically alumni of the conservative Haqqani Seminary in Qom and have served in some capacity in the judiciary.<sup>35</sup> During Ali Fallahian’s eight-year stewardship, MOIS agents allegedly presided over the assassination of a long string of Iranian dissidents at home and overseas. Furthermore, Fallahian is also believed to have played a role in the bombing of the AMIA Jewish community building in Buenos Aires in 1994.<sup>36</sup> Although its influence in national security decision-making is unclear, it is reasonable to assume that it corresponds to the extent that MOIS produces strategic intelligence (i.e., of defense and foreign policy relevance), which informs the former.

Figure 1 attempts to capture the institutions invested in national security decision-making, the relational structures in place, and the approximate institutional influence with reference to the Supreme Leader.

The role of the formal structure of power is, however, subordinate to the informal and far more complex network of peers and factions—notably, the IRGC old boys’ network who

shared in the trauma of the Iran–Iraq War—with a vested interest in regime survival, and in practice these networks of individuals and the power relations among them either overlap with, or overrule, the formal structure.<sup>37</sup> The International Crisis Group noted that the core coterie of decision makers are both “relatively insulated from, and yet reflect, alterations in formal institutional structures (e.g., as a result of elections or personnel changes) and broader regional and international conditions.”<sup>38</sup> Moreover, as other analysts have argued, “Key individuals often change institutions, and their responsibilities and networks go with them.”<sup>39</sup> The high retention rate of regime veterans in overall positions of power, and their resistance to change, in some ways create a degree of regime stability. However, this trade-off may well come at the expense of qualified expertise, especially lower down the hierarchy. As Chubin noted, “Interest groups have inputs at all levels of decision-making, while technocrats are only consulted out of necessity. The continued disdain for expertise and bias toward political loyalty favors the recruitment of ideologues and slights more knowledgeable individuals.”<sup>40</sup>

Further blurring the institutional–individual dichotomy is Khamenei’s vast network of clerical commissars—some put the number at 2,000—in every existing institution and organization of note, beginning with the ministries and the security-military organizations, who ensure that these toe the Supreme Leader’s line.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, their supervisory and overriding authority makes many of these more powerful than even ministers, commanders, and organizational appointees in comparable positions. Also, given that Khamenei is known to speak only Arabic as a foreign language and may have little direct acquaintance with the world outside Iran, by serving as his eyes, ears, and mouthpiece (Hossein Shariatmadari, for example, is the influential editor-in-chief of Iran’s leading ultraconservative newspaper *Kayhan*,<sup>42</sup>) these representatives make up his private grapevine and information filters and, it stands to reason, are as likely to influence his decisions, including in national security.<sup>43</sup> One specific commissar in this connection stands out, given that he is also the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council.

## The Supreme National Security Council

The SNSC (*Shoura-ye Aali-ye Amniyat-e Melli*) is the principal forum and clearinghouse for defense and security coordination. Established during the 1989 constitutional revision to replace the Supreme Defense Council, it is formally chaired by the president, who in turn appoints the secretary with the Supreme Leader’s consent (or prompting, as the case may be). The SNSC has an entire chapter in the constitution dedicated to its definition, leaving little ambivalence that its decisions acquire force with the Supreme Leader’s approval.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, on the basis of a general framework delineated by the Supreme Leader, the SNSC fleshes out national security policies, coordinates them, and mobilizes the necessary resources toward that end, namely preservation of the Islamic Revolution (*enghelab-e eslami*), Iran’s territorial integrity (*tamamiyat-e arzi*), and national sovereignty (*hakemiyat-e melli*).

The formal 12-member composition of the SNSC—others are invited ad hoc depending on the agenda—provides an idea of the posts officially invested with influence: the head of the executive (which is also the SNSC’s chairman); the heads of the legislative (Majles speaker) and judicial branches; the chief of the Supreme Command Council of the Armed Forces; the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Intelligence and Security; the Commanders of the IRGC and the *Artesh*; a Planning and Budget Organization representative; and finally, *two* representatives of the Supreme Leader, one of which is the SNSC

secretary and, in practice, the national security adviser.<sup>45</sup> The SNSC appears to be the only organization with more than one clerical commissar at the highest level of representation. Also, while the forum is composed of different organizational interests, the fact that one of Khamenei's top representatives, rather than the president, manages it challenges the view that the SNSC is a purely consultative body bereft of real authority.<sup>46</sup>

Of the prevailing slate of security issues, none are as sensitive, momentous, and restricted (in terms of the circle of decision makers) as Iran's nuclear program. Similarly, of the individuals involved, Iran's current president provides what is perhaps the closest glimpse into the decision-making process.<sup>47</sup> Hojjat-ol-Eslam Hassan Rouhani was Khamenei's representative to the SNSC and its secretary for nearly two decades, a period (1989–2005) which witnessed events of critical strategic significance to Iran, including the collapse of the Soviet Union, the First and Second Gulf Wars, and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. During Khatami's presidency, Rouhani also served as chief nuclear negotiator. Until the revelations of August 2002, which led to the IAEA board of governors' September 2003 resolution and Tehran's current predicament, the nuclear dossier had been under the purview of the AEOI. From that point onward, responsibility was reassigned to the SNSC, partly in view of the coinciding regional sensitivities and its experience with handling the uncertainty in neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>48</sup> The SNSC's most pressing task was to avoid, or at least delay, having Iran's nuclear program referred to the UN Security Council, while preserving and, indeed, perfecting the fuel cycle.<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, political and technical matters would remain the responsibility of the MFA and the AEOI, respectively, but a more centralized decision-making structure was to be put into place via the SNSC, with Rouhani "riding point" upon Khamenei's insistence.<sup>50</sup> This entailed four increasing levels of decision-making:

- (1) a technical level led by the MFA and under the auspices of the AEOI (*jalase-ye karshenasi-ye fanni*);
- (2) a higher expert technical level within the SNSC secretariat (*jalase-ye karshenasi-ye haste'i*);
- (3) a ministerial committee within the SNSC's secretariat known as the Supreme Nuclear Committee (*komite-ye aali-ye haste'i*); and,
- (4) the highest level, which includes the "heads of the ruling system (*saran-e nezam*). All the major fundamental decisions are made there."<sup>51</sup>

The lower technical levels aside, members of the Supreme Nuclear Committee were appointed by the Supreme Leader and the president, but were often the same top-level regime decision makers at the time.<sup>52</sup> These are also known as the "council of heads."<sup>53</sup> During the 2005 presidential transition period, Chubin took this innermost nuclear circle to include Khamenei, Rafsanjani as well as the overlapping duos Khatami-Ahmadinejad (president), Rouhani/Larijani (SNSC secretary/chief nuclear negotiator) and Shamkhani/Najjar (defense minister), but oddly fails to mention any direct IRGC representative.<sup>54</sup> In 2009, Entessar's innermost circle of influence encompassed the same individuals with the exception of IRGC Chief Mohammad Ali Ja'afari, whom he added; Larijani, whom he relegated to the third rung (the outermost in this case); and ex-president Khatami, whom he omitted altogether.<sup>55</sup> Attempting to identify the core national security elite in 2004, Bar added "first generation revolutionaries," such as Mohsen Reza'i, Yahya Rahim Safavi, and Ali Shamkhani—all IRGC commanders.<sup>56</sup> Writing earlier, Buchta had already singled Reza'i out as "one of the twelve most powerful men in Iran,"<sup>57</sup> whose stature, according to Katzman, derived not from politico-clerical patronage but instead from his control of the most

powerful of the militias that would become the IRGC.<sup>58</sup> This may explain why Reza'i, who was also close to Khomeini in the 1980s, subsequently resisted toeing Khamenei's line, unlike his more pliable successor, Yahya Rahim Safavi.<sup>59</sup>

