Clientelism in the Islamic Republic,
Illustrated at the Example of IRGC and Basij

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Statutory Declaration

I hereby certify that this dissertation, which is approximately 14,490 words in length, has been composed by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree. This project was conducted by me at the University of St Andrews from May 2011 to August 2011 towards fulfilment of the requirements of the University of St Andrews for the degree of Master of Letters (Iranian Studies) under the supervision of Dr. Ali M. Ansari.

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1. Introduction

Clientelism as a theoretical concept evolved in and for a European context. Yet it has long since been acknowledged that, while varying in outlook and extent, clientelist structures can be found in any society, regardless of culture, organization, or level of development. It is therefore not surprising that clientelism has likewise been a feature of the Middle East, past and present. In this paper, I investigate clientelism in the Islamic Republic, illustrated at the example of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its subordinate, the Basij. I argue that the informal patronage networks which penetrate Iran’s economic and political sphere are extensive in their reach and influence; hamper economic and political efficiency; and yet, have an overall positive effect on regime stability.

Clientelist patterns of behaviour in Iran have been identified already in the Qajar era\(^1\), and, since clientelism in one form or the other seems to be a virtually inevitable feature of organized human societies, one may assume that it has existed in Iran before those times as well. However, clientelist structures tend to grow in reach and relevance in those periods when a once traditional state embarks on the intricate and lengthy process of modernization. This is why I start my study of clientelism in Iran in the 20th century with the Pahlavi era: it was in this period that the ground was laid for the so-called “modern” type of clientelism in place in Iran today.

The 1979 Revolution is usually seen as a watershed moment in Iranian history. Yet while the event caused major changes in Iran’s institutional make-up and leading personnel, other, notably less formalized structures and behaviour patterns remained in place. Patronage networks continued to exist and to prosper in the Islamic Republic, and many observers today credit these networks with substantial, or even decisive, political influence. A key actor in the complex web of institutions, informal networks, and powerful individuals that altogether determine the course of the Islamic Republic is the IRGC, together with its subordinate organization, the Basij. Having started as a paramilitary force with a strong ideological commitment, the IRGC today is a major player in Iran’s economy, an influential political actor, and present in virtually all segments of society. The Basij, in turn, engages in a variety of political, social, and educational grass root activities, while being organizationally and personally closely tied to the IRGC and an intrinsic part of its wide-reaching patronage network.

The IRGC and the Basij serve as case study for my inquiry of clientelism in the Islamic Republic. While it is naturally difficult to obtain clear-cut information on a phenomenon defined by informality and intransparency, insider accounts, expert analyses, and news reports from Iranian and foreign press allow for a careful estimation of the structures, the extent, and possible large-scale consequences of patron-client relationships in Iran.

I will start my discussion with an introduction of clientelism as a theoretical concept. In addition to the work of established authors in this field, such as Eisenstadt, Lemarchand, and Clapham, I will refer to Max Weber to define basic terms that help explain the mechanism of clientelist relationships. The theoretical section will be followed by a brief historical review of the Pahlavi era that highlights the reasons for the rise and spread of modern clientelist structures in that period. This will lead into a more detailed discussion of clientelism in the Islamic Republic. I will first give a general overview of the external circumstances which help create a favourable environment for clientelism, notably Iran’s rentier economy, the huge public and semi-public sector, and the intricate institutional setup with its lack of transparency and accountability. Subsequently, I will focus on the IRGC (which, if not explicitly mentioned otherwise, shall be understood as including the Basij). After a brief overview of the organization’s origin, I will recount its evolution from the beginning of the Rafsanjani administration until the present day.

Subsequently, I will investigate the clientelist networks and activities of the IRGC in more detail. This section will encompass descriptions of, first, the organizational features of IRGC and Basij, and, second, an account of their wide-ranging activities, with a special emphasis on their involvement in the Iranian economy, from which they draw much of their weight and influence. Subsequently, I will show how deeply the IRGC patronage network has penetrated the political establishment, especially under Ahmadinejad. This section will be followed by a discussion of evident and potential consequences which the IRGC’s clientelist networks may have, first, on the organization itself, and second, the Islamic Republic at large, both politically and economically.

Concluding, I will argue that the overall efficiency of both the political and economic system is likely to suffer from a situation in which personal relations, rather than professional merit and rational calculation, serve as a basis for allocating posts and resources. Nevertheless, IRGC and Basij are likely to have a positive effect on the stability of the system, since they have both a rational interest in the status quo and the means to maintain it.
2. Clientelism as a Theoretical Concept

One of the simplest definitions of a patron-client relationship has been provided by Clapham: he describes it as “a relationship of exchange between unequals”. Slightly more elaborate, Lemarchand defines patron-client relations as “dyadic bonds between individuals of unequal power and socio-economic status” which “exhibit a diffuse, particularistic, face-to-face quality strongly reminiscent of ascriptive solidarities” and are entered voluntarily and in the expectation of mutual benefits. In addition, patron-client relationships tend to rely on informal understandings rather than formal or contractual agreements.

The concept of clientelism was originally coined in the fields of anthropology and sociology to describe the relationship between peasants and landowners in agricultural South European societies. The core feature of this relationship was that the peasant – the client – offered services, usually of economic or military nature, to his patron, the landlord, who in return provided security and protection. When it became clear that, with the dissolution of traditional societal structures, clientelism did not vanish, but rather adjusted to the changing circumstances, the terms once used for landlord-peasant relations came to be generalized and extended to similarly structured relations in any given society. Today, patron-client relationships are considered a universal phenomenon which can be found in all types of states and societies, be they traditional or modern, democratic or autocratic, ‘Western’ or ‘non-Western’.

The core element of patron-client relationships, indeed their raison d’être, is the element of exchange (some authors use the term “reciprocity” for the same phenomenon.) In Weber’s definition, one may speak of exchange in “every case of a formally voluntary agreement involving the offer of any sort of present, continuing, or future utility in exchange for utilities of any sort offered in return.” While the objects of exchange in

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5 Clapham, ‘Clientelism and the State’, pp. 2f.
patron-client relationships are of various nature, they can all be subsumed under Weber’s definition of “utilities” (Nutzleistungen): these are “the specific and concrete, real or imagined, advantages (Chancen) of opportunities for present or future use as they are estimated and made an object of specific provision by one or more economically acting individuals”. In other words, utilities may be non-human objects like financial benefits or material goods, as well as the service of human beings. They may furthermore include social relationships which are perceived by the individuals involved as an asset, a “potential source of present or future disposal over utilities” as well as what Weber calls “good will”: immeasurable benefits such as loyalty and political support. In clientelist relations, all these different types of utilities can become the object of exchange.

Patron-client relationships usually include interpersonal obligations, such as loyalty, a sense of personal commitment, and even attachment and affinity, which help to preserve the relationship and increase the chances of its durability. This feature is sometimes described as a “moral” obligation. However, it is important to note that this moral code is of “private” character – hence not to be confused with the public moral, i.e. the values and virtues accepted in a society. In fact, patron-client relationships often run counter the public moral, as they serve individual rather than public interests and occasionally contradict official law. (Clapham rightly notes, on the other hand, that in many societies it is widely known and accepted that loyalty to one’s leader will bring rewards; thus, for instance, “it is accepted that certain posts may be allocated on grounds of personal patronage, like the White House staffs of American presidents.”)

Since clientelist relations are by nature personal, in order for them to be extended through a large hierarchy such as state administrations, an entire chain of patron-client relations must be formed. In these chains of relationships, some individuals function as patron and client at the same time; these are usually referred to as “brokers” or “middle men”. Furthermore, when such clientelist networks are responsible for a “substantial proportion of total allocations of goods and services” in a society, one may, with Clapham, speak of a “clientelist system”.

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9 Ibid., p. 68.
10 Ibid., p. 68.
11 Ibid., p. 73.
12 Eisenstadt and Roniger, Patrons, Clients and Friends, p. 48.
13 Clapham, ‘Clientelism and the State’, p. 5.
14 Eisenstadt and Roniger, Patrons, Clients and Friends, p. 48.
15 Clapham, ‘Clientelism and the State’, p. 5.
16 Ibid., p. 6f.
While personal in their nature, patron-client relationships can thus also affect, and have to be viewed in regard to, the wider social system. The following discussion on clientelism in Iran will take this into consideration.

