Who Will Shield the Imams? Regime Protection in Iran and the Middle East

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The Iranian protest wave in the summer of 2018 and the ongoing sporadic strikes have been persistent reminders of the importance of regime protection. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran has not been free of societal upheavals although they never posed a serious threat to the regime's survival. That they did not can be explained by the opposition's shortcomings and, more convincingly, the unhesitating and brutal crackdown of the regime's security forces. Still, not all parts of Iran's coercive apparatus are equally devoted to the imams' conservative rule. Under what conditions would military forces split from the government? What useful lessons can be drawn from Iran's own history and the examples of the Arab Spring upheavals?

This essay argues that the Tehran regime enjoys the strong support of its capable Revolutionary Guard and need not fear a coup or major insurrection from within its coercive apparatus. The Iranian political elites' unbending attitude toward societal protests suggests that the push for substantive liberalization will be the result of gradual change within the regime rather than revolutionary upheaval.

ARMIES AND DOMESTIC REVOLTS

In many cases a military's behavior in domestic contingencies is predictable *if* we know enough about the sociopolitical environment within which an army operates, the state it is supposed to serve, and the external context. We cannot possibly know every issue that pertains to how decision makers reach their ruling, but we do know that no revolution has ever triumphed without at least the tacit support of the army.[1] If an army uses all the resources at its disposal, an uprising cannot succeed.

Military decision makers draw on four separate domains of inputs as they formulate their response to a revolution: the military establishment, the state, society and the external environment. A comprehensive study of dozens of modern uprisings isolated several of these variables that appear to have the most explanatory power.[2]

Internal Cohesion

An internally unified military will most probably act in unison to either support the regime or not; it is not going to splinter or experience mass defections. The military's internal cohesion is a composite of several factors having to do with potential cleavages:

- Ethno-religious, tribal and regional splits. Conscript armies tend to represent a cross-section of a country's population and, in multiethnic and multireligious states, are often affected by the rifts in society at large.
- Generational divisions (senior vs. junior officers). Perspectives vary with age. Junior officers tend to be more prone to radicalism, more liable to support revolutionary action, less invested in the status quo, and thus more likely to side with rebellions than are their more senior colleagues.
- Divisions between officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs)/privates. Enlisted men tend to come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, have less schooling, lower salaries, and fewer benefits than officers. If treated poorly, their loyalty is likely to be questionable.
- Fractures between elite and regular forces. Many authoritarian regimes set up elite units or special branches of service to complement, compete with, and keep a check on the regular military. These entities are a source of professional competition, and their presence is a signal of the rulers' lack of confidence in the latter's reliability.
- Splits among the army, other services and security-sector entities. Different branches develop internal loyalties as ways of building an *esprit de corps* essential to military success. Inter-service antagonisms may come into play when one branch — often the army — becomes involved in politics while others remain on the sidelines.[3]

Professionals versus Conscripts

One of the key distinctions of an army is whether it depends on mandatory conscription or volunteers. An army made up enlistees is a force of self-selected young men and women who tend to embrace the military's ethos, discipline, regimented life, and conservative values. Draftees, on the other hand, are supposed to represent a wide cross-section of society. They will be far more likely to sympathize with a broad-based revolutionary movement, while volunteers will probably favor whatever stance their senior officers take.

Management of the Military

If the regime treats the armed forces well, the generals are likely to stand by it, come a day of revolution. There are several components of the "treatment" in question.

- Taking care of the material welfare of personnel. Does the state provide its soldiers — especially its professional officers, NCOs and career enlistees — with decent salaries and perquisites? Soldiers who believe they are appreciated, are more likely to stick with the regime.
- Taking care of the army. Does the state equip the armed forces adequately with bases, weapons, fuel, spare parts and other necessities for the execution of their mission? If so, the generals will be more likely to stand by it.
- Appropriate missions. Does the state involve the military in unwise and unpopular missions? Regimes that habitually order the military to discharge police functions or execute orders of questionable legality tend to lose their generals' respect and loyalty.
- The generals' professional autonomy and decision-making authority. Does the state meddle in professional military matters such as training and routine promotions? Military elites that are not used to making professional decisions and whose civilian masters are always look-

ing over their shoulders may be hesitant to take decisive action.
- Ambiguous orders to the armed forces during uprisings. At what point should the military get involved and in what manner? Should it use heavy weapons and live ammunition against demonstrators or restrict itself to non-lethal police tactics? Generals who receive clear-cut directives from resolute political leaders will respond differently from generals who get crossed signals, uncertain objectives, or no orders at all.