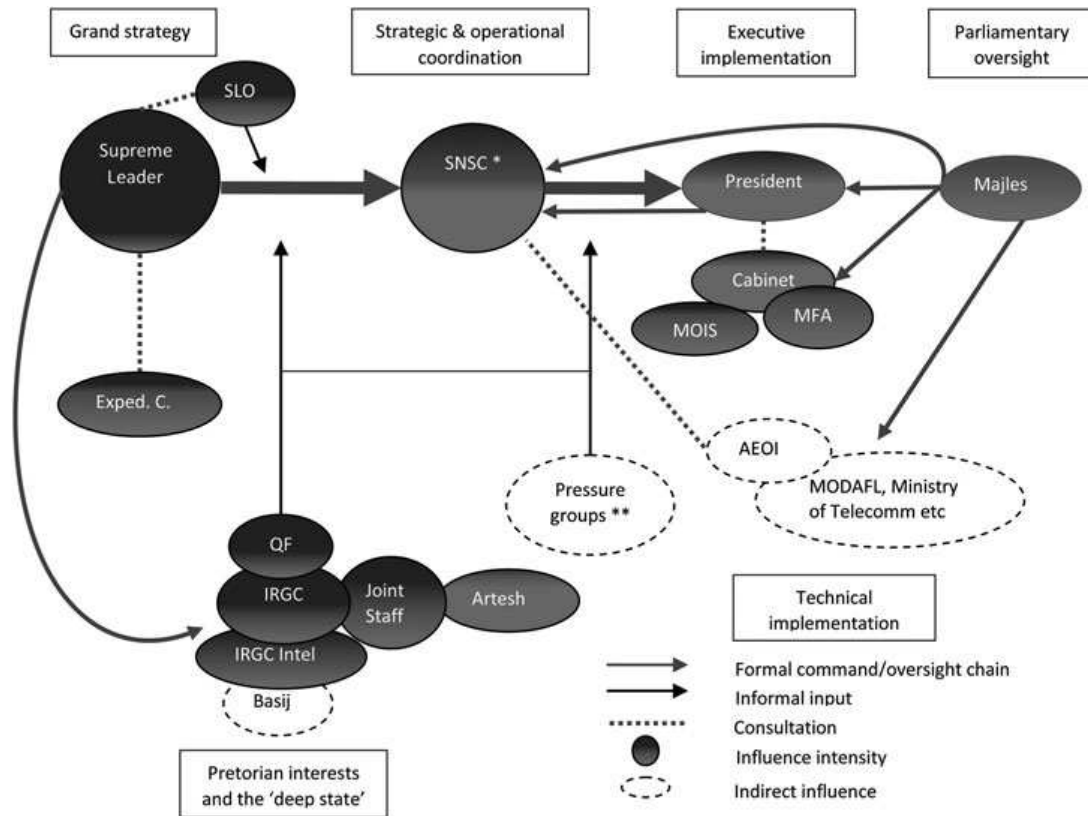
Insofar as conduct is concerned, two elements repeatedly stand out in Rouhani's account: the careful deference to decision-making based on consensus (*ejma'*), as well as Khamenei's unequivocal backing and endorsement.<sup>60</sup> Consensus conveys the impression of pluralism and compromise. But it may similarly be calculated rather than authentic, for as Chubin notes, "it allows the leadership to share the responsibility and the risks associated with a particular decision."<sup>61</sup> Consensus also appears confined to the Council of Heads—according to one Iranian legislator, despite all the questions, "we still do not know what has been going on in [Bushehr] for the past thirty years."<sup>62</sup> The second element, Khamenei's approval, is a consistent leitmotif and source of legitimacy with succeeding nuclear negotiators, of which four have been appointed since the nuclear controversy broke. The first three were SNSC secretaries and presumably beholden to similar decision-making processes and constraints. Yet each one exercised a distinct set of ideological biases and influenced outcomes in different ways.<sup>63</sup> Following Rouhani's 22-month negotiations with the EU3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), incoming president Ahmadinejad replaced him, upon Khamenei's approval, with Ali Larijani in August 2005, reflecting the new administration's adversarial stance.<sup>64</sup> The nuclear negotiations took a still more rigid turn under Saeed Jalili, who during this period nonetheless purportedly deferred to consultation and cooptation,<sup>65</sup> maintaining "direct interaction and coordination with the regime's main constituents of power [*arkan-e nezam*], *something not even the heads of the three branches of government necessarily enjoy*" (emphasis added).<sup>66</sup> The nuclear standoff reached a head with unprecedented economic sanctions and enabled a new negotiating team under Foreign Minister Zarif to be brought in. This shift, orchestrated by Rouhani, hints at the confidence and backing the president enjoys from Khamenei, even though according to Rouhani himself, succeeding governments—i.e. presidents—only determine the tone and scope of the nuclear program, "nothing more."<sup>67</sup>

On the other hand, the SNSC hasn't become any less relevant.<sup>68</sup> The current secretary, Ali Shamkhani, is a regime stalwart, career military professional, and one of the few recognizable names today who participated in the first session of the Supreme Defense Council at the start of the war with Iraq.<sup>69</sup> The Ahvaz-born Shamkhani is also the first ethnic Arab to have been appointed both Defense Minister (under Khatami) and SNSC secretary (and indeed, IRGC minister and deputy commander-in-chief),<sup>70</sup> and within the elite few enjoy his degree of proximity to Arab leaders, especially in the Persian Gulf—the paramount focus for Iran's strategic interests.

Figure 2 attempts to capture the national security decision-making process, the vectors of influence, and the actors' importance relative to the Supreme Leader.

The SNSC's aggregate influence clearly depends on its makeup under a given administration, but this is in itself more deterministic than it appears given that half the posts are directly appointed by Khamenei and the other half are often influenced through veto. This is not to say that debates do not take place, for they clearly do if the regularity and intensity of public altercations at the highest levels of the regime are any indicator. Through the SNSC, the decision-making process has undergone a greater degree of rationalization vis-à-vis institutional stakeholders, despite ongoing informal inputs from various groups and, as mentioned, the strengthening of the semblance of consensus-seeking, the significance of which isn't always fully appreciated in the West. But while the SNSC embodies the highest





**Figure 2.** The national security decision-making process. \* The SNSC is already represented here as the sum of its constituent parts (e.g. IRGC Commander, Minister of Foreign Affairs), whose official inputs are therefore implied and not illustrated here. \*\* This includes institutions (Guardian Council, Assembly of Experts, the Judiciary), Bonyads (“charity” foundations), the defense industry, and miscellaneous individuals with a stake, economic for instance, in national security.

formal decision-making forum in Iran, it is in practice the IRGC that represents the single and most consistently influential group of individuals in national security matters.