3. Clientelism in Iran

3.1 The Pahlavi Era

Within the larger political and socio-economic setting, clientelism constitutes a dependent variable. As a consequence, changes in the wider environment have a potentially transforming effect on clientelist structures. The transition from a traditional to a modern political and economic system constitutes such a change, and, as has been noted by several authors, usually leads to the expansion of patronage networks. As shall be seen, this was the case in Iran.

After taking power in 1925, Reza Shah embarked on a comprehensive reform program, based on the principles of secularism, nationalism, educational development, and capitalism, to catapult Iran into the modern age and shelter it from foreign interference. To realize his vision of a strong, independent state, he deemed political centralization as crucial. For this purpose, he took several steps. First, he vastly expanded and restructured the state administration; second, in order to extend the government’s reach throughout Iran’s wide territory and advance its penetration of the society, he resorted to a clientelist practice: while ideologically suspicious of the traditional authorities, i.e. the aristocracy and the clergy, Reza Shah was aware of the leverage they held among the populace. Consequently, he used them as brokers, as middlemen between their local clients and his government, to reach out to the local populace. This pattern is typical for state-building efforts in transitional societies; similar practices have been observed in such different settings as 17\textsuperscript{th} century France, pre-British Egypt, the Ottoman Empire, Spanish Mexico, and modern Turkey. In all of these cases, rulers relied on local patrons in their efforts to

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19 Ali M. Ansari, Modern Iran Since 1921. The Pahlavis and After (Essex, 2003), p. 44.
advance the political integration of the state. This practice usually leads to an expansion of clientelist structures: first, as the patron acquires a key position as mediator between government and local population, he increases his bargaining power vis-à-vis his clients; second, the clientelist structures expand in geographical reach, as they are used to connect the periphery with the central state.\textsuperscript{22} The fundament for what is usually described as “modern” clientelism was thus established by Reza Shah.

The forced abdication of Reza Shah in 1941 and his replacement with his son, Muhammad Reza, brought a setback for centralization. First, the general authority of the central government had suffered from the seemingly effortless invasion of the Allied Forces; second, the inexperienced young Shah had difficulties to establish his authority, soon becoming dragged into a power struggle with the parliament; and finally, the central government was further weakened by the attempt of the Soviet Union to establish two autonomous republics in northern Iran.\textsuperscript{23} Only after the CIA-supported overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953 did Muhammad Reza Shah manage to gradually consolidate his political control and once more work towards the centralization on the state.

His efforts were successful in that they reinforced the state’s grip of its territory. Yet the centralization was not complete: while re-establishing political control, the central government proved deficient in providing services to all parts of the territory as late as in the 1970s. This “incomplete” centralization created “fertile ground for mediation, influence peddling, and brokerage”, since it forced the government to continue to rely on local and regional patrons as brokers in order to reach the local populations.\textsuperscript{24}

Much of the Shah’s centralization and modernization efforts relied on oil revenues, which constituted the most important single source of income for the state: in 1960, oil exports made up 41% of the total state revenue\textsuperscript{25}, and this share continued to rise in the following years, reaching, after the 1973 OPEC boycott, 84% in the fiscal year of 1974-5.\textsuperscript{26} Aside from massively expanding the public sector and investing in industrialization, the Shah used these revenues to foster the private sector by providing low interest loans, cheap raw materials, and favourable tax rates.\textsuperscript{27} This policy led to the creation of a new class: a small elite of entrepreneurs, which, as Moaddel estimates, consisted of no more than one

\textsuperscript{22} Lemarchand, ‘Comparative Political Clientelism’, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 29.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 318.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., pp. 320f.
thousand individuals (who, however, owned some 85% of the major private firms)\textsuperscript{28}, and which highly depended on the state as its main source of capital.\textsuperscript{29}

Since the government, thanks to the oil revenues, did not need to rely on taxes, this new entrepreneurial class had no leverage to challenge it. In order to advance their interests, Iranian businessmen therefore relied on their contacts with high-ranking government officials.\textsuperscript{30} As commented Zonis in 1971, “Few industrial or commercial undertakings are launched in Iran without the blessing of the Shah. To secure these blessings the Shah is often made a gift of a share in the ownership of the venture”.\textsuperscript{31} The mechanism at play here is typically clientelist: using personal, informal connections, the entrepreneurs delivered favours to their patron, who in turn provided them with the permits or policies they desired.

Yet despite of the Shah’s virtual monopoly over political and economic power, his clients, as it turned out, were by far neither numerous nor strong enough to prevent the fall of their patron.

3.2 The Islamic Republic

3.2.1 Introduction

As it constituted a major change in external circumstances, the Islamic Revolution naturally had an impact on the clientelist structures in place. Notably, the event changed personalities on both sides of the clientelist relationship between state and dependants; it brought in ideology as a new element to serve as a legitimating argument for claims and actions on both sides; and it expanded the field of potential patrons and clients with the creation of several power centres, both within and outside of the government.

The first decade after the revolution was extraordinary in several ways. It was a period of revolutionary fervour, widespread purges, largely undisputed charismatic rule by Khomeini, and of course the draining war against Iraq. The end of the war in 1988, together with Khomeini’s death in the following year, has often been marked as a pivotal moment in

\textsuperscript{29} Shambayati, ‘State and Business in Turkey and Iran’, p. 320.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p. 321.
the history of the Islamic Republic; Alamdari notably calls it the beginning of the “period of clientelism” in Iran, ending, as he sees it, the period of “religious populism” under Khomeini’s charismatic rule. Given the exceptionality of the war years, I will start my discussion of clientelism in the Islamic Republic in 1989 with the beginning of Rafsanjani’s presidency. Yet at first, I will present some general features of the Islamic Republic which make it especially prone for clientelism.

### 3.2.2 Factors of Iran’s Political and Economic System Favouring Clientelism

In Iran, oil accounts for about 80 percent of exports and between 50 and 70 percent of government revenue. Its heavy reliance on a single resource qualifies Iran as a rentier state, which is usually defined as “any state that receives a substantial portion of its income in the form of external rents”. Eisenstadt and Roniger have found that clientelism-prone societies are often characterized by “intensive exploitation of a fixed resource basis”; and indeed, Iran’s rentier character has been identified as a major factor contributing to the widespread existence of clientelism in the country. This is because rentierism enhances the state’s autonomy by making it largely independent from taxes, while much of the bourgeoisie directly depends on it for its wealth – a situation which, as has been seen, fostered clientelist structures already in the Pahlavi era.

In addition, rentierism has allowed Iran to build up an extensive state administration: according to a study by Esfahani and Taheripour, the size of the government in the last two decades has exceeded 50 percent of Iran’s GDP. Others estimate that, including enterprises controlled by the state, Iran’s public sector accounts for at least 60 percent of the economy. As the state thus constitutes the main source of wealth

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35 Shambayati, ‘State and Business in Turkey and Iran’, p. 308.
38 Shambayati, ‘State and Business in Turkey and Iran’, p. 307.
40 Ghadar, ‘Iran at Crossroads’.
and employment, there is a strong incentive to establish patron-client ties with powerful individuals within state institutions.\textsuperscript{41}

Furthermore, Iran’s oil revenues serve as major source for extra-budgetary funds (EBF). EBFs are government expenditures and liabilities that do not show up in official budget accounts, and, due to their intransparent nature, are easily used for clientelist purposes.\textsuperscript{42} Esfahani and Taheripour have conducted a detailed study to estimate the size of EBFs in Iran. Despite basing their estimates on conservative assumptions, they conclude that about 70 percent of total public expenditure since 1979 has been channelled through mechanisms outside of the official budget.\textsuperscript{43} As these funds are not subject to parliamentary oversight, one may assume that they are often spent inefficiently and counter to the public good. Esfahani and Taheripour contend that the state nevertheless holds on to them due to the “political legitimacy” they “buy” among favoured sectors and groups.\textsuperscript{44} As did the Pahlavi regime, it seems, the Islamic Republic’s leaders resort to informal, clientelist measures in order to obtain political loyalty.

