

Iran: The Revolutionary Guards' Role in Elections

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OE Watch Commentary

While Iranian law charges the regular Iranian military, often called the Artesh (the Persian word for Army), with territorial defense, the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is broader. The IRGC's founding statutes charge it with defense of the revolution, meaning it combats enemies both foreign and domestic. It is against this backdrop that the *Holy Defense News Agency*, the official agency of the Iranian Defense Ministry, outlines the role and function of the IRGC in the forthcoming June 2021 presidential and local elections.

The excerpt is especially interesting because it illustrates the IRGC's self-perception of its role and purpose: Its primary reason to exist remains battling the influence of outside powers and the existing world order. This focus can be seen within official Iranian discourse, in which "arrogance" primarily refers to the United States. Support for the "oppressed" is the rationale for the IRGC's support for insurgencies and terrorist groups. The enumeration of the IRGC's principles also emphasizes its self-conception as representative of all elements of Iranian society. Fulfilling this goal remains elusive, however, in reality given the class differences that permeate Iranian society. While the IRGC is elite, it is traditionally more working class than intellectual or cosmopolitan. That it must aspire to be broad-based is a subtle acknowledgement both that it continues to fall short and that, in the eyes of some hardliners, those who fall outside its spectrum are somehow outcasts within proper Iranian society.

The IRGC's role in promoting "maximum and conscious

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participation” highlights the importance Iran continues to place on voter participation and its sensitivity to the notion that low participation would reflect a lack of popular legitimacy to the regime. How the IRGC will augment voter participation, however, is unclear.



Gholamhossein Gheibparvar, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' chief security official and commander of the Imam Ali Central Security Headquarters (above), has pledged that the Guards would secure Iran's forthcoming elections.

Source: Tasnim News Agency, <https://farsi.iranbriefing.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/1398120210102811119737154.jpg>

Traditionally, voter turnout is highest in Tehran. Often, the regime appears to sequester foreign journalists in the capital in order to prevent them from reporting low turnout in peripheral provinces such as Kordestan and Sistan va Balochistan. Within these provinces, security forces including the IRGC prohibit demonstrations. The government also seeks to tie voter participation to eligibility for civil service jobs, including teachers and road workers, and so often marks national ID cards to prove participation. During the Ahmadinejad era (2005-2013), the IRGC also fielded many of its own candidates from a tight network of both active duty and retirees. While the excerpt suggest that the IRGC will not intervene on behalf of any particular candidate, the Guardian Council's previous screening disqualifies any candidate with whom the IRGC would disagree. However, the excerpt's statement that the IRGC seek to help realize the Islamic system's strategies suggest that it will by direction of the Supreme Leader, massage the results if necessary.

Source: “Naqesh-e Mowsir-e Sepah dar Tashviq-e Mardam baraye Mosharakat dar Entikhabat” (The Effective Role of the IRGC in Encouraging People to Participate in the elections),” *Holy Defense News Agency* (official agency of the Iranian defense ministry), 31 March 2021. <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/447547>

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are an institution born of the Islamic Revolution, and they have their own guidelines that direct the general policy of the IRGC's political behavior on various issues. Since we are facing presidential and municipality elections this year, it is not out of place to have a brief overview of some of the political principles of the IRGC:

One of the political principles of the IRGC is “anti-arrogance.” This principle emphasizes the serious and continuous struggle against the ruling system of the world on the one hand and the support and defense of the oppressed on the other.... Another principle is “being popular.” This means maintaining the popular support of the people by representing their interests and demands... Another principle is “maximum absorption and minimum repulsion” which means the IRGC must know all the groups in society and must attract the gray strata and even critics. But the principle relevant to elections and how the IRGC participates in the elections is the principle of “maximum and conscious participation.” According to this principle, the IRGC must make a serious and comprehensive effort in its political behavior to achieve the maximum, conscious and purposeful presence of the people at the ballot box. Of course, this does not mean that the IRGC intervenes in the elections for the benefit or detriment of any particular group, but rather in order to help realize of the system's strategies in the elections.