### The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

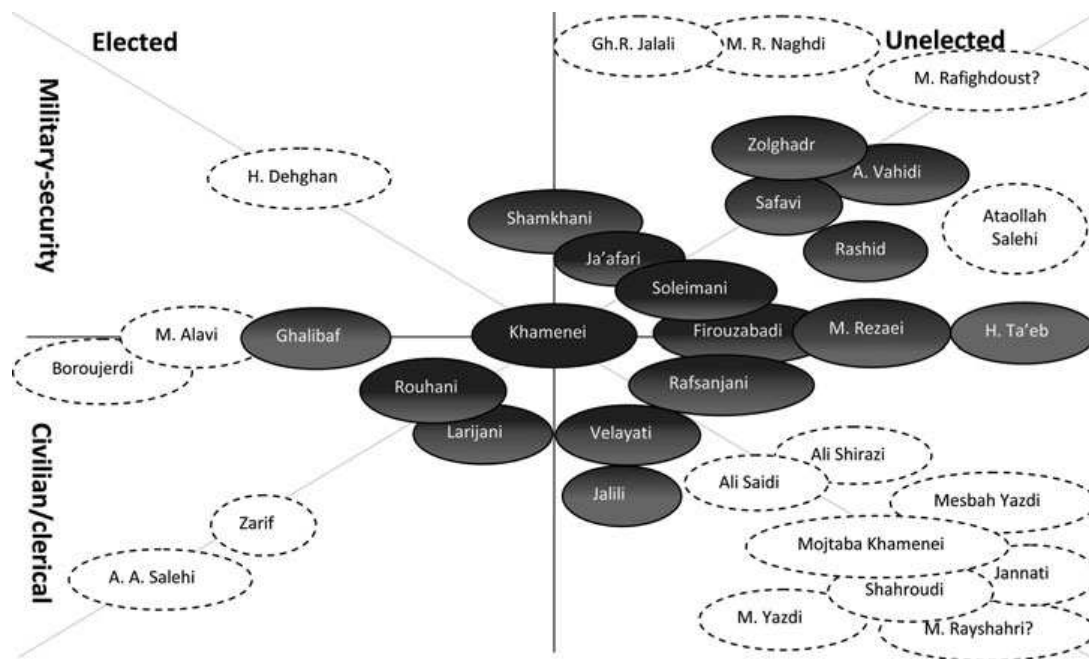
The IRGC was officially inaugurated by Khomeini’s decree on May 5, 1979, with the express but vaguely defined purpose of “protecting the revolution and its achievements.”<sup>71</sup> Despite the constitutional exhortation of “brotherly cooperation and harmony” between the IRGC and the *Artesh*, implicit in this was the bulwark it would serve against the latter which until then had been loyal to the Shah. Iran’s military structure has consequently been characterized by bifurcation and, at times, inconsistency, and attempts (prominently by then president Rafsanjani) to fully unify both forces have come to naught.<sup>72</sup>

In 1982, the IRGC was assigned its own ministry under Khomeini’s one-time chauffeur and bodyguard Mohsen Rafighdoust, and by 1985, a full tri-service structure—army, navy, and air force—had been established. Over time, it eclipsed the *Artesh* by inheriting control of the country’s missile and the then-existing unconventional (especially chemical) weapons arsenal, and the authority to conduct direct relations with the military forces of allied states.<sup>73</sup> It wasn’t until Operation Walfajr-8 in the Faw Peninsula in early 1986 that both services worked in tandem for the first time as a result of

improved structural coordination.<sup>74</sup> In June 1988, a Joint General Staff of the Armed Forces was established, which coincided with increasing professionalization of the IRGC. In 1989, the IRGC Ministry, by then under Ali Shamkhani following Rafighdoust's ouster, was subsumed under the newly created Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL). The new minister in question, Akbar Torkan, was however only assigned responsibility for the *administrative* rather than the operational aspects of the revolutionary and regular forces.<sup>75</sup> With the General Command of the Joint Chiefs of Staff firmly in place by 1992, long-time Khamenei confidante Hassan Firouzabadi was appointed Chief of Staff, further streamlining coordination between both forces.<sup>76</sup> This notwithstanding, the IRGC retained a separate Central Headquarters Staff under Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr,<sup>77</sup> an intelligence wing autonomous of MOIS,<sup>78</sup> and even an independent arms industry.

The IRGC's leading role in national security cannot be overstated. The adamant prosecution of the war with Iraq from 1982, when the tide temporarily turned in Iran's favor despite the IRGC's subpar battlefield tactics, was but one early instance. But its primacy is also evident in several other ways, beginning with the relationship between the IRGC and Khamenei, which had its antecedents in the alliance between the ruling clerics of the then Islamic Republican Party (IRP) and the IRGC faction headed by Mohsen Reza'i mentioned earlier.<sup>79</sup> Inadequacy in clerical credentials led Khamenei to leverage the IRGC to bolster his position, an arrangement which turned out to be "politically expedient for the Leader and economically expedient for the Guards."<sup>80</sup> The IRGC's simultaneous involvement in politics had been expressly proscribed by Khomeini,<sup>81</sup> but yet tacitly cultivated by Khamenei, eventually peaking during the Ahmadinejad years.<sup>82</sup> IRGC chief Mohammad Ali Ja'afari publicly defended this involvement by pointing out that the biggest (domestic) threats to the Islamic Revolution and its achievements are necessarily political in nature.<sup>83</sup> The IRGC has been allowed to swell into an economic juggernaut through the massive conglomerate known as Khatem ol-Anbia (Seal of the Prophets), much of it via no-bid tenders, intimidation, and illicit import activities, in addition to its cut of the official government budget.<sup>84</sup> This economic leverage at a time of international sanctions and reduced domestic competition militates in favor of preserving the hardline status quo. Indeed, it isn't merely a leading security organization or even a "deeply entrenched domestic institution,"<sup>85</sup> for in many ways it has taken on the characteristics of an entire sub-class of society. Indeed, the IRGC since 1979 is the only revolutionary organ that has gained in strength whereas others have waned in relative terms or disappeared altogether, such as happened to the IRP.<sup>86</sup>

The IRGC approximates a "deep state" in the sense of an entrenched, unelected organization with the means—often armed—and the will to challenge elected civilian rule.<sup>87</sup> Unlike the *Artesh*, the IRGC openly aligns itself with domestic political actors (usually within the conservative-ultraconservative fold) and falls under little civilian oversight.<sup>88</sup> A cabal of some two dozen commanders who cut their teeth on the Iran–Iraq War now form a rather cohesive "command network" spanning the IRGC and other key government bodies.<sup>89</sup> Other than IRGC chiefs past and present,<sup>90</sup> the most prominent of these, according to one analyst include: Qods Force (QF) Chief Maj-Gen. Ghassem Soleimani; Deputy Armed Forces Chief of Staff Maj-Gen. Gholam-Ali Rashid;<sup>91</sup> Tehran mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf; Armed Forces General Staff Intelligence and Operations Deputy Maj-Gen. Mohammad Bagheri; QF Deputy Chief Brig-Gen. Esmail Ghaani; Armed Forces General Staff Strategic Affairs Deputy Maj-Gen. Mostafa Izadi; and current SNSC secretary Ali Shamkhani.<sup>92</sup> As the dominant gene pool for Iran's political, economic, and certainly national security elite (see Fig. 3), the IRGC enjoys a collective reach unmatched by any other institutional player in the country.