As a third point, the trade-based capitalism fostered by the Rafsanjani administration in the wake of the Iran-Iraq War has since proven a fertile ground for clientelism. After becoming president, Rafsanjani effectively functioned as the patron of wealthy mercantile class from which he himself had emerged: thus, he resorted to protectionist measures to shelter the merchants from international competition and allowed them to use informal, personal channels to conduct their business.\textsuperscript{45} Moreover, he kept the market largely free of regulatory measures, so that in fact many companies had neither formal accounts nor an auditing procedure.\textsuperscript{46} This policy fostered an economic system which is characterized by a lack of transparency and accountability as well as the widespread use of informal patronage networks.

In addition, Iran’s institutional make-up further contributes to the favourable environment for clientelism. Iran’s political system entails multiple centers of power with partially overlapping responsibilities and intricate procedures of decision-making. This complex, intertwined institutional web tends to reduce not only the efficiency and

\textsuperscript{41} Shambayati, ‘State and Business in Turkey and Iran’, p. 209.
\textsuperscript{42} Esfahani and Taheripour, ‘Hidden Public Expenditures’, p. 693.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. 693.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 712.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p. 18.
consistency, but also the transparency of decision-making, which makes it easier to distribute funds, permits, or other special favours to respective clients.\textsuperscript{47}

Finally, the high importance ascribed to personal relationships in Iran also has cultural roots.\textsuperscript{48} Its effect has probably been multiplied by the lack of accountability and rule and law in the Islamic Republic. The pre-eminence of personal relations in Iran has been described by one author as follows:

[Iran’s political landscape] cannot easily be understood through a systems or organizational approach. Individuals in and out the government are connected through kinship, marriage, and place of origin. An individual’s service branch during the Iran-Iraq War (e.g. IRGC, Basij, Army ground forces) and education, whether in a seminary or a military academy, also affect the connections he is likely to have... In many cases, therefore, individuals are in a position because of their connections, rather than their qualifications or competence.\textsuperscript{49}

In this complex, intransparent network of personal, clientelist relationships, the IRGC, and with it the Basij, occupy a key position.

\section*{4. Clientelism at the Example of IRGC and Basij}

\subsection*{4.1 Creation and War, 1979-1988}

On 5 May 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini by decree created the \textit{Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Islami}, the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, or Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), to establish a counter-weight to the regular army, a widely mistrusted remnant of the Shah’s reign. Originally, the IRGC was designed as a domestic force to fight counter-revolutionaries and minority revolts before it became heavily involved in the Iran-Iraq War.\textsuperscript{50} The informality and the focus on personal relationships which later proved favourable for clientelism were prevalent among the IRGC from the beginning; in a way, they can even be regarded as part of its founding principle, as in deliberate contrast to the mistrusted regular army, “the IRGC was to be something quite different: a brotherhood of

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\item 50 Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, \textit{Iran and Iraq at War} (London, 1988), p. 35.
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Iranian sansculottes, an organic military force that shunned all the normal paraphernalia of the regular armed forces.\textsuperscript{51}

Already in the first years of its existence, the IRGC formed a bond with one political faction among the revolutionaries: the conservative clergy, led by Khomeini and represented by the Islamic Republican Party (IRP). This faction was engaged in a political dispute with the Liberation Front, which sought to limit clerical influence in politics.\textsuperscript{52} Once the clerics emerged victorious from this power struggle, they "showered resources and attention" on the Guards to reward the latter for their loyalty as well as to secure their continuing support.\textsuperscript{53} Being as it was a creation of Khomeini, one may assume that the IRGC’s decision to side with the Ayatollah and his allies was based on genuine ideological conviction; nevertheless, the mechanism of the relationship – the IRGC siding with powerful individuals in the political establishment to be rewarded with favours in return – also bears strong clientelist characteristics. As shall be seen, it was a pattern to be repeated in subsequent decades.

In the course of the war, the IRGC gradually developed and expanded its organizational structure and in the process also introduced conscription.\textsuperscript{54} By 1986 the Guards had grown from 30,000 members in 1980 to over 200,000; they had their own naval and air forces, their own ministry, and a budget not accountable to parliament. They had, in other words, become “virtually an independent empire” as well as “a formidable interest group”\textsuperscript{55}, with both the determination and the power to preserve their interests beyond the end of the war.

The militia of the \textit{Basij-e Mostazafan} (the Mobilization of the Oppressed) was created in 1980 as an irregular volunteer force under the command of the IRGC. Originally designed to fight counter-revolutionary uprisings, volunteers, mostly young boys too young for the regular military service, were recruited for the Basij in high numbers to help avert the Iraqi attack. In addition to an extensive propaganda effort, the government provided concrete incentives for young Iranians to sign up for the front: surviving Basij were granted a state sponsorship, while in case of their death, their families received a relatively

\textsuperscript{54} Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will Be Mercantilized’.
\textsuperscript{55} Chubin and Tripp, \textit{Iran and Iraq at War}, p. 74.
generous pension from the state and benefited from interest-free loans.\textsuperscript{56} In addition, foundations were created for their support\textsuperscript{57}, and Basij enjoyed minor privileges in schools, such as generous grading and the allowance of unexcused absence.\textsuperscript{58} Finally and more important, both IRGC and Basij veterans were favoured in the revolutionary state apparatus, with the result that they were soon to find “everywhere” in the administration, the army, and the public enterprises.\textsuperscript{59}

Concluding, several factors were established in the first decade of the revolution which would contribute to the expansion of the IRGC’s patronage network after the war: the focus on informality and personal ties within the organization; its vast expansion as a reaction to the war necessities; the granting of special socio-economic privileges to IRGC and Basij veterans by the state; and their beginning penetration of public institutions.

**4.2 IRGC and Basij under Rafsanjani and Khatami, 1989-2005**

In 1989, the new administration under President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was faced with enormous challenges. Iran’s economy had suffered tremendously under the war: the war industry, the trade sanctions resulting from the US-hostage crisis, and the destruction of infrastructure and property valued at several billion dollars had led to a sharp decrease in production, rampant inflation, and high unemployment rates.\textsuperscript{60} At the same time, the state and military sector had been heavily expanded, which could not longer be afforded after the war (nor was it needed). Many thousands of war veterans now needed a new source of income which they could hardly find in Iran’s underdeveloped private sector.\textsuperscript{61}

To create employment for the veterans and ease the pressure on the state budget, Rafsanjani encouraged the IRGC to create its own income by entering business. To enable the Guards to found their own companies, Rafsanjani allocated to them a share of the oil income. Through these revenues, the IRGC gained direct access to dollars, with which it

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{56} Matthias Künzels, \textit{Die Deutschen und der Iran. Geschichte und Gegenwart einer verhängnisvollen Freundschaft} (Berlin, 2009), p. 134.
\textsuperscript{57} Kamran Scot Aghaie, \textit{The Martyrs of Karbala. Shi‘i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran} (Seattle, 2004), p. 138.
\textsuperscript{59} Aghaie, \textit{The Martyrs of Karbala}, p. 179.
\textsuperscript{61} Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will Be Mercantilized’.
\end{footnotesize}
started to import goods and sell them in Iran with high profits. In addition, it took control of several confiscated factories and established numerous enterprises in fields such as agriculture, industry, mining, transportation, road construction, import, and export. Furthermore, in a concession to once-spurned professionalism, the organization adopted formal rank structures, which, as some have argued, introduced the “notion of perquisites, privileges, and status for the senior leadership of the IRGC”.

With its new economic power, the political weight of the IRGC grew as well. As seen above, the IRGC had already laid the ground for its personal network during the war; but now, financially strengthened and released from the burden to defend the country, it expanded this network into the spheres of economy as well as politics, until it virtually “spanned the entire Islamic Republic.”

According to IRGC co-founder Mohsen Sazegara, besides Rafsanjani’s economic considerations the expansion of the IRGC’s power was also fuelled by a political calculation on the part of the new Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Lacking authority with the clerical establishment due to his unimpressive theological credentials, Khamenei sought to make the IRGC its support base. In order to obtain their political loyalty, he worked to increase the Guard’s influence, hence effectively becoming their patron. In the words of Sazegara,

If, at this juncture [right after being nominated], you had placed Khamenei on one side of the scale, he would not be heavy enough to occupy even the place of the second or third political personality in the country. Khamenei was not even a marja-ye taqlid (source of emulation)... For this reason, he could not count on the clergy, and that is why he strived to transfer the power from the ‘Elmiye Religious Seminaries’ to military forces.