Generals' Perception of Regime Legitimacy

What do officers in the senior echelons of the military think of the political rulers? Military elites are more likely to back a regime they believe to be robust and popular than one that looks weak and unpopular. The larger a demonstration, the more likely it is that the regular army — rather than the police — will be deployed. Are the protesters drawn from a wide spectrum of society? A crowd of radical young men is more likely to be met with bullets than one that includes various ages representing a spectrum of political views. The more forceful the protests, the more likely it is that soldiers will respond with violence.

In most contexts, the key external variable is the possibility that foreign power(s) might intervene. There are two fundamental questions for generals to ponder: First, is there a realistic potential for foreign intervention at all? Second, on which side are forces from abroad expected to intervene: the regime's or the rebels' (i.e., Bahrain vs. Libya in 2011)?

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Let us take a brief look at three cases: the Iranian Revolution and the recent upheavals in Tunisia and Syria, in view of the variables outlined above. I chose recent Middle Eastern examples that display a variety of outcomes.[4]

Iran, 1978-79

The military's lack of internal cohesion goes a long way in explaining the outcome of Iran's Islamic Revolution. The deep divide between officers and NCOs/soldiers robbed the leadership of an effective army to fight the insurrection. The former enjoyed high pay and prestige and were increasingly secular, while the latter were poor, usually from low socioeconomic backgrounds, deeply religious and thus receptive to Khomeini's messages. This was a conscript army manned by draftees who were forced to serve, commanded by a ruler, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who was oblivious to his people's plight and led by officers who shared little of their soldiers' way of life, values and religious fervor. No wonder the soldiers deserted in ever-growing numbers as the revolution went on. In terms of the regime's treatment of the military, one factor was paramount: the generals' lack of authority to make decisions. They were hamstrung by a paranoid shah who personally approved all promotions above the rank of major (in a military of over 400,000), prohibited even top generals to travel without his permission, rotated commanders frequently and unnecessarily, and regarded their loyalty to him as the key basis for advancement.[5]

The generals' view of regime legitimacy carried little weight here. For the vast majority this was simply not an issue. However, the number, make-up, and nature of the protesters was a critical factor. The crowds were huge, included a virtual cross section of society, and were generally peaceful.[6] The potential for foreign inva-

sion was not a serious consideration here, but the regime's direction to the military had decisive influence. In this respect, the Iranian case is unusual. Most government leaders do not display the unpredictable behavior of the shah, who could never quite make up his mind whether he wanted the demonstrations suppressed (and in what manner) or allowed to continue. Societal factors such as fraternization also played an important role in neutralizing thousands of conscripts and NCOs. The most revealing external variable affecting the outcome of the Iranian revolution was the close relationship that Iranian commanders had with their U.S. colleagues and, more broadly, that the regime maintained with the government.

The inaction of the generals and the related institutional paralysis would have been difficult to predict, certainly at the early stages of the uprising, when the military could have been energized with relatively little effort. But there were two "unknown unknowns" in the equation: the shah's ambivalence and his grave illness. He had grown increasingly lethargic and withdrawn as the disease progressed.[7] In sum, Iran's military split apart, calling attention to the importance of studying not just the behavior of the elites but that of the soldiers. Without their active participation and loyal service, the armed forces are useless.