**Figure 3.** Key individuals in Iran's national security decision-making (shaded).

Moreover, the IRGC leadership distinguishes itself in an already fiercely strident media environment by not only publicly taking sides in regime infighting but articulating political views against even the highest elected officials—usually in line with Khamenei's opinions.<sup>93</sup> Examples abound, although three suffice. On July 12, 1999, amid the most serious student demonstrations since the revolution, 24 top commanders issued an elliptical warning against president Khatami's seeming lack of resolve by announcing "our patience has run out, we cannot tolerate the situation any longer."<sup>94</sup> In 2011, after Ahmadinejad fired intelligence minister Heydar Moslehi, the Guards denounced the president and his closest associates, accusing them of "sedition" and "deviance" (in reference to Ahmadinejad's claimed ability to communicate with the Hidden Imam). More recently in September 2013, after commending Rouhani's overall diplomatic opening, Maj-Gen. Ja'afari proceeded to upbraid the Iranian president—who despite his revolutionary pedigree has (together with his mentor Rafsanjani) had rocky relations with the Guards—for his telephone conversation with U.S. President Barack Obama, which he thought premature.<sup>95</sup>

In addition, a special elite unit of the IRGC known as the Qods Force (QF) is tasked with operational and intelligence responsibility, as well as the training of frontline resistance groups, in Iran's most sensitive theatres of operations, including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Persian Gulf, and Afghanistan.<sup>96</sup> In Syria and Iraq specifically, the QF is neck-deep and taking the lead in counteracting the Sunni extremist threat posed by the self-styled 'Islamic State.' Even though it is officially one of the IRGC's five branches alongside the tri-services and the Basij, its commander Maj-Gen. Ghassem Soleimani has Khamenei's direct attention, has been exceptionally referred to by Khamenei as a living martyr, and is equal or even possibly superior to IRGC Commander-in-Chief Mohammad Ali Ja'afari.<sup>97</sup> Irrespective of whether Soleimani bypasses Ja'afari (and Chief of Joint Staff Firouzabadi, for that matter), the perception thereof was sufficiently significant for Khamenei's representative to the QF, Ali Shirazi, to issue a formal denial.<sup>98</sup>

Furthermore, the IRGC's ideological fealty to Khomeini's Revolution has made it, rather than the *Artesh*, the custodians for the country's most sensitive weapons systems.

Iran's missile program, which began in response to Saddam Hussein's Scud attacks,<sup>99</sup> is the largest of its type in the Middle East and has come to encompass a solid-fuel, intermediate-range ballistic component under the remit of the IRGC's Air Force. But the more critical linkage lies in its use as delivery systems for any potential unconventional offensive capabilities, including a nuclear program with possible military dimensions. This would complement the IRGC's own expertise, through the QF and in tandem with MOIS and Lebanese Hezbollah, as Iran's leading proponent of asymmetric warfare.<sup>100</sup> All of the preceding factors taken together reflect another fundamental fact: that the IRGC's primacy in national security matters stems from its standing as the main line of defense for a regime whose overriding priority is its own survival, or in other words, *maslahat-e nezam*. The critical mass required for this defense at home is embodied in the IRGC-controlled volunteer paramilitary known as the Basij-e Mostaz'afin (Mobilization of the Oppressed), which arguably makes it the IRGC's most important component from this perspective.<sup>101</sup> The Basij, however, appears to have comparably less say *beyond* Iran's borders and is therefore not accorded treatment here.

Despite the Guards' revolutionary inception, operational and structural coordination with the *Artesh* has improved over the years with the former's progressive professionalization and modernization.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, unlike the leadership, the IRGC rank-and-file has undergone generational turnover with a consequent diminishing in revolutionary fervor. But rivalries and imbalances still exist. The Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL), as mentioned, is charged only with administrative responsibilities, and indeed, the Minister of Defense is not even included among the SNSC's permanent members. Likewise, the *Artesh* may man the bulk of the country's conventional weaponry, yet the IRGC is entrusted with its most sensitive. For this reason, neither the Ministry of Defense nor the *Artesh* have been included in this study. The Guards are widely considered the most powerful institution in Iran and clearly dominate in the most crucial aspects of national security decision-making. If the IRGC's top commanders did not exercise direct involvement in decision-making, its collective institutional interests would still have exerted sufficient gravity on policymaking, perhaps even at cross-purposes with wider domestic interests.<sup>103</sup> But while Khamenei closely supports the Guards and relies on them, the record suggests that his is a logic of domestic balance that prolongs his own political longevity and influence. If this holds true, *sustained* and *inordinate* empowerment of the IRGC beyond its current influence levels could also indicate, rather than consolidation, an inverse trend in the Supreme Leader's hold on power.

Figure 3 is a schematic of the key individuals assessed to occupy the core of national security decision-making.<sup>104</sup> Besides Rafsanjani, Rouhani, and Velayati, three figures who have been closely associated with the Islamic Revolution from its start, those immediately surrounding Khamenei have a history with the IRGC (beyond those already mentioned, Larijani was an IRGC commander, and Brig-Gen. Ahmad Vahidi was Soleimani's QF predecessor and the former defense minister;<sup>105</sup> conversely both Firouzabadi and Jalili were Basij members).<sup>106</sup> Others who play an indirect, but nonetheless potentially significant, role (by dint of the positions they occupy) are depicted separately, of which those not yet mentioned are current Minister of Defense Brig-Gen. Hossein Dehghan, who previously commanded the IRGC's crucial Lebanon contingent as well as its air force and served as deputy chief of the IRGC's joint staff; Brig-Gen. Gholam-Reza Jalili, commander of the Passive Defense Organization, which also oversees increasingly important cyber defense measures; Brig-Gen. Mohammad Reza Naghdi, the current Basij commander; Maj-Gen. Ata'ollah Salehi, the Commander-in-Chief of the *Artesh*; Ali Saidi and Ali Shirazi, Khamenei's clerical representatives to the IRGC and Qods Force, respectively—positions generally concerned

with internal organizational and disciplinary matters, but which nonetheless have the potential to greatly influence decision-making; and lastly, clustered in the bottom-right quadrant, are some key sources of clerical support for security policy. Clearly, an individual's decision-making influence depends on factors including proximity to the Supreme Leader, experience, and domestic dynamics, yet almost all of the most influential maintain strong existing links to the IRGC, if not to the regime's founding fathers.