When the reformist Muhammad Khatami was elected President in 1997, he initially attempted to contain the spread and influence of clientelist networks, notably by re-staffing the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), another hub of patronage. Sazegara has attested Khatami “relative success” in this regard; others, however, contend

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62 Ibid.
63 Frederic Wehrey et al., The Rise of the Pasdaran. Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (Santa Monica, 2009), p. 59.
65 Wehrey et al., The Rise of the Pasdaran, p. 56.
66 Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will Be Mercantilized’.
that many of those that were purged from the MOIS simply moved to the IRGC.\textsuperscript{69} Overall, Khatami’s legislature has thus been described as “a failed attempt to end clientelism.”\textsuperscript{70}

Meanwhile, the IRGC further expanded its business activities, increasingly using front companies to establish monopolies in several sectors of the economy.\textsuperscript{71} It also became involved in illegal and black-market activities, such as the import of forbidden goods and the smuggling of oil to Iraq, which was then under UN sanctions.\textsuperscript{72} These substantial unofficial revenues, sometimes estimated at several billions of dollars\textsuperscript{73}, allowed the IRGC to further increase its independence from the government.

When in 1997 Yahya Rahim-Safavi replaced Mohsen Rezai as the commander of the IRGC, he allied himself with the right-wing political elite. As in similar cases before, this alliance between IRGC and a particular political faction bore clientelist characteristics, as it brought benefits for both sides: the IRGC provided the conservatives with political support and helped to constrain reformist endeavours, occasionally through the use of force; in return, senior right-wing politicians facilitated the IRGC’s profit-making\textsuperscript{74} and provided the IRGC with generous financing for troop training and new weapon-systems as well as increases in salaries and benefits.\textsuperscript{75}

The Basij, likewise, was reorganized after the war. In addition to domestic security duties, its tasks came to encompass the promotion of the official interpretation of Islamic values and support for the regime, countering cultural Western influence, enforcing the official ‘Islamic morals’, and, notably, the participation in state-run economic projects.

\textsuperscript{69} Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will Be Mercantilized’.
\textsuperscript{70} Alamdari, ‘The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran’, p. 1291.
\textsuperscript{71} Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will Be Mercantilized’.
\textsuperscript{72} Sazegara, ‘Se inheraf’.
\textsuperscript{74} Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will Be Mercantilized’.
\textsuperscript{75} Nasr and Gheissari, ‘Foxes in Iran’s Henhouse’.
4.3 IRGC and Basij Since 2005

4.3.1 Structures and Numbers

Estimations of the IRGC’s current size usually range between 120,000 and 125,000 members. The organization is divided into different branches and units, such as the Quds force and the IRGC intelligence unit, and there are IRGC installations in all of Iran’s major cities. As the Commander-in-Chief of all armed forces, the Supreme Leader is entitled to appoint and fire the head of the IRGC (since 2007, this has been Mohammad Ali Jafari). As the IRGC leadership reports directly to the Supreme Leader, its activities are largely freed of parliamentary oversight.

In 2007, the Basij was fully integrated into the IRGC’s command structure. As with the IRGC, it is up the Supreme Leader to appoint its head. Since 2009 this has been Mohammad Reza Naghdi, who had previously held the post of deputy commander of the IRGC for readiness, logistics, and research – an indication for the close personal ties between Basij and IRGC. Taeb, the former commander, in turn moved on to serve as head of the IRGC’s intelligence arm.

The overall number of Basij is disputed. Iranian press usually talk of more than ten million; Ettelaat, for instance, recently claimed that five million Iranian women alone are members of the Basij. In 2008, Hosein Taeb, then commander of the Basij, announced that the number of Basij had been 12.5 million in the previous year and was to grow to 14.5 million until the end of 2008. Estimations by external analysts, on the other hand, usually

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77 David E. Thaler et al., Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads. An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics (Santa Monica, 2010), p. 61.
81 ‘Ozviat-e panj milyiun zan-e irani dar basij’, Ettelaat, 3 August 2011, <http://www.ettelaat.com/new/index.asp?fname=2011%5C08%5C08-03%5C13-14-25.htm&storytitle=%DA%D6%E6%ED%CA%20%E3%ED%E1%ED%E6%E4%20%D2%E4%20%C7%ED%1%20%CF%1%20%C8%20%D3%ED%CC> [20 August 2011].
range between one and a few million. Basij are recruited and organized already in school age, represented by the Pupil’s Basij Organization, which, with officially at least 4.5 million members, constitutes the biggest pupils organization in Iran.

Basij perform basic security functions like border-guard duties and riot-control, as during the post-election protests of 2009. Yet, as Khamenei himself once pointed out, fighting is only one among many duties of the Basij: with its multiple branches of specialized functions, such as the Labor Basij (Basij-e Karegaran), Pupil’s Basij (Basij-e Danesh Amuzi), Student Basij (Basij-e Daneshjuyi), and Engineer Basij (Basij-e Muhandesin), the organization penetrates virtually every sector of society. According to former Basij Commander Taeb, the Basij has in total 32 such specialized sub-organizations.

Concluding, despite their origin as military forces, the IRGC and Basij today are complex and highly multifaceted entities with a variety of domestic tasks and activities. IRGC Commander Jafari himself pointed this out in July 2011, saying,

Some people insist in saying that the revolutionary guards (IRGC) and the Basij mobilization forces are, and should be merely military forces, but the Leader of [the] Islamic Revolution emphasizes that [the] Basij is not a military force and the Revolutionary Guards, too, are not merely [a] military force and have other responsibilities at cultural, political, and security fields [sic].

4.3.2 Ideology, Social Activities, and Special Benefits

At least officially, IRGC and Basij have a strong ideological commitment. Officials often speak of “Basij culture”, which they understand as embodying devotion, self-sacrifice,
holding up revolutionary ideals, and struggling for justice for the oppressed.  

This official ideology is conveyed by a number of means, such as paramilitary training, cultural activities, newspapers, and the various publications produced by Basij university student groups which aim at educating both students and the wider public in revolutionary ideology on a variety of themes.  

In addition, the Basij regularly organizes summer camps, in which the official Basij ideology is taught. Yet at the same time these camps also entail sports, social activities, and training in certain technical skills potentially useful for the job market. Similarly, the Basij Center affiliated to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs recently announced to launch a “youth project” which combines lessons in culture and religion with counselling on future studies and work. Both the counselling in the youth project and the technical training in the summer camps promise advantages in the job market; they may therefore be appealing especially to young Iranians in those backward and remote rural provinces where many of these activities take place and where the prospects for upward mobility are otherwise dim.

Basij members also enjoy a number of benefits in Iran’s university system, as they may obtain reserved spots in the universities and receive a small stipend. In addition, every Basij that enters university can easily integrate himself into the social and organizational network of Basij students which is officially represented by the Student Basij Organization (SBO). In addition to curbing reformist student activism on campus, the SBO functions as a sort of “umbrella grouping” of students affiliated with the Basij throughout Iran, thus providing a link between the students and the wider IRGC organization.

All the mentioned activities are likely to facilitate patronage within the organization in a number of ways: firstly, they may promote a sense of corporatism and loyalty between the Basij and the wider IRGC organization, which, as has been seen, is regarded an important feature of patron-client relationships; second, organizations like the SBO provide

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92. Wehrey et al., The Rise of the Pasdaran, p. 37f.
95. Wehrey et al., The Rise of the Pasdaran, p. 40.
structures which connect lower ranking Basij and higher ranking IRGC members and thus facilitate clientelist interaction, which is dependent on personal contact. In addition, the promise of upward mobility which comes with counselling, job training, reserved university spots, and the access to the IRGC’s powerful patronage network may in itself be regarded as object of a clientelist exchange, as it constitutes an incentive for young Iranians to join the Basij. When they choose to provide the Basij with some of their personal resources – be it time, service, or simply loyalty – in order to obtain the privileges that come with Basij membership, they effectively enter a quasi-clientelist relationship with the organization. The difficult question of how many actually join the Basij for material, as opposed to ideological, reasons will be discussed in a later chapter.