Tunisia, 2010-11

The Tunisian army is quite unusual in the Middle East. Its civilian masters have politically marginalized it, even withholding from its members the right to vote. And, unlike most other North African armies, Tunisia's had never even attempted a coup, had never been a nation-building instrument, and had never joined in economic and development schemes. Indeed, the army has often been described as *la grande muette* (the big silent one) in Tunisian politics. The army's turn against Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's deeply corrupt and widely unpopular regime should have been easy to predict.[8]

Tunisia's army has been remarkably free of internal divisions and widely considered by Tunisians as a *national* institution. Its non-professional manpower is based on mandatory conscription, in contrast to the Presidential Guard and the police. The military's institutional rivals — the various internal security organizations under the control of the Ministry of Interior — have been better funded and highly privileged. Undistracted by politics, underfunded and poorly equipped, the Tunisian military nevertheless came to be regarded as one of the Arab world's most professional forces. Ben Ali allowed his militias to attack demonstrators and loot with impunity, enraging the army, whose personnel maintained its professionalism throughout the crisis.[9] When Ben Ali had to turn to the soldiers as a last resort — the other security forces were incapable of suppressing the massive demonstrations — he was doomed. The army's commander, General Rachid Ammar, persuaded the strongman to leave and told the demonstrators: "The army is the guarantor of the revolution."[10] The military personnel despised the regime that had mistreated and humiliated them for decades; not surprisingly, Tunisians did not consider it a part of Ben Ali's coercive apparatus.[11] The demonstrations were large and peaceful and the revolution seemed widely popular. In terms of Arab Spring surprises, only the Bahrain Defence Forces' loyalty to the royal family was less difficult to foresee than the Tunisian army's refusal to come to the aid of the Ben Ali regime.[12]

Syria, 2011-

Predicting that Syrian army elites and religious minorities would stick by the regime was not particularly challenging.[13] Here, the sectarian composition of the armed forces was the most important factor. Even though tens of thousands of primarily Sunni conscripts and mostly lower-level officers deserted or joined the uprising, the top brass and most of the officer corps have continued to side with the regime.[14]

The Syrian leadership, perhaps more than that of any other Arab republic, has been keenly aware of threats to topple it. Between 1949 and 1970, at least 10 coups d'état were mounted in Damascus, often with military factions fighting one another. President Bashar al-Assad's father, former President Hafez al-Assad, a former air-force general, was a participant in no less than three of them (1962, 1966, 1970) and realized the necessity of coup-proofing his regime.[15] Once in power, Assad made the military his own, managed to unify the officers corps, and created a number of internal-security organizations — subordinated directly to him — that spied on each other and on the regular armed forces in an attempt to guarantee loyalty. The Assads were preparing for a popular insurrection all their political lives.

The Syrian officer corps had been dominated by the minority Alawites (the Assads' sect) since at least 1955, when they took over the military section of the Baath Party.[16] In 2011, roughly four-fifths of the officers, as well as all the commanders of the intelligence agencies, were Alawite. The sect does not staff the entire officer corps, of course, but Alawites hold virtually all sensitive and powerful positions. There are nearly a dozen paramilitary forces in the country, all of them led by Assad-family confidants and consisting of highly motivated and loyal fighters. For instance, although most Syrian air-force pilots were Sunni, the air-defense force that controlled logistics and communication was mainly Alawite; this prevented the pilots from making a play for power. Further, divisions that consisted mainly of drafted Sunni soldiers have either diminished in size as conscripts defected or have not been deployed to quell the uprising. Instead, the regime has increasingly turned to the army's third and fourth divisions, special forces and irregulars, often called *shabiha*, which are heavily Alawite or belong to other minorities sympathetic to the regime.[17]

As in most other authoritarian states, the Syrian military is also heavily indoctrinated; loyalty to the regime often outweighs professional merit as a promotion criterion.[18] The top brass consider the rule of Assad and the Baath Party entirely legitimate, well aware that they can expect the worst should the opposition eventually come out on top. Moreover, the army may be confident, as some commentators are, that the insurrection does not represent the popular will. According to some experts, the majority of Syrians remained ambivalent about or opposed to the rebellion.[19] In other words, Alawites — and other supporters of Assad's rule — would have little to gain and much to lose if the government were toppled. Consequently, they have stayed in the fight to the bitter end, as they have declared repeatedly.