## Conclusion

The lopsided influence of unelected institutions, especially the IRGC and its clerical allies, has subordinated the notion of national security to a narrow set of interests hitherto guaranteed through overseas resistance and domestic repression. Likewise, despite the semblance of a constitutional framework, the decision-making process favors informal inputs from a wide variety of actors and pressure groups, which revolve around a few key individuals.<sup>107</sup> National security decisions are ultimately products of cold give-and-take negotiations and consensus-seeking within a highly fractious society and correspondingly factionalized body politic. Khamenei himself, perhaps gray eminence but certainly no absolute ruler, is under constant pressure to balance competing centers of power. For this reason, we witness the rise of moderate or reformist governments at key moments when the system demands self-adjustment. Combined with structural bifurcation at the systemic level and between the official armed forces, the foregoing are sufficient conditions to encumber and even thwart effective decision-making. Indeed, the Byzantine complexity of the process itself is evident in Iran's foreign policy contradictions over the decades. Back in 1994, Shahram Chubin wrote that:

Since there is no hand at the helm, and little institutional influence (Foreign Ministry input or the like), there is no learning process. Feedback is not used to adjust course. As a result changes in direction tend to be abrupt rather than incremental, the product of force rather than adaptation. Since decision-making tends to be reactive rather than anticipatory, policy lurches from crisis to crisis. Rather than delineating a clear pattern of priorities and goals, decisions are the product of an internal struggle for power in which competing visions of the future of Iran are but one element in the stakes.<sup>108</sup>

This was barely six years after the "Imposed War" and Khomeini's passing, and still a time of great transition. Of course, Iran has neither remained the same, nor are such contradictions in a state's internal logic unique to it. As elsewhere, national security decision-making takes place in the context of a higher strategic imperative, conceptually expressed in Western thought as the relationship between ends and means. Although there appears to be consensus—at least among the elite—concerning the desirability of an independent Islamic polity playing a lead role in regional affairs, there is still trenchant disagreement over the means (i.e. the degree to which it should be revolutionary) of achieving that goal. A Tehran University professor noted:

[By] pursuing value-laden ends not compatible with its means . . . the Islamic Republic has continuously instigated harsh reaction from both regional and international actors . . . [leading] to the emergence and accumulation of security threats that have turned regime maintenance into the most important goal of [Iran's] foreign policy.<sup>109</sup>

But if the driving logic has been narrow regime survival, Iran's political upper crust has undergone a remarkable trial of endurance and, it follows, the ideological rigidity that has on the whole proven prejudicial to Iran's broader national interests would appear rational. In this sense then, revolutionary Iran has ironically become a status-quo power. Thirty-five years into Khomeini's revolution, a coherent assessment of the Islamic Republic's grand strategy, or its "ends," remains a challenge, or at least its "ends." Insights into the "means," on the other hand, have been gleaned from Iran's diplomatic historical record. The point at which the two meet in the realm of national security constituted the subject of this article.

## Notes

1. Lionel Beehner and Greg Bruno, "Intelligence on Iran Still Lacking", *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 4, 2007, available at <http://www.cfr.org/iran/intelligence-iran-still-lacking/p12721>

2. See, for instance, Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran: The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy & Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2000); and David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), chapter 2.

3. See, for instance, Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli va Diplomasi-ye Haste'i [National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy]*, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Center for Strategic Research, 1391 [2012]), 68 (all translations from the Persian are heretofore the author's); and Farzad Poursaeed, "Sakhtar va Ravand-e Tasmingiri dar Seyasat-e Khareji-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran: Tahlil-e Motun-e Amuzeshi va Pazhuheshi" [The Structure and Process of Decision-Making in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Analysis of Training and Research Texts], *Faslname-ye Motalaat-e Rahbord* [Strategic Studies Quarterly]. Vol. 11, no. 40 (Summer 1387/2008): 343.

4. The original definition is Kerry M. Kartchner's, cited in Willis Stanley, "The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran", paper prepared for the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, October 31, 2006, 3.

5. Alidad Mafinezam and Aria Mehrabi, *Iran and Its Place among Nations* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 37; Hamid Ahmadi, "The Dilemma of National Interest in the Islamic Republic of Iran," ch. 3 in Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi, eds., *Iran in the 21st Century: Politics, Economics and Conflict* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2008), 30–31; the following, in a letter from Khomeini to Khamenei, is a key passage concerning this notion of expediency: "The government [state] that is a part of the absolute vice-regency of the Prophet of God is one of the primary injunctions [*ahkam-e avvaliyeh*] of Islam and has priority over all other secondary injunctions, even prayers, fasting, and *haj*. The ruler is authorized to demolish a mosque or a house that is in the path of a road and to compensate the owner for his house. The ruler can close down a mosque if need be, or can even demolish a mosque that is a source of harm if its harm cannot be remedied without demolition. The government is empowered to unilaterally revoke any shari'a agreement that it has conducted with people when those agreements are contrary to the interests of the country or of Islam," cited in Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 74.

6. Embodied in such organizations as the Law Enforcement Forces (Ministry of Interior), the judiciary, the Basij and its Ashoura and Zahra Brigades, Ansar-e Hezbollah and Ansar-e Velayat. The Ministry of Intelligence and Security's brief mainly covers internal dissent, but it has been included in this study because of its role in foreign policy.

7. See, for instance, Abbas Maleki, "Decision Making in Iran's Foreign Policy: A Heuristic Approach," *Journal of Social Affairs*, vol. 73 (Spring 2002).

8. The position of prime minister, held throughout the 1980s by Mir Hossein Mousavi (also Khamenei's cousin), was subsumed into the presidency after the eight-year war, thereby easing a quasi-parliamentary system into a quasi-presidential one.

9. The Guardian Council has been vetting the assembly's candidates since 1991, i.e., the institution's second elections, in conformity with Art. 99 of the revised constitution. In a way, it behaves like the upper chamber or senate in some countries.

10. For an overview, see Mehrzad Boroujerdi, “The Paradoxes of Politics in Postrevolutionary Iran,” in John L. Esposito and R. K. Ramazani, eds., *Iran at the Crossroads* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 13–27.

11. The other two legislative bodies are the Council of Guardians and the Expediency Council.

12. For a short synopsis of the Guardian Council’s beginnings, see Bahman Baktiari, *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran: The Institutionalization of Factional Politics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 60–63. In effect, the idea behind the Guardian Council goes as far back as the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11, when a proviso was incorporated introducing a committee of mojtaheds to ensure compatibility of legislation with the Shari’a, see Nikki R. Keddie, *Iran and the Muslim world: Resistance and Revolution* (New York: NYU Press, 1995), 102.

13. Jalil Roshandel, “Iran’s Foreign and Security Policies: How the Decision-making Process Evolved,” *Security Dialogue*, vol. 31, no.1 (March 2000): 108; Ruhollah Khomeini, *Velayat-e Faghih* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1979).

14. Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, whom Khomeini appointed as his successor in 1985, fell out of grace by dint of his growing criticism of the regime’s conduct and egregious practices. By Khomeini’s death in June 1989, as none of the other roughly six living grand ayatollahs of undisputed theological erudition—Kazem Shariatmadari, Abdollah Shirazi, Abulghassem Khoei, Sayyed Shihabeddin Najafi-Mar’ashi, Mohammad Reza Golpayegani, and Mohammad Ali Araki—either espoused revolutionary ideals or unequivocally acknowledged the legitimacy of *Velayat-e Faghih*, Khamenei assumed the Imam’s mantle as a compromise candidate and was confirmed by the Assembly of Experts. Overnight, he was promoted from the mid-ranking *Hojjat-ol-Eslam* to *Ayatollah*, and the post-war constitution was amended, among other things, to reflect the new criteria for succession.

15. Khamenei is thought to control nearly \$100 billion through an ostensibly charitable economic superfund known as Setad, Persian shorthand for the “Headquarters [for the Execution of the Imam’s Orders]”. This “revenue stream,” according to *Reuters*, “helps explain why Khamenei has not only held on for 24 years but also in some ways has more control than even his revered predecessor,” Steve Stecklow, Babak Dehghanpisheh, and Yeganeh Torbati, “Khamenei Controls Vast Financial Empire Built on Property Seizures,” *Reuters*, November 11, 2013; *Voice of America Persian*, November 14, 2013.

16. Shahram Chubin, *Iran’s National Security Policy: Capabilities, Intentions, and Impact* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 1994), 67.

17. Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran*, 41, 55.

18. Chubin, *Iran’s National Security Policy*, 68.

19. Walter Posch, “E Pluribus Unum: Decision-Makers and Decision-Making in Iran,” Brief no. 2, European Union Institute for Security Studies, August 8, 2008.

20. Posch, “E Pluribus Unum.”

21. Daniel Byman et al., “Iran’s Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND), 2001, 22.

22. Michael Rubin, “Deciphering Iranian Decision Making and Strategy Today,” Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2013.

23. Despite his moderate views, one of the first things that the then provisional government’s prime minister Mehdi Bazargan did was to sever ties with Israel. See Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations and Oxford University Press, 2009), 64–65; for Israel–Iran relations, see Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Kayhan Barzegar, “The Paradox of Iran’s Nuclear Consensus,” *World Policy Journal*, Fall 2009.

24. For an account of the changes in the government make-up under Rafsanjani’s presidency, see Anoushiravan Ehteshami, “After Khomeini: The Structure of Power in the Iranian Second Republic,” *Political Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1 (1991).

25. Amir Ali Nourbakhsh, “Iran’s Foreign Policy and Its Key Decision Makers,” *Tharwa Project*, April 18, 2005, available at <http://www.payvand.com/news/05/apr/1188.html>

26. Art. 110, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, available at [http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution\\_ch12.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution_ch12.php); Maleki, "Decision Making in Iran's Foreign Policy," 9.

27. Amir Ali Nourbakhsh, "Iran's Foreign Policy."

28. Ibid.

29. The reference is to the five-member Supreme Board for the Arbitration of Disputes and Regulation of Relations among the Three Branches of Government (*Hay'at-e Aali-ye Hall-e Ekhtelaf va Tanzim-e Ravabet-e Ghovva-ye Sehgame*), led by Iraqi-born Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi. Shahroudi has also been set up as a challenger to Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, and may in time also be one of the candidates for Iran's Supreme Leader. See Khamenei's announcement in this regard, available in Persian at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=16782>; and Kevjn Lim, "Tehran's Man in Baghdad", *The National Interest*, June 8, 2012.

30. For details on membership and parliamentary initiatives, see the committee's Majles website, available in Persian at: [http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/parliament\\_commission/national\\_sec\\_foreign\\_policy](http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/parliament_commission/national_sec_foreign_policy)

31. Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli*, 141.

32. Another Middle Eastern state with a heavy security orientation and a comparatively feeble foreign ministry, interestingly, is Israel.

33. "Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security: A Profile," *Federal Research Division*, Library of Congress, December 2012, 3; MOIS, also known by its Persian abbreviation as VEVAK, was remodeled from SAVAMA, the clone stem of the Shah's notorious SAVAK, in 1984.

34. Anthony H. Cordesman and Ahmed S. Hashim, *Iran: Dilemmas of Dual Containment* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), 67; Yonah Alexander and Milton Hoenig, *The New Iranian Leadership: Ahmadinejad, Terrorism, Nuclear Ambition, and the Middle East* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008), 21–22.

35. Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security, 19–21.

36. In this connection, an international wanted persons notice for Fallahian remains in place, see <http://www.interpol.int/News-and-media/News/2007/PR054>; Larry Rohter, "Argentine Judge Indicts 4 Iranian Officials in 1994 Bombing of Jewish Center," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2003.

37. For one perspective on the predominance of informal networks, see Abbas William Samii, "It's Who You Know: Informal Networks in Iran," in Caroline F. Ziemke et al., eds., *Leadership Dynamics and Nuclear decision-making in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Institute for Defense Analyses, June 2005), 29–48.

38. "Iran: What Does Ahmadinejad's Victory Mean?" *Middle East Briefing*, no. 18, International Crisis Group, August 4, 2005:11.

39. Byman et al., "Iran's Security Policy," 54.

40. Chubin, *Iran's National Security Policy*, 68.

41. Wilfried Buchta, "Who Rules Iran", 47–52; for an account of the Supreme Leaders' commissars to the IRGC in particular, see Ali Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards is Turning Theocracy into Military Dictatorship* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2013), ch. 5, 87–127.

42. David Ignatius, "Iran's Hard-Liners Resist Nuclear Deal," *Washington Post*, December 17, 2013; the other prominent newspaper whose editor is known to be a Supreme Leader appointee is the conservative *Ettelaat*.

43. The notion of commissars is hardly novel, especially in its Soviet variant. Persian history, for its part, yields other similar references, including the sultan's direct intelligence agents, or "postmasters," as treated in Nizam al-Mulk's Seljuk-era treatise, *Siyar al-Muluk* [The Book of Government], Hubert Darke, trans., 2nd ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), chapter 10.

44. Ch. 13, Art. 176, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

45. For comparison's sake, the erstwhile Supreme Defense Council consisted of the president, prime minister, minister of defense, chief of joint staff, chief of IRGC, and two clerical representatives.

46. See, for instance, Shmuel Bar, Rachel Machtiger, and Shmuel Bachar, "Iranian Nuclear Decision Making under Ahmadinejad" (Herzliyya, Israel: The Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya-Institute for Policy and Strategy, January 2008), 19.



47. Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli*; see in particular chapters 2 and 3.