4.3.3 The IRGC Business Network

As has been noted, the IRGC is deeply integrated in the Iranian economy. IRGC Commander Jafari once justified the IRGC’s business activities by pointing out that its projects increase the welfare of the rural and impoverished populace96, yet in the first place, the IRGC’s business conglomerate appears to be a giant profit-making machine. With its companies and sub-companies, the IRGC is present in virtually every sector of the Iranian economy97, and while the exact numbers are unknown, it has been estimated that it controls between one and two thirds of it.98 Figures on the Guards’ income vary likewise: while a former senior official in 2007 estimated the IRGC’s annual earnings to be about $1 billion99, others believe it is closer to $12 billion.100

The IRGC’s economic expansion has profited significantly from its informal ties to the state administration. Thus, IRGC companies are frequently awarded public contracts without bidding procedure; and even in cases where a bidding is announced, they often manage to sideline private competitors with the help of the public authorities. One widely-

97 Sazegara, ‘Se inheraf’.


While these examples point to the IRGC’s political influence, at other times the organization simply resorts to sheer force in order to advance its interests. As commented Sazegara, “Entering business with weapons creates two major and strong dangers. One is that business competitors are pushed aside with (the help of) force and arrests and prison, and they (the Guards) monopolize many of their activities.”\footnote{Sazegara, ‘Se inheraf’.} A prominent example for this is the forced closing down of the newly opened Imam Khomeini Airport by the IRGC in May 2004: despite the IRGC’s claim of a “security risk”, the move has been widely
interpreted as a protest against the fact that the IRGC had lost the contract for the airport construction to a Turkish company.\textsuperscript{108}

Eisenstadt and Roniger have noted that clientelism tends to prosper in situations when the access to the market is relatively open in principle – theoretically, to all segments of society –, but when at the same time powerful patrons strive for the narrowing of access and in fact monopolization of the market in order to increase their profits. “It is the combination of potentially open access to the markets with continuous semi-institutionalized attempts to limit free access that is the crux of the clientelist model.”\textsuperscript{109} As has been seen, in Iran such attempts are made by the IRGC: with its efforts to establish monopolies in several economic sectors, the IRGC actively works towards creating an environment which is even more advantageous for clientelism.

Basij members, in turn, are often employed to work in the development projects supervised by the IRGC\textsuperscript{110}, this way again profiting from their ties to the organization.

4.3.4 Foundations

In part, the IRGC operate and finance themselves through foundations, the bonyads. Bonyads had already existed under the Shah: while their official purpose was to provide relief to the needy, they were at the same time serving as a “slush fund” for the elite and used to deliver patronage.\textsuperscript{111} After the revolution, Khomeini ordered foundations to be established from seized property and enterprises in order to redistribute the wealth accumulated by the Shah and his allies.\textsuperscript{112} Yet after Khomeini’s death, the foundations engaged increasingly in commercial activities and were used for patronage, soon resembling the situation under the Shah. Today, the bonyads are exempt from taxes, often benefit from various other subsidies\textsuperscript{113}, and their combined budgets are estimated to make

\textsuperscript{108} Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will Be Mercantilized’; Nasr and Gheissari, ‘Foxes in Iran’s Henhouse’.
\textsuperscript{109} Eisenstadt and Roniger, ‘Client Relations as a Model of Structuring Social Exchange’, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{110} Aryan, ‘Iran’s Basij Force’.
\textsuperscript{111} Thaler et al., \textit{Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads}, p. 57.
up as much as half that of the government sector.\textsuperscript{114} They are unaccountable to anyone but the Supreme Leader.\textsuperscript{115}

One of Iran’s largest and wealthiest bonyads, the \textit{Bonyad-e Mostazafan} (Foundation of the Oppressed), has close ties to the IRGC: its current director is Mohammad Forouzandeh, a former IRGC officer. His predecessor was Mohsen Rafiqdust, who was appointed by Khamenei in 1999. Rafiqdust had been Khomeini’s driver from the airport when the latter returned to Iran in 1979, and subsequently acted as co-founder of the IRGC. From 1982 to 1989, he served as Minister of the Revolutionary Guards.\textsuperscript{116} Officially, Mostazafan is striving to improve the “material and cultural” situation of the deprived\textsuperscript{117}; yet it is also deeply integrated in the economy, running numerous subsidiary companies in various industries, such as oil, construction, banking, and agriculture.\textsuperscript{118} In official numbers, its assets in 2007 (the most recent numbers available on the foundation’s website) amounted to a value of around $1.64 billion\textsuperscript{119}; yet given the lack of external oversight, the true amount may well be higher.

The significant economic weight of foundations like the Bonyad-e Mostazafan, as well as the lack of transparency and accountability with which they operate, make them an important part of the powerful informal networks of the IRGC. The fact that two former IRGC officers smoothly moved from the IRGC to head Mostazafan can be read as an indication for the close personal ties between both organizations.

\textbf{4.3.5 Illegal Activities}

While such claims are naturally difficult to verify, the IRGC is widely suspected of a range of illegal activities. For instance, both IRGC co-founder Sazegara and then-speaker of the Majlis, Mehdi Karrubi, have accused the IRGC of using the jetties under its control to move commodities in and out Iran without paying duty.\textsuperscript{120} Furthermore, the IRGC has been accused of smuggling forbidden goods such as alcohol, narcotics, cigarettes, and satellite

\textsuperscript{114} Ghadar, ‘Iran at Crossroads’.
\textsuperscript{115} Thaler et al., \textit{Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads}, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{116} Klebnikov, ‘Millionaire Mullahs’.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid. (according to 2011 exchange rates).
\textsuperscript{120} Sazegara, ‘Se inheraf’; Nafisi, ‘Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Has A Lot To Lose’.
In 2004, the Majlis demanded an investigation to be launched into smuggling through jetties, which subsequently found that three jetties belonging to the IRGC were used for illegal commerce. In addition, there are said to be about 9,000 Iranian import-export companies registered in Dubai, between half and two thirds of which are estimated to be front companies of the IRGC that are used for smuggling goods from Dubai to Iran.

Besides further increasing their profits and thus their financial autonomy, these activities allow the Guards to function as powerful patrons vis-à-vis any businessman who wishes to increase his profits by saving duties. As one Iranian analyst commented, “If you want to get things to and from Iran without paying excise duty, they are the people to go to. No big businessman in Iran is truly independent of them or the government.” This is another case in which clientelist relationships prove more efficient than formal channels.

### 4.3.6 IRGC and Basij in Politics

The IRGC’s political ascendancy was triggered by its confrontation with the reformists under Khatami, as networks of active and former IRGC officers felt obliged to act “as a sort of praetorian guard for conservatives seeking to displace Khatami supporters from political power.” Today, the IRGC is regarded a “key institution” in Iran’s political landscape. On the one hand, many senior IRGC officers have close personal ties to key members of Iran’s political class; on the other, a growing number of IRGC and Basij members and veterans are occupying political offices themselves. A prominent example is former IRGC chief Mohsen Rezai, who today is a member of the powerful Expediency Discernment Council. Another former IRGC chief, Yahya Rahim-Safavi, went on to become a military advisor to Khamenei after being replaced by Jafari in 2007. A further example is Ali Larijani, who was appointed Secretary of the Supreme National Council in 2005 (he resigned from the post in 2007, but is still member of the Council).

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121 Sazegara, ‘Se inheraf’; Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will Be Mercantilized’.
126 Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*, p. 58.
127 Samii, ‘ Factionalism in Iran’s Domestic Security Forces’, p. 3.
former IRGC officer, had previously held the influential post as head of the national broadcasting service IRIB from 1994 to 2004 and served as Minister for Culture and Islamic Guidance from 1992 to 1994. In 2008, he went on to become Speaker of the Majlis.\(^{129}\)

In the presidential elections of 2005, four out of six of the initially confirmed candidates had an IRGC or Basij background: besides Ahmadinejad, who claims to have served as Basij in the Iran-Iraq War\(^{130}\), Mohsen Rezai, the former head of the IRGC, ran for office, as well as Ali Larijani and Mohammed-Bagher Ghalibaf, both former IRGC commanders.\(^{131}\) Ghalibaf is now the Mayor of Tehran.