In terms of the international context, although Syria has plenty of enemies in the region, some of whom have helped the rebels, it is by no means a pariah state like, for instance, Qaddafi's Libya. Its close relationship with Hezbollah's military arm in Lebanon has yielded significant assistance. And Syria's alliance with Iran may

be the most enduring in the Middle East. Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and its elite Qods Force have trained and fought with Syrian soldiers. Both Hezbollah and the Revolutionary Guard have vowed to continue to fight against the rebels in Syria even if Assad is overthrown. Furthermore, the regime has had a decades-long friendship with Russia, which, along with Iran, has continued to supply it with armaments — including sophisticated new missile systems — as well as air support and mercenaries.[20]

WHO WILL PROTECT IRAN'S REGIME?

In late December 2017, protests started in Iran's second-most-populous city, Mashhad. In the following days, sporadic protests spread around the country and increasingly appeared to be an organized challenge — mainly on social media — to the rule of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.[21] Security personnel (primarily the Basij paramilitary force along with local police) brutally suppressed the demonstrations, which started out as complaints about the economic situation. At least 25 protesters were killed and hundreds were arrested.[22] Soon, however, the protests — the largest since 2009 — acquired an anti-regime character, and they flared up again in late June 2018. Some participants were chanting "Death to the dictator!" (referring to Khamenei) and "No to Gaza, no to Lebanon, my life is for Iran." They called for an end to Iran's involvement in Syria, declaring, "Our enemy is here, they lie when they say the U.S. is our enemy!"

Perhaps even more important, the protesters also asked the security troops to join them.[23] Fraternization between protesters and those charged with suppressing them is a feature of many successful revolutions, including, of course, that of Iran in 1979. What are the chances of an upheaval in contemporary Iran? And which alternative military-security forces could Khamenei's regime rely on to suppress a potential massive uprising — the 2018 protests generally did not mobilize more than 10-15,000 people — once it exhausted the capabilities of the regular police force?

The Iranian armed forces are bifurcated, composed of the regular military (Artesh) and the separate Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, "the Guard"), known as the Sepah (Corps) or, more commonly, the Pasdaran (Guardians).[24] Artesh is the far larger force, comprised of 130,000 professional officers and NCOs and 220,000 conscripts. The latter are drafted for a 21-month duty, which many consider a waste of time, though there is some variation depending on location and type of service.[25] The army may be viewed as more or less representative of society at large. Tehran has skimped on conventional military power in favor of its missile program and irregular warfare. As a result, Artesh is kitted out mostly with obsolete weapons and equipment.[26] Although some experts consider it a *more* professional force than the IRGC,[27] the regular army is certainly the stepchild of the military establishment. It would be a force of last resort to deploy against civilians. The soldiers' morale and commitment to the regime should not be taken for granted, nor should their willingness to shoot friends and relatives participating in protests. Moreover, the bulk of regular-army units have been stationed near Iran's borders — especially the border with Iraq — and far from population centers. In any event, there is evidence that Artesh has resisted orders in the past to take part in

domestic-repression operations.[28] Experts agree that, even if the Guard failed to suppress domestic protesters, "it is unlikely the regular military will help."[29]

The obvious choice of force to use in a domestic contingency is the IRGC, whose manpower is estimated at 130,000. This organization is much more than simply a part of Iran's coercive apparatus. It is, to use the apt title of a recent book, "the vanguard of the imam," Iran's supreme leader, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979-89), and his successor, Ali Khamenei.[30] The IRGC was called to life by Khomeini on April 22, 1979, after the Islamic Revolution had succeeded, to serve as a counterweight to the army. The Constitution charged it with the "role of guarding the Revolution and its achievements," but ultimately did not restrict its functions.[31] The Guard is considered an elite force. About 50,000 of its members are conscripts who are carefully selected and possess higher skill levels and share more orthodox ideological convictions than their Artesh counterparts.[32]

Virtually all IRGC cadres come from the all-volunteer Basij militia, the Basic Resistance Force. Its official name is "The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed," and it "serves as a means of indoctrination, a morality police, and a force for suppressing protests."[33] Basij members usually hail from lower socioeconomic strata and conservative religious families. For young male supporters of the regime, service in the Pasdaran is both an honor and an experience that may well pay them future dividends. The IRGC is a complete military force with its own army, air force, navy and air defense.