48. See text of speech by then SNSC secretary Hojjatolislam Dr. Hassan Rouhani to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council, “*Farasuye Chalesh-Haye Iran va Azhans dar Parvande-ye Haste’i*” [Beyond the Challenges Facing Iran and the IAEA Concerning the Nuclear Dossier], *Rahbord*, September 30, 2005, p. 9, available at <http://lewis.armscontrolwonk.com/files/2012/08/Rahbord.pdf>. While the AEOI was in charge of the nuclear dossier until the nuclear controversy, its relatively restricted knowledge of international affairs prompted the transfer of nuclear negotiations to a more appropriate body; see Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli*, 58, 107.

49. Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli*, 456: “Jelogiri az be khatar oftadan-e amniyat-e melli az yek su va hefz-e tavana va tadavom-e barname-ye tolid-e sukht-e haste’i az su-ye digar, be onvan-e hadaf-e diplomasi . . .”

50. Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli*, 105–108; *Kayhan*, July 23, 2004.

51. See Rouhani, *Farasuye Chalesh-haye Iran va Azhans dar Parvande-ye Haste’i*, 11; Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli*, 110–113, 631, available at <http://lewis.armscontrolwonk.com/files/2012/08/Rahbord.pdf>.

52. Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli*, 110, 141; the names mentioned by Rouhani other than himself at that time included the Supreme Leader’s international affairs adviser (Ali Akbar Velayati), the Ministers of Foreign Affairs (Kamal Kharrazi) and Intelligence (Ali Younesi), Defense (Ali Shamkhani), AEOI Chief (Gholam-Reza Aghazade), Hosseini Tash, Ali Larijani, and Head of the Majles Commission for National Security Ala’eddin Boroujerdi.

53. In the early 1980s, these would have been the members of the now defunct Revolutionary Council.

54. Shahram Chubin, *Iran’s Nuclear Ambitions* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006), 39. In a later article, however, he cites the IRGC, alongside the AEOI, as a key nuclear stakeholder, see Chubin, “Decision-making for National Security: The Nuclear Case,” workshop paper, in Jerrold D. Green, Frederic Wehrey, and Charles Wolf, Jr., eds., *Understanding Iran* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009), 56, 60.

55. Nader Entessar, “Iran’s Nuclear Decision-Making Calculus,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2009): 31.

56. Shmuel Bar, “Iranian Defense Doctrine and Decision Making,” (Herzliya, Israel: The Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya–Institute for Policy and Strategy, 2004), 17.

57. Wilfried Buchta, “Who Rules Iran,” 67.

58. This faction was known as the Mojahedin-e Enghelab-e Eslami. See Kenneth Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam: Iran’s Revolutionary Guard* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993), 116; see also the open letter signed by 33 of the IRGC’s leading commanders in defense of Reza’i, after he was relieved of his command under President Khatami, “*Name-ye Kamtar Montasher Shode-ye Farmandehan-e Sepah be Agha Mohsen dar Hengam-e Khoruj az Sepah*,” text available at <http://goo.gl/eF6MPR>

59. Nourbakhsh, “Iran’s Foreign Policy.”

60. Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli*, 625–626: “Dar dowre-ye ma, magham-e moazam-e rahbari rahnama va kamelan poshtiban budand . . . [Vey] ham . . . farmudand ma hame ba ham dar zamine-ye haste’i tasmimat-e lazem ra gereftim va tasmim besurat-e jam’i bud”.

61. Chubin, “Decision-making,” 52; the SNSC tends to adopt “lowest common denominator positions that associate all groups with policy decisions,” Chubin, *Iran’s National Security Policy*, 70.

62. “Majles Deputy Questions Spending on Nuclear Power Plant,” *Mardom-Salari* (Tehran), October 5, 2005, available via *BBC Monitoring*, October 7, 2005.

63. “Reckoning within the Iranian Nation: A Report Addressing Common Misunderstandings of Iran post–June 12, 2009 elections” (Lund University Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2010), 13.

64. Rouhani, who stayed on as Khamenei’s other SNSC representative, recounts his “first and last working meeting with Ahmadinejad” in unflattering terms, and indeed cites the lack of mutual confidence on the part of the incoming president as a main reason he relinquished his post, Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli*, 595, 601; Larijani even went so far as to criticize Rouhani’s team for agreeing to suspend uranium enrichment for Western concessions, which he likened to “a rare pearl in return for

a lollipop,” Sadeq Saba, “Iran hardliner heads nuclear team,” *BBC*, August 8, 2005; Abbas William (Bill) Samii, “Iran: Nuclear Decision Making undergoes changes,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 9, 2005.

65. Saeed Jalili, “Dar Shoura-ye Aali-ye Amniyat-e Melli che Migzarad?” [What Happens in the Supreme National Security Council?], from Jalili’s personal website, 4, available at <http://goo.gl/4nHlkj>

66. Saeed Jalili, ‘Dar Shoura,’ 2.

67. “Siyasat-e Haste’i-ye Iran, Siyasat-e Peyvaste Mibashad ke Naghsh-e Dolatha-ye Mokhtalef Tanha dar Bayan va Sabk va Seyagh-e ejra-ye Siyasatha-st va na Bishtar,” Rouhani, *Amniyat-e Melli*, 579; Iran’s Minister of Industries at the time of the EU3 negotiations also said as much during the 77th session of the Supreme Nuclear Council (April 2005), cited in Rouhani, *ibid.*, 493.

68. Mehdi Khalaji, “President Rouhani and the IRGC,” (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy, January 8, 2014).

69. That session included then President Khamenei, Majles Speaker Rafsanjani, Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, IRGC Commander in Chief Reza’i, and a couple of other IRGC commanders, *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts ME/6995/A/3*, April 3, 1982.

70. Ali Hashem, “The ‘Admiral’ Heads Iran’s National Security Council,” *Al-Monitor*, September 11, 2013.

71. John Kifner, “Khomeini Organizes a New Armed Force,” *The New York Times*, May 7, 1979; see Art. 150 of the constitution; for an overview of its beginnings, see Nikola Schahgaldian, “The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1987), chapter 4.

72. Katzman has argued that while the Guards kept an eye on the *Artesh*, the army previously loyal to the Shah also held the IRGC’s instability in check, hence the institutional separation, see *The Warriors of Islam*, 30.

73. Daniel Byman et al., “Iran’s Security Policy’, 35; Chubin, *Iran’s National Security Policy*, 70.

74. Michael Connell, “Iranian Operational Decision Making: Case Studies from the Iran–Iraq War,” Center for Naval Analyses, July 2013, 30.

75. Cordesman and Hashim, *Iran*, 166; Byman et al., “Iran’s Security Policy,” 37.

76. Although Firouzabadi was a civilian vet by training, with no known longstanding military experience other than membership in the Basij (according to one source, he once headed the committee for the production of surface-to-surface missiles, see <http://www.hamshahrionline.ir/details/101019>), he has been close to Khamenei since 1972 when they reportedly first met; moreover, he is the only serving military commander with a seat in the Expediency Council.