After winning the election, Ahmadinejad appointed a number of individuals to high offices who are closely tied to the IRGC. Thus, for example, he among others nominated Sadegh Mahsouli for the Oil Ministry (two other proposals were rejected by the Majlis). Mahsouli is a former Guard, who, after his military career, used his IRGC contacts to build a business in construction and oil trading. When his enormous wealth raised opposition in the Majlis, Mahsouli withdrew his candidacy\(^{132}\), but in 2008 he went on to become Interior Minister and subsequently held the post of Minister of Welfare and Social Security until this ministry was merged with the Labour Ministry in May 2011.\(^ {133}\) Another IRGC veteran, Mustafa Mohammad Najjar, was named Minister of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics. The new Industries and Mines Minister, Ali-Reza Tahmasbi, had performed military research for the IRGC during the war. The new Energy Minister Parviz Fattah had likewise served with the IRGC, while his experience in the relevant field appeared to be limited. Finally, the new Islamic Culture and Guidance Minister, Hussein Safar-Harandi, had served with the IRGC from 1980-94.\(^ {134}\)

After his contested re-election in 2009, Ahmadinejad among others nominated Najjar for Interior Minister\(^ {135}\) and Ahmad Vahidi, a former commander of the IRGC Quds

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\(^{133}\) ‘Ahmadinejad Dismisses 3 Ministers to Shrink Cabinet’, \textit{AFP}, 14 May 2011, \texttt{<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hL18l1_PRDymgsqXR1qXZ8TfWL-wQ?docId=CNG.d14d12517d91613ff8dfe44bb4d26a.4e1>} [20 August 2011].


for Defense Minister. Heydar Moslehi, a former representative of the Supreme Leader in the IRGC command, was named Intelligence Minister. Another IRGC veteran, Masoud Mir-Kazemi, became Minister of Oil, even though his nomination raised criticism in the Majlis due to his lack of experience in the field.

After dismissing Mir-Kazemi in May 2011, Ahmadinejad proposed another IRGC commander for the post, Rostam Ghasemi. Ghasemi, who had until then served as the head of the IRGC company Khatam al-Anbia, announced that, as Oil Minister, he would employ Khatam al-Anbia for public oil development projects, allegedly since the company had “experienced and strong personnel”. After the confirmation of his nomination by the Majlis, Ghasemi stated that Khatam al-Anbia should be used to fill the place of foreign companies retreating from Iran due to international sanctions. IRGC Commander Jafari then backed the claim by announcing that the IRGC should play an even more important economic role in the future. The incidence is noteworthy: Ahmadinejad appointed no other than the head of IRGC’s largest company as Oil Minister, who, even before officially assuming the post, publicly announced to favour his company with government contracts. Regarding both the financial weight of this clientelist exchange and the publicity in which it was conducted, the Ghasemi-case arguably constitutes a new step in the patronage conduct between IRGC and the state.

With their growing political weight under Ahmadinejad, senior Guards have in recent years intervened increasingly openly in politics. As one of the latest examples for this trend, IRGC head Jafari in July 2011 ostensibly laid out conditions which reformist politicians, notably former President Khatami, would need to fulfil in order to be allowed to participate in future elections – even though, formally, it is the Guardian Council which is responsible for vetting political candidates, not the IRGC. The remarkable self-confidence to interfere in politics displayed by Jafari and other senior Guards, as well as

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142 ‘Sepah zabet-e dastgah-e ghaza-yi dar barkhudar ba jaryan-e inheraf ast’, Mehrnews.
the ability to do so without virtually any public reprisal, likely stems to a large extent from their close personal ties to, and indeed their own presence in, the state administration.

5. Large-Scale Effects of Clientelism

5.1 Effects on IRGC and Basij as Organizations

Weber has observed that economic considerations have sociological importance for the formation and evolution of organizations. Even an organization which, like the IRGC and the Basij, was originally founded on ideological grounds is likely to be transformed over time based on economic rather than idealistic considerations. This is because the organization’s leader and staff, once they are remunerated, develop an economic interest in maintaining and possibly expanding the organization. As writes Weber,

It is an everyday occurrence that organizations of all kinds which, even in the eyes of the participants, have become ‘meaningless’, continue to exist because an executive secretary or some other official makes his ‘living’ in this manner and otherwise would have no means of support.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that such a process has affected at least parts of IRGC and Basij. For instance, Wehrey et al. found indications that some Basij hold “cynical or ambivalent” views of the ideological training which they must undergo in order to obtain the social benefits that come with Basij membership. Another author quoted a young Basij in 2005 with the statement: “The only reason I stay in the Basij is for the money... many of my friends in the Basij are unhappy with the government.” In the words of an Iranian analyst, “Back in the ’80s, [the IRGC] was a very pure force, ideologically. Very Islamic. But now the whole thing is about making money.” Finally, an Iranian-born scholar who stated to have held many interviews and private conversations with IRGC and Basij members framed his assessment the following way:

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143 Weber, Economy and Society, pp. 201f.
145 Wehrey et al., The Rise of the Pasdaran, p. 28.
Imagine two brothers: one is very talented, studying engineering, with prospects for a good job. The other one is less talented and, under normal circumstances, wouldn’t even get into university. But as a Basij member, he gets everything: the spot in the university, the right personal connections, so that in the end he may end up in a better position than his brother. For him it makes sense to join and support the Basij.\textsuperscript{148}

On the other hand, a number of personal accounts by young Iranians who left Iran within the past five years overwhelmingly contradict the above assessments, at least as far as the Basij are concerned.\textsuperscript{149} Thus, for instance, a young Iranian who was a student in Tehran before he left Iran in 2010 and who claims to have had “ten to fifteen Basij friends” while knowing many more Basij personally, estimates that among his own acquaintances about 80 percent had joined the Basij out of genuine ideological conviction.\textsuperscript{150} Another Iranian who left Iran in 2008 estimated that at least “most of the low grade Basij members join [the] Basij because of their ideology”, while acknowledging that economic reasons often play a role too: “because of [the] bad economical condition, they are persuaded to work for [the] Basij.”\textsuperscript{151} A third interviewee, who pointed out that his family had moved frequently and that he had therefore observed Basij activities in several different cities, likewise estimated that most Basij members had ideological motives. In the schools, he states,

Only very religious students who usually grew up in families with very religious and/or traditional values would join the Basij. They might do not much in school, yet that would be a place where they are able to find the people who share the same values. So, they feel comfortable around the others... As far as my memory helps me, whatever social class people belonged to, they joined [the] Basij for a purpose related to their religious beliefs. [This] could be helping very poor kids in rural areas, educating kids for free during summer, collecting charities etc. or just discussing very religious topics together.\textsuperscript{152}

The same student, however, also stressed that things changed “dramatically” after the 2009 election protests, during which Basij were mobilized to suppress the protests. Based on the information he got from inside Iran, he writes, “definitely there were members... who did not want to take part in any of those extreme actions against people.” As a consequence,

\textsuperscript{148} Author’s conversation with an Iranian-American scholar in Amsterdam, December 2009.
\textsuperscript{149} I asked specifically about the Basij, because all of the interviewees had direct personal experiences with Basij in the high schools and universities they attended in Iran.
\textsuperscript{150} Author’s conversation in Jerusalem, July 2011.
\textsuperscript{151} Email conversation, August 2011. The interviewee is a personal acquaintance of the author.
\textsuperscript{152} Email conversation, August 2011. The interviewee is a personal acquaintance of the author.
The Basij ran out of ‘willing’ members to perform the suppressive and brutal actions. Hence, to compensate for the big gap between demand and resources they had, they have focused on recruiting new members in the very low class and poor section of society, mostly coming from smaller cities and villages or very poor areas of Tehran, by means of money and simple privileges. There are rumours that those members were given very good instant benefits per mission.¹⁵³

In a similar vein, Amir Farshad Ebrahimi, a former Basij in exile who is still in touch with his former Basij fellows, stated that in light of the violent crackdown, “Some of them have become disillusioned. I can’t tell you how many. But I am sure that many are not happy about what is happening right now [in 2009].”¹⁵⁴ Due to these developments, the formerly quoted student concludes, “I would say that, nowadays, with the post-election situation in Iran… it is very likely that the new members of Basij are joining them because of economic privileges and benefits.”¹⁵⁵

While in the absence of representative surveys it is impossible to determine the motivations of the majority of Basij members, a few things can be noted: first, given their numerical size, their geographical reach, and the great diversification of their structure and activities, it is simply unrealistic to view the Basij as a monolithic bloc. As they differ in terms of geographical origin, socio-economic background, position, and tasks within the organization, so, one can assume, do they differ in their personal motivation. One thing is safe to say: joining the Basij comes with a variety of advantages; some, like scholarships, immediate and material, others, like the feeling of comradeship and the access to a personal network, less measurable, but in no way less valuable. As suggested by one of the interviewees, it is likely that the special benefits that come with Basij membership play a bigger role for those Basij from low socio-economic background.