Traditionally, the IRGC has maintained exceedingly close relations with the supreme leader, who appoints the Guard's head and has a direct link to the organization. In addition, the Pasdaran's very existence is tied to the revolution, "so loyalty to the Supreme Leader is necessary to maintain its constitutional status."[34] Khomeini and his successor, Khamenei, remained staunch representatives of the conservative ideological and political line. The IRGC shares this orientation, in stark contrast to its occasionally difficult relations with moderately reformist presidents, such as Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-97) and Hassan Rouhani (2013-). In the last four decades, especially since the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-13), a former Pasdaran member himself, the IRGC has considerably expanded its profile and influence to become an ever-more powerful military, political and economic entity.[35] Since the mid-2000s, the number of former guards in parliament and in the cabinet have drastically increased. In fact, one might say that there is a quasi-symbiotic relationship between the IRGC and conservative political elites in Tehran.[36] But, as the commander-in-chief of the Guard, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, acknowledged: the Pasdaran's primary mission was to fight "internal threats" and "attempts at a velvet revolution."[37]

The IRGC also controls or provides guidance for a number of paramilitary organizations, the most important of which in the domestic context is the Basij militia.[38] Founded by Khomeini in 1980 as a youth paramilitary organization, it was at first nominally independent but subordinated to the Guard in the following year; since 1989, it has formed the IRGC's fifth branch. In 2007, General Jafari imposed formal Pasdaran control over the Basij "in order to better fight internal enemies." In 2016, Khamenei appointed a decorated veteran of the Iran-Iraq War, Brigadier

General Gholamhossein Gheibparvar, to command the Basij,[39] which has become even more integrated into the IRGC since the latter's 2008 restructuring. According to state propaganda, the Basij claims as many as 24 million members (in a population of approximately 80 million); in reality, its membership is probably closer to five million.[40] There are Basij units in most sectors of society, organized in universities, factories, offices and administrative units.

The IRGC also enjoys a powerful position as a domestic intelligence agency. Its security division, *Sazman-e Harassat,* "functions much like a regular internal security and intelligence office" collecting information on the opposition and separatists, arresting individuals and incarcerating them in prisons under its control.[41] The Pasdaran oversees the small (no more than several-thousand) elite Qods (Jerusalem) force, to export the revolution in conflicts abroad.[42] Particularly since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the IRGC has become more and more of an expeditionary force. For instance, of the 561 IRGC combat fatalities in Syria between January 2012 and November 2018 less than 10 percent (55) were Qods members; the rest belonged to other Pasdaran branches.[43] One wonders to what if any extent the increasing foreign engagement of the IRGC will affect its domestic functions. It is widely unpopular among ordinary Iranians; in early December 2018, protesting workers chanted "Palestine and Syria are the root of our problems."[44] The IRGC also controls a number of vigilante groups, the Ansar-e Hezbollah (Partisans of the Party of God) being the most important. Relations between the IRGC and the government were actually quite tense during the Hashemi and Khatami era (until about 2005), when the Guard and the Basij did not have the confidence to be openly involved in politics.[45]