77. Cordesman and Hashim, *Iran*, 167.

78. Formerly a directorate, IRGC Intelligence was in 2009 further upgraded to a full organization led by Hossein Ta’eb; see “Ertegha’ye Mo’avenat-e Ettela’at-e Sepah be Sazeman-e Ettela’at’, *Alef*, October 6, 2009, available at <http://alef.ir/vdcauanm.49nyu15kk4.html?54822>

79. Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam*, 35, 55.

80. Karim Sadjadpour, “Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran’s Most Powerful Leader,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009, vii, 8; see also Ali Alfoneh, “The Revolutionary Guards’ Role in Iranian politics,” American Enterprise Institute, September 1, 2008.

81. *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, March 17, 1982.

82. Mohsen Sazegara, “What Was Once a Revolutionary Guard is Now Just a Mafia,” *Forward*, March 16, 2007; “Sepah Bayad az Jariyanat-e Siyasi be Dur bashad” [The IRGC Must Stay Out of Politics], *Iranian Labour News Agency*, September 16, 2013, available at <http://www.ilna.ir/news/news.cfm?id=105093>

83. “Enteghad-e farmande-ye sepah az sokhanan-e akhira-e Zarif” [“IRGC commander criticizes Zarif’s recent comments”], *Tabnak News*, December 10, 2013, available at <http://goo.gl/tRnIL2>

84. The IRGC’s economic activities began during the period of post-war reconstruction, when its expertise in civil engineering was brought to bear on the country’s devastated infrastructure. In this context, Khatem ol-Anbia, currently headed by IRGC commander Ebadollah Abdollahi, was

founded in 1992. See also Emanuele Ottolenghi, *The Pasdaran: inside Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (Washington, DC: FDD Press, 2011), chapter 5.

85. Frederic Wehrey et al.: *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), xii.

86. Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam*, 13, 37–43.

87. Alternatively, since true power as it exists and is constitutionally enshrined (to an extent) lies not in elected officialdom but instead in the politico-clerical structure of which Khamenei is the foremost representative; should the IRGC attempt to overrule this structure, we might then perhaps speak of a “deep state” in its most sweeping sense.

88. Wilfried Buchta, “Who Rules Iran,” 70–71.

89. Will Fulton, “The IRGC Command Network: Formal Structures and Informal Influence,” American Enterprise Institute, July 2013.

90. Excluding the fluidity of command between May 1979 and September 1981, this in chronological order includes Mohsen Reza'i (1981–97), Yahya Rahim Safavi (1997–2007), and Mohammad Ali Ja'afari (2007–present).

91. After Firouzabadi, his deputy Maj-Gen. Gholam-Ali Rashid is technically the Islamic Republic's highest-ranking career soldier in active service.

92. Fulton, “The IRGC Command.”

93. For a survey of the IRGC leadership's rhetoric, see Will Fulton, “IRGC Messaging: Insight into a Revolutionary Regime,” American Enterprise Institute, May 20, 2013; Abbas Milani, “Khamenei's Assault on Iran,” *The National Interest*, July 28, 2011.

94. *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* (Tehran), July 19, 1999; for the full text in Persian, see *Aftab News*, June 11, 2005, available at <http://aftabnews.ir/vdci.zawct1ay5bc2t.html>

95. “Nazar-e Farmande-ye Sepah Darbare-ye Mokaleme-ye Rouhani va Obama” [IRGC Chief's Views Regarding Rouhani's Telephone Conversation with Obama], *Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA)*, September 30, 2013.

96. The IRGC, and specifically QF's geographical scope is reflected in Art. 154 of the constitution, according to which the Islamic Republic “supports the just struggles of the [oppressed] against the [arrogant powers] in every corner of the globe,” available at [http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution\\_ch10.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution_ch10.php); “Obligations of the Guards,” *Payam-e Enghelab*, March 19, 1980.

97. See Ali Alfoneh, “Iran's Secret Network: Major General Qassem Suleimani's Inner Circle,” American Enterprise Institute, March 2011. Although the ranks of Lieutenant General (*Sepahbod*) and General (*Arteshbod*) theoretically exist, the highest military rank in practice is Major General (*Sarlashgar*). Within the top echelons of the IRGC and the Joint Staff, this is known to be held by Hassan Firouzabadi, Mohsen Reza'i, Yahya Rahim Safavi, Mohammad Ali (Aziz) Ja'afari, Ghassem Soleimani, Gholam-Ali Rashid, Mohammad Bagheri, Mostafa Izadi and Ali Shamkhani (who also exceptionally carries an equivalent naval rank). *Artesh* Commander-in-Chief Ata'ollah Salehi also holds this rank. His influence, however, is dwarfed by that of his IRGC counterparts.

98. “Baraye Hezf-e Esra'il yek Bahane va 24 Soat Vaght Lazem Darim” [To remove Israel, We Only Need One Excuse and 24 hours], *Jahan News*, September 29, 2012, available at <http://jahannews.com/vdcbgzb5grhba8p.uiur.html>

99. Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 47.

100. Dexter Filkins, “The Shadow Commander,” *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2013; Kevjn Lim, “Iran's Secret Weapon,” *The National Interest*, August 9, 2012.

101. Matthew M. Frick, “Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps: An Open Source Analysis,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 49 (April 2008): 124.

102. This was noted as early as 1987 by Schahgaldian, see “The Iranian Military,” vii, 75–6.

103. Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam*, 14.

104. Note that “elected” here includes those appointed by elected officials such as the president. Likewise, Khamenei is *officially* elected by the Assembly of Experts.

105. See Muhammad Sahimi, “The IRGC Strategic Brain Trust—Part 1,” *Tehran Bureau*, August 1, 2012, available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2012/08/the-guards-strategic-brain-trust-part-1-ghasem-soleimani-and-ahmad-vahidi.html>

106. While they were not members as such, both Rafsanjani and Khamenei consecutively served as IRGC supervisor (later changed to Khomeini’s representative to the IRGC) following Ayatollah Hassan Lahuti’s removal in October 1979.

107. Mohammad Reza Tajik noted that “in modern-day Iran, the consolidation of multiple and varied ‘personal structures’ has led to the proliferation of parallel, unaccountable and inefficient centers of power, most of which are in mutual competition, conflict and disagreement” [*Dar Iran-e Emruz, Sheklgiri ‘Sakhtarha-ye Shakhshi’-ye Mota’added va Motanavve’, Monjar be Takassor-e Marakez-e Ghodrat-e Movazi, Gheyr-e Mas’ul va na-Karumad Shode ke Aghlab dar hal-e Raghbat, Keshmakesh va ta’aroz ba Yekdigar Hastand*], cited in Farzad Poursaeed, “Sakhtar va Ravand-e Tasmimgiri,” 330.

108. Chubin, *Iran’s National Security Policy*, 73.

109. Hamid Ahmadi, “The Dilemma of National Interest,” 32.

**Kejvn Lim** (kevjnlm@gmail.com) is a researcher focusing on foreign policy and security in the wider Middle East and especially Iran. He is also an analyst with Open Briefing: The Civil Society Intelligence Agency and consults on developments in the wider Middle East (Middle East, North Africa, Persian Gulf, Central Asia), where he has been based for nearly a decade.