The case of the IRGC is notably different: since the lower ranks of IRGC are to a large extent filled with conscripts, the question of personal motivation is irrelevant in their regard. The higher IRGC officials, on the other hand, are reportedly divided into at least two different factions: while generally, “the older generation appears to be more security-conscious, and ... closely adheres to revolutionary ideology”, a second, overall younger group “favours business interests over revolutionary ideology.”¹⁵⁶

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¹⁵³ Email conversation, August 2011. The interviewee is a personal acquaintance of the author.
¹⁵⁵ Email conversation, August 2011.
¹⁵⁶ Thaler et al., Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads, p. 63.
At least in regards to the second group of IRGC officers, as well as a certain share of Basij members, Weber’s observation on the transformation of organizations seems to hold true.

5.2 Effects on the Economy

The Iranian economy is marked by a huge and inefficient state sector and an underdeveloped private sector which is largely limited to small-scale workshops, agriculture, and services.\(^{157}\) For years, it has been suffering from high inflation and unemployment rates. While in June 2011, Iran’s economy drew some praise from the IMF for improvements in GDP growth and reductions in inflation, other experts have expressed more scepticism, stressing that Iran’s official economic statistics are usually unreliable.\(^{158}\)

In an open letter to Khamenei in 2005, Sazagara criticized the widespread corruption in Iran and the inefficient state-led economy. To remedy the situation, he proposed to “curtail (the hand of) IRGC companies from (being) contractors of the state” and to cut back their quasi-monopoly in fields like oil transactions, car production, and “tens of other activities”.\(^ {159}\) Sazegara’s diagnosis has been echoed by a study on the Iranian economy, which names the “monopolistic nature of much of the industrial economy” – which, as noted earlier, is a result of the IRGC’s omnipresence in this sector – as one of the reasons for Iran’s economic difficulties.\(^ {160}\)

Without doubt, the IRGC’s dominant position in Iran’s economy is highly profitable for the organization itself, but ostensibly less so for the economy as a whole. Not only businessmen and companies without affiliation to the IRGC – and thus without the backing of its powerful patronage network – stand on the loosing side of the equation; the lack of competition in sectors dominated by the IRGC is likely to result in inefficiency and overly high prices in much of the Iranian economy in general.

In addition, in a situation where patronage is common government practice, the economic policies of the state tend to be guided less by rational calculations as to which

\(^{157}\) CIA World Factbook.
\(^{160}\) Ghadar, ‘Iran at Crossroads’. 
policies would be best for the public good, and rather by the particularistic interests of a comparably small group of patrons and their clients. In 1970s Turkey, this phenomenon significantly aggravated Turkey’s economic difficulties, as the government, focused on pleasing narrow clientelist interests as it was, failed to formulate a coherent economic policy.\footnote{Metin Heper and E. Fuat Keyman, ‘Political Patronage and the Consolidation of Democracy in Turkey’, in Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 34, No. 4, Turkey Before and After Atatürk: Internal and External Affairs (Oct., 1998), p. 265.} The same risk exists in Iran.

5.3 Effects on Domestic Politics

To estimate in which way and to which extent the patronage ties between IRGC, Basij, and the state affect Iran’s domestic politics, it is helpful to assess the political attitude which prevails among the organizations’ members. In the absence of empirical data, this of course can only be speculative, based on specific reported events and anecdotal evidence.

IRGC and Basij are supposed to have constituted an important part of Ahmadinejad’s constituency in the presidential election of 2005\footnote{Bernard Hourcade and Paul Silverstein, ‘In the Heart of Iran: The Electorate of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’, in Middle East Report, No. 241, Iran: Looking Ahead (Winter, 2006), p. 11.}, and Sazegara estimated that, in the first year of his legislature, Ahmadinejad’s policies were "supported by some of the chiefs and personnel of the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij".\footnote{Tahavori, ‘An Interview with Mohsen Sazegara’.} Whatever the extent of IRGC support for Ahmadinejad initially was, however, it started to erode already in late 2006. By then, Iran’s growing international isolation put hardship on Iran’s economy, which, due to its mercantile character, depends on international trade.\footnote{Ansari, ‘Iran Under Ahmadinejad’, pp. 84f.} Ahmadinejad’s provocative appearance on the global stage which aggravated Iran’s isolation seems to have been identified by his former allies in IRGC and Basij as counter-productive to their business interests.

Furthermore, there is strong evidence that in the recent public infighting between the President and the Supreme Leader, the IRGC leadership placed its loyalty with the latter. Thus, for instance, IRGC Commander Jafari asserted in July 2011 the determination of IRGC and Basij to fight against the “deviant movement”\footnote{‘Sepah zabet-e dastgah-e ghaza-yi dar barkhurd ba jaryan-e inhaf ast’, Mehrnews.}, the term commonly used to denote Ahmadinejad’s close circle of ideological allies who promote a messianic, nationalist-religious ideology in contradiction to Khamenei’s more conservative and...
traditional line. In the same month, Ahmadinejad accused unnamed government agencies of using their own dockyards for smuggling. Given the IRGC’s reputation in this regard, the statement was widely interpreted as a thinly veiled attack on the IRGC; and in fact, Jafari felt subsequently compelled to deny the accusations in public.

These recent developments indicate that Ahmadinejad has fallen out of favour not only with Khamenei, but also the IRGC leadership, and – as suggested by his public criticism – does not see any need for, or use in, patronizing the IRGC any further. In turn, the IRGC leaders’ decision to side with Khamenei is, besides possible ideological reasons, likely the result of a calculation as to which one of the two is the more powerful patron. In the history of the Islamic Republic, yet no president who entered a power struggle with the Supreme Leader has emerged victorious from it. This fact has certainly not been lost on the IRGC leadership. (On the other hand, it has even been suggested that the IRGC has become so powerful that it is the Supreme Leader who needs its support more urgently than vice versa. As the cleric Mohsen Kadivar has commented, “Between the [Supreme] Guide and the Pasdaran, everything is so intertwined that one does not know anymore who is ultimately controlling whom.”)

Finally, it should be noted that the political attitudes of the IRGC leadership do not necessary conform to those of lower-ranking Guards and Basij. In fact, while senior IRGC officers endorsed the conservative candidate Ali Akbar Nategh Nuri in the presidential elections of 2001, the totality of IRGC personnel was reported to have voted for the reformist Khatami in even greater proportion than did the general population (73% vs. 69%). It is relevant in this regard that the IRGC has traditionally recruited from the same social base as the universities, a “hotbed of support” for Khatami. Furthermore, it was reported that during the presidential campaign in 2009, Basij members in several cities established offices to support the campaign of reformist candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Ultimately, however, it is the IRGC’s leaders who determine the political course of the organization; with regards to the IRGC’s influence on the balance of power in Iran’s

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168 Ghadar, ‘Iran at Crossroads’.
171 Ibid., p. 29.
172 Sanandaji, ‘Political Factionalism’.
domestic politics, their position is therefore more relevant to consider than that of the lower-ranking IRGC and Basij members.

5.4 Effects on Regime Stability

To estimate the effect which the IRGC clientelist networks and activities have on the stability of the Iranian regime as a whole, several aspects shall be highlighted.