What can we learn from the actions of the IRGC and the Basij in suppressing two post-revolution challenges? In the summer of 1999, following the regime's shutdown of a liberal newspaper, protests broke out at the University of Tehran that soon spread to colleges and universities across Iran. Although initially some senior clerics and government officials expressed sympathy with the demonstrators, the Guard responded with an open letter, signed by 24 senior Pasdaran commanders, warning about "anarchy" and signaling zero tolerance for social dissent. The inevitable crackdown, mainly executed by the Basij and Ansar-e Hezbollah, lasted through Khatami's tenure (2005) and included the beating, arrest and torture of many students, some of whom simply disappeared. Long-term oppressive measures included the vetoing of progressive laws enacted by parliament and an overall "conservative ascendancy and intensified repression" that strengthened the IRGC's standing in political institutions.[46]

In 2009, President Ahmadinejad was challenged for re-election by two prominent politicians, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi. When Ahmadinejad won, as a result of electoral fraud, the resulting Green (protest) Movement — named for Mousavi's adopted color — posed a major test for the conservative establishment. But, like the student demonstrations a decade earlier, it failed; its two leaders were unable to mobilize enough support among the population. Unlike the students, Mousavi and Karroubi supported the institutional foundations of the Islamic Republic; they were moderates who wanted to reform the system, not radically change it.[47] Once again, the riot police and the Basij beat up

and arrested protesters; some were killed in street battles or shot by sharpshooters from rooftops. Meanwhile, the regime closed down opposition organizations and put their politicians on trial. Many, including both Mousavi and Karroubi, were placed under long-term house arrest.[48] The persecution of identified opposition activists lasted until the end of 2010.

What are the takeaways from the anti-regime demonstrations of December 2017/January 2018, other than that — despite the contrary views of some experts — Iranians continue to be willing to challenge the regime, even against terrible odds?[49] The protesters this time came not just from the cities but also from rural areas; they do not seem to have a clear leadership; and the spontaneous combustion of the demonstrations harkens back to the 2011 Arab Spring upheavals. Although by early January 2018 at least 20 protesters had been killed and hundreds arrested — mainly by riot police and local Basij detachments using tear gas, water cannons and small arms — the regime did not feel sufficiently threatened to deploy mainstream IRGC units.[50] In June 2018, renewed protests took place in Tehran emanating from the bazaar. The largest demonstrations in the capital since 2012, they seemed to be primarily motivated by economic grievances.[51] Then, in early July, people took to the streets in the southwestern city of Borazjan to protest severe water shortages and the regime's handling of fundamental economic and infrastructural issues.[52] All of these rallies were suppressed by police forces in conjunction with local Basij units. In August, Basij commander Gheibparvar publicly urged the government to use the untapped capacity of his organization to alleviate economic problems throughout the country.[53]

In the foreseeable future, the IRGC and its subsidiaries will, in all likelihood, unhesitatingly suppress any protest, let alone a large-scale movement threatening the state. There have been no reports of reluctance, much less aversion, by any Pasdaran or Basij personnel administering brutal crackdowns. While Iran's security apparatus may not be entirely cohesive — the regime may well doubt the regular army's reliability in domestic repression — there seem to be few qualms about the ability and willingness of the IRGC and the organizations it controls.[54] Those who man them appear to be steadfast supporters not only of the regime but of the conservative political ideology symbolized by the supreme leader. The regime's uncompromising approach to social upheaval suggests that the impetus for effective liberalization will come not from revolution but from gradual changes inside the regime.

[1] For insightful comments I am grateful to Professor Saeid Golkar. On this point, see, for instance, Katherine Chorley, *Armies and the Art of Revolution* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943), 243; and D. E. H. Russell, *Rebellion, Revolution, and Armed Force* (London: Academic Press, 1974), 3.

[2] For the entire set of variables affecting the military's stance vis-à-vis domestic revolutions, see Zoltan Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 24-39.

[3] See Zoltan Barany, *The Soldier and the Changing State: Building Democratic Armies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 131-132.

[4] For other case studies, see Barany, *The Soldier and the Changing State*; and idem., *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*.

[5] See Nader Entessar, "Military and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *Post-Revolutionary Iran*, eds.

by Hooshang Amirahmadi and Manoucher Parvin (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988), 57-58; and Hooshmand Mirfakhraei, *Imperial Iranian Armed Forces and the Revolution of 1978-1979*, PhD diss., SUNY at Buffalo, 1984, 237, 276-277.

