Ali Alfoneh


Ali Alfoneh’s *Iran Unveiled* is a thematic examination of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), from its beginnings in 1979 through 2012. Despite the IRGC’s critical role in Iranian politics and foreign policy, scholarship on the organization remains limited. Alfoneh’s book is therefore a welcome contribution to the field. As the author states in the introduction, the book is aimed at policy makers in Washington (rather than scholars and the research community), whose “erroneous understanding of Iran,” he suggests, has “led to failed U.S. policies” towards Iran (p. 1). Fundamental to this line of thinking, and the book’s overall contention, is that Iran’s supreme leader is no longer in charge of Iran; rather, he has been outmaneuvered by the IRGC and plays an increasingly subservient role to its top brass. In the author’s words: “This book aims at correcting the U.S. decision makers’ understanding of the nature of the regime in Tehran by discussing how the IRGC is transforming the Islamic Republic into a military dictatorship” (p. 2).

In support of this provocative argument, Alfoneh has put forward eight chapters that discuss various topics concerning the IRGC. The introduction, Chapter One, briefly outlines the book and each individual chapter. In the second (and first substantive) chapter, the author draws from memoirs of a few founding IRGC members and some later histories to briefly explore the complicated community of small revolutionary groups from which the IRGC emerged. The author maps out these groups and discusses the roles of some of their leaders, such as Mohsen Rafiqdust (who later went on to be the head of the IRGC ministry during the Iran-Iraq War), in putting the IRGC together. The author argues that this factional basis of the IRGC continued to plague the organization as it developed.

Chapter Three is a broad overview of the IRGC’s political role through 2012. Alfoneh argues that the Islamic Republic has essentially been run by two complementary centers of power: the clergy and the IRGC. The latter, in fulfilling its official duty to “safeguard the revolution,” has gradually become a dominant player in Iranian politics. During this time, the author contends, the Guards have been able to infiltrate “all spheres of life in Iran,” a development which has been “transforming Iran into a military dictatorship” (p. 16). These are bold claims. Few would disagree that the IRGC has indeed grown immensely in power since its inception; however, many would also contend that there remain other centers of power and influence in the country (such as the supreme leader’s office and the elected government) that compete with the Guards.
Alfoneh does show that the IRGC has been involved in political suppression since its existence, and has grown more powerful as a result, but the evidence is not there to sufficiently make the case that ‘Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, and all other civilian leaders in Iran “find themselves hostages in the hands” of the IRGC (p. 17).

To be fair, the trajectory of the IRGC’s growth in power that Alfoneh outlines in this chapter looked more ominous under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s government (when the book was written) than it does today, especially in light of Hassan Rouhani’s (June 2013) election. Time might prove Alfoneh right, but so far events in Iran have only muddied the waters. Yet, the crux of the issue that Alfoneh focuses on in this chapter—the IRGC’s role in the suppression of dissent and the growth of its influence in the political sphere—is important, and the author does a commendable job in connecting some aspects of the IRGC’s early history (such as the organization’s broad founding mission) with its expansive place in the Iranian political scene. The author’s larger argument that the IRGC has capitalized on regime in-fighting to increase its influence is also intriguing.

Chapter Four briefly discusses the IRGC’s role as an internal security organization. It focuses on two tangentially related issues: the early history of the Basij popular militia and the IRGC’s mosaic doctrine. The latter, developed and instituted by the IRGC’s then new commander, ‘Ali Jafari, was a restructuring of the organization’s command-and-control, which divided the organization into 31 provincial commands (one for each province and two for greater Tehran), each with some level of autonomy on certain issues. This overhaul—which Alfoneh describes as more in name than in substance—repositioned the IRGC to focus on domestic anti-regime threats, and was designed to help protect the organization from potential “decapitation” attempts by the United States or other outside hostile forces.

The fifth and sixth chapters examine the institution of the supreme leader’s representative to the IRGC and clergy-led ideological “indoctrination” efforts within the organization, respectively. The former chapter is the weightier of the two, wherein Alfoneh describes the foundational elements of the representative’s institution and its legal basis. He calls this institution (comprising the representative himself and the bureaucratic office he oversees) a “commissar,” comparing its intent to that of the commissars of the Soviet system, but admits the Islamic Republic’s version has been less effective. As the author suggests, the institution’s role is limited, with the representative relegated to the role of “spokesman of the Guards in the political life of the Islamic Republic rather than the civilian leadership’s political commissar within the body of the IRGC” (p. 84). Most interesting to this reviewer, is Alfoneh’s unpacking