The first one concerns the popular attitude towards the system in place. As Wehrey et al. point out, the extensive clientelism of IRGC and Basij bears the risk of a backlash from those who are disadvantaged by this system. These are notably the private companies and individual businessmen who are regularly sidelined by the IRGC, but also ordinary students or work-seekers who, independent from their qualification, are disadvantaged vis-à-vis IRGC and Basij members as they lack the latters’ powerful personal connections.

In addition, clientelism tends to result in economic and political inefficiency and narrow-interest policies counter to the public good. In post-1950 Turkey, the government’s extensive patronage had a negative effect on popular attitudes toward the state, as it led to “marked popular cynicism and distrust towards politicians” which were seen as “unprincipled, self-serving wheel-dealers”. In Iran, the massive post-election protests of 2009 provided an indication as to how deep and widespread popular frustration with the government is. This is not to say that clientelism is the most, or indeed any, important reason for this anger; nevertheless, clientelism and its political and socio-economic consequences bear the potential to fuel even further the popular anger towards the status quo. An overwhelmingly negative popular attitude towards the state and its institutions obviously does not work favourably for regime stability; and, under certain circumstances – as has been evident most recently in the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ – it may indeed severely threaten the system in place.

In today’s Iran, however, the prospects for such a revolt seem rather slim. This is partly due to the fact that other aspects of clientelism have a positive effect for regime stability.

First of all, as they bring about alliances between members of different socio-economic groups, clientelist relations tend to weaken intra-class solidarity. It is therefore

usually argued that they prevent, or help to prevent, collective class action, which otherwise might turn against the system in place.\textsuperscript{174}

Second, the activities of IRGC and Basij have in fact some positive effect on certain sectors of the populace not affiliated to the organizations. Thus, for example, with its extensive economic activities, the IRGC employs tens of thousands of workers directly or via one of its contractor companies. The Basij, in turn, with their social activities and development projects especially in remote and impoverished regions, improve the living conditions in these areas, which seems indeed to have led to comparably positive attitudes among the rural population towards the Basij.\textsuperscript{175}

Finally, IRGC and Basij members themselves enjoy a variety of advantages in the Iranian society. Senior IRGC officials obtain high profits from the IRGC business conglomerate; students affiliated with the organization are privileged in the allocation of university spots and scholarships; and Basij members from remote areas and low social standing receive useful training and council and possibly find employment through the IRGC’s development projects. Moreover, all IRGC and Basij members have access to the vast and powerful network of informal, personal relations with its many opportunities for patronage. In short, they all benefit from the current status quo. As a consequence, one may assume that they have a natural interest in preserving it. Conversely, if a system were established in which personal merit, popular will, and universal criteria determine the allocation of posts and resources as promoted by some Iranian reformists, they would inevitably stand on the losing side. “This may be a reason why the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij have been so ruthless in handling the [2009] demonstrations”, comments one observer: “They are not just protecting the Islamic revolution; they are also protecting their income and economic position.”\textsuperscript{176}

Unlike in 1978/79, when popular opposition against the Shah was shared by virtually all socio-economic segments of the population, today there is with the Basij and the IRGC a significant share of the population, cutting through class-divisions, which benefit from the status quo. Crucially, the IRGC possesses both the political means – through its personal network – and the physical force – through its military component – to enforce its objectives and, if necessary, clamp down on dissent. As a consequence, the likelihood of a successful popular uprising is significantly smaller than it was in 1979.

\textsuperscript{175} Wehrey et al., \textit{The Rise of the Pasdaran}, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{176} Ghadar, ‘Iran at Crossroads’. 
6. Conclusion

The Islamic Republic is marked by a clientelist system: as the above discussion has shown, it is indeed true that, in accordance with Clapham’s definition, patronage is responsible for a “substantial proportion of total allocations of goods and services” in the Iranian society. Yet this clientelist system is not a creation of the Islamic Revolution. As has been seen, it was in the Pahlavi era, as it is typical for transitional periods, that the basis for modern clientelist structures was laid.

Despite the slogans of social justice and equality which accompanied the Islamic Revolution, clientelism continued to exist and to prosper after 1979. While the first decade of the Islamic Republic was exceptional both due to the war and Khomeini’s charismatic rule, the Rafsanjani administration laid the ground for the transformation of the IRGC (and by extension the Basij) from a pure military organ into a complex, multifaceted organization that is deeply anchored in the Iranian economy and, with its social work, its publications, and its various education and training activities, present in all sectors of society. In the process, the IRGC seems to have lost most of its ideological commitment which used to be one of its defining features in the wake of its creation. Today, it seems, the IRGC is a business entity in the first place, determined to advance its economic interests with all the means at its disposal.

In the absence of empirical data, it is difficult to make statements about the political attitude and ideological commitment of IRGC and Basij members. Many indications suggest that the bulk of ordinary IRGC members, many of whom are conscripts, do not share the hardline-conservative attitudes which the IRGC leadership displays. The case of the Basij is even more difficult, as anecdotal evidence is scarce and contradictory. What is safe to say is that, first, given the size of the organization, it would be illusionary to assume that the attitudes among its members are monolithic; and second, the material and non-material benefits that come with Basij membership create incentives potentially appealing to young Iranians, especially those from low socio-economic standing. In any case, it is ultimately the IRGC leaders who drive the organization. It is their interests and their actions, therefore, which must be looked at in the first place to make predictions on its future course.

From the early days of the organization, the IRGC leadership allied itself to one of the political factions fighting for power and influence. In the wake of the revolution, its ally

177 Clapham, ‘Clientelism and the State’, pp. 6f.
of choice was Khomeini’s Islamic Republican Party, which in turn rewarded the IRGC with special favours for its support. When Khamenei succeeded Khomeini as Supreme Leader in 1989, he chose to ally himself with, and effectively patronize, the IRGC in order to compensate for his deficient authority. At the same time, Rafsanjani with his economic policies laid the fundament for the IRGC’s business activities and, in the process, the expansion of its patronage network. While Khatami seems to have made a genuine if largely futile effort to curtail the IRGC’s influence, Ahmadinejad reinforced the old patronage ties, awarding IRGC companies with a series of lucrative government contracts and appointing numerous IRGC and Basij members and veterans in his government.

The virtual omnipresence of the IRGC in the Iranian state and society has inspired many debates about the fate of the Islamic Republic. While assessments of the future are by nature speculative and to be treated with care, several actual and potential large-scale effects of the IRGC’s clientelist network can be noted. First, the quasi-monopolization by the IRGC of several economic sectors is likely to have negative consequences on the overall performance of Iran’s economy; second, the unequal allocation of funds and privileges, as well as the negative effects on political and economic efficiency that come with widespread clientelist practice, is likely to create a backlash in popular attitude towards the system. On the other hand, the activities of IRGC and Basij also have some positive effects on certain groups, notably the rural, impoverished populace. Furthermore, IRGC and Basij members in general and IRGC leaders in particular benefit from the status quo; one may thus assume they have an interest in maintaining it. Finally, the organization’s political, economic, and military weight provides those who oversee it with the means to enforce this interest.

More likely than the overthrow of the system as a whole, therefore, is a shift in power within the system. As has been seen, in the recent rivalry between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei, the IRGC leadership is backing the latter. This stems probably from the calculation that, as Iran’s formally most powerful figure, Khamenei is in a better position to deliver political patronage than the embattled President. On the other hand, the Supreme Leader, lacking the charisma and theological credentials of his predecessor, needs the political backing of the IRGC to consolidate his authority. A prime example of a clientelist relationship – with the exception that, given the IRGC’s military, economic, and political weight, it is not longer so clear who is the patron and who the client.

In the 2009 presidential election campaign, Khamenei publicly endorsed Ahmadinejad’s candidacy. While it is still to be seen who will be Khamenei’s future
protégé now that Ahmadinejad has fallen out favour, it seems safe to assume that senior Guards will have a say in the choice. Given their political weight, it is not at all unlikely that the next presidential candidate patronized by Khamenei will have an IRGC background himself. An IRGC candidate, in turn, can be expected to function as a patron for his constituency, satisfying their economic interests just as in the case of newly appointed Oil Minister Ghasemi. As all present indications suggest, the political and economic role of the IRGC is still on the rise.
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