[6] A far larger proportion of the population participated in the Iranian Revolution (>10%) than in the French (~2%) or the Bolshevik (<1%) revolutions. See Charles Kurzman, *Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), vii.

[7] Author's interview with an associate of the shah who was in weekly personal contact with him during this period (Paris, December 2011). According to Mirfakhraei (op. cit., 310), even the shah's wife was unaware that her husband was suffering from lymphomatous cancer. Robert Jervis claims — in *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 31 — that the CIA also knew nothing of the shah's illness.

[8] In fact, President Obama publicly criticized the U.S. intelligence community for its inability to foresee this. See Mark Mazzetti, "Obama Said to Fault Spy Agencies' Mideast Forecasting," *New York Times*, 4 February 2011.

[9] For a useful summary, see Risa Brooks, "Abandoned by the Palace: Why the Tunisian Military Defected from the Ben Ali Regime in January 2011," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 2 (2013): 205-220.

[10] See "Tunisie: L'armée qui a lâché Ben Ali," *Le Monde*, January 16, 2011.

[11] Author's interviews with retired senior army officers, Tunis, December 2011.

[12] See, for instance, Sharon Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 3 (2013): 337-349.

[13] For three explanations of this outcome, see Zoltan Barany, "General Failure in Syria: Without the Officers' Support, the Insurgents Can't Win," *Foreign Affairs*, July 17, 2013; Kamal Alam, "Why Assad's Army Has Not Defected," *National Interest*, February 12, 2016; and Rashad Al Kattan, "Decisive Military Defections in Syria: A Case of Wishful Thinking," *War on the Rocks*, September 5, 2016.

[14] Kheder Khaddour, "Assad's Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal," *Diwan* (Carnegie Middle East Center), November 4, 2015.

[15] See Amos Perlmutter, "From Obscurity to Rule: The Syrian Army and the Bath Party," *Western Political Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1969): 827-45.

[16] See Michael Kerr and Craig Larkin, eds., *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith, and Politics in the Levant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). For an earlier assessment, see Alisdair Drysdale, "Ethnicity in the Syrian Officer Corps: A Conceptualization," *Civilisations* 29, no. 3/4 (1979): 359-74.

[17] Y.A. H. Salih, "The Syrian Shabiha and Their State," Heinrich-Böll Stiftung, Middle East Office, 2012; and Adam Alquist, "Pour une nouvelle conception de la Syrie: le renversement de l'image de l'État et du régime," *Maghreb-Machrek*, no. 213 (2012/13): 37-49.

[18] See Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 551.

[19] Musa Al-Gharbi, "Syria Contextualized: The Numbers Game," *Middle East Policy* 20, no. 1 (2013): 56-67.

[20] Neil Hauer, "Russia's Mercenary Debacle in Syria," *Foreign Affairs*, February 26, 2018.

[21] Sheera Frenkel, "Iranian Authorities Block Access to Social Media Tools," *New York Times*, January 2, 2018. The Iranian opposition relied heavily on social media during the 2009 Green Movement protests. See Philipp S. Mueller and Sophie van Huellen, "A Revolution in 140 Characters? Reflecting on the Role of Social Networking Technologies in the 2009 Iranian Post-Election Protests," *Policy & Internet* 4, nos. 3-4 (2012): 184-205.

[22] See, for instance, "Iran: le bilan officiel des manifestations monte à 15 morts," *Le Monde*, January 14, 2018.

[23] See Raman Ghavami (@Raman_Ghavami), Twitter, June 25, 2018,

[24] For an excellent history of Iran's post-1979 military, see Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Georgetown University Press, 2009), 242-326.

[25] *The Military Balance 2018* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018), 334.

[26] Jonathan Speyer, "Iran's Response: The 'Strategy of Tension'," *Jerusalem Post*, June 1, 2018. For a comprehensive and comparative analysis, see Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Arab-US Strategic Partnership and the Changing Security Balance in the Gulf* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2015).

[27] I owe this insight to Saeid Golkar (email communication, October 22, 2018).

[28] Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran's Military Forces in Transition* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 93-99, 135.

[29] Sean Burns, *Revolts and the Military in the Arab Spring: Popular Uprisings and the Politics of Repression* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 283.
[30] Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[31] Article 150 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. See, also, Kenneth Katzman, *Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993), 23.
[32] Elliot Hen-Tov and Nathan Gonzalez, "The Militarization of Post-Khomeini Iran: Praetorianism 2.0," *Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2011, 47.
[33] Burns, *Revolts and the Military*, 277. See, also, Saeid Golkar, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
[34] Golkar, op. cit., 49.
[35] See, for instance, Saeid Golkar, "The Paramilitarization of the Economy: The Case of Iran's Basij Militia," *Armed Forces & Society* 38, no. 4 (2012): 625-48; Hesam Forozan and Afshin Shahi, "The Military and the State in Iran: The Economic Rise of the Revolutionary Guards," *Middle East Journal* 71, no. 1 (2017): 67-85; and Bayram Sinkaya, *The Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics: Elites and Shifting Relations* (Routledge, 2017).
[36] See, for instance, M. Mahtab Alam Rizvi, "Evaluating the Political and Economic Role of the IRGC," *Strategic Analysis* 36, no. 4 (2012): 584-596; Hen-Tov and Gonzalez, "The Militarization," 51; Katzman, *Warriors*, 124; and Ostovar, *Vanguard*, 165-175.
[37] See Ali Alfoneh, "What Do Structural Changes in the Revolutionary Guards Mean?" *AEI Outlook Series*, no. 7, September 2008.
[38] For a helpful organizational chart of the IRGC, see Saeid Golkar, *The Supreme Leader and the Guard: Civil-Military Relations and Regime Survival in Iran* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2019), Policy Note #58, 4.
[39] Ali Alfoneh, "The Revolutionary Guards' Role in Iranian Politics," *Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (2008): 3-14.
[40] Golkar, *Captive Society*, 52.
[41] Frederic Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009), 31.
[42] For a brief analysis, see Michael Wigginton et al., "Al-Qods Force: Iran's Weapon of Choice to Export Terrorism," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 10, no. 2 (2015), 153-165.
[43] See Ali Alfoneh, "The War in Syria is Transforming the IRGC into an Expeditionary Force," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, December 5, 2018.
[44] See https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran_ahwaz_workers_steel_factory/29636678.html.
[45] I am indebted to Saeid Golkar for this point. See also Naysan Rafati, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards: Readying Strength," *Survival* 59, no. 2 (2017): 167-76.
[46] See Charles Kurzman, "Student Protest and the Stability of Gridlock in Khatami's Iran," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 1 (2001): 38-47; and Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 179-205.
[47] M. Schramm and A. M. Tabatabai, "Why Regime Change in Iran Wouldn't Work," *Foreign Affairs*, July 20, 2017.
[48] See Parsa, *Democracy in Iran*, 206-264.
[49] See Asef Bayat, "The Fire that Fueled the Iranian Protests," *Atlantic*, January 27, 2018; and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "What Washington Can Learn from the Iran Protests," *Foreign Affairs*, February 5, 2018.
[50] Zack Beauchamp, "The Massive New Protests in Iran, Explained," *Vox*, January 3, 2018. For a more extensive analysis, see Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).
[51] "Iran Economic Protests Shut Tehran's Grand Bazaar," BBC News, June 25, 2018.
[52] See "More Protests over Water Shortages Break Out in Iran," National Council of Resistance of Iran, July 10, 2018, see https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-protests, accessed on July 14, 2018.
[53] "Cmdr. Urges Government to Use Basij Capacities to Solve Problems," Iran Project, August 26, 2018.
[54] For an analysis of IRGC's operations abroad, see Amir Toumaj, "Death of a General: What Shaban Nasri Revelas about Iran's Secretive Qods Force," *War on the Rocks*, March 23, 2018.