

Iran's Revolutionary Guards in power bid

by Thierry Lalevée

On Aug. 21, Mohsen Rafik-Dust, minister of the *Pasdarans* or Revolutionary Guards, announced that Iran would soon relaunch a military offensive against Iraq. In the following days, the Iranian media gave much publicity to the sending to the front of some 200,000 new volunteers.

These announcements were generally ignored as so much bluster, consistent with the general view that Iran is currently incapable of an offensive and that a diplomatic settlement may be at hand. The announcements were viewed as merely another step in the now-public fight for Khomeini's succession. The problem is, a new offensive could also occur as part of that faction fight.

Behind the declaration is an attempt by the leadership of the *Pasdarans* to take power. This implies not merely a tough political struggle between warring factions, but also a deadly fight between the highly fanatical *Pasdarans* and the nation's army. Some newspapers have compared this to the struggle between the German Wehrmacht and the hardcore Nazis of the *Waffen SS* during the last years of Hitler's regime.

The *Pasdaran's* objectives are twofold.

First, they wish to achieve military independence from the regular armed forces. They have been busily engaged in a project aimed at beefing up its own military capabilities to rival those of the regular army. Military hardware including tanks, cobra-type helicopters, as well as airplanes have been secretly bought in Ibero-America with the complicity of leading Swiss arms manufacturers, and apparently shipped directly to Iran by the German company Lufthansa. The latest reports indicate that after months of technical training with specialists, the *Pasdarans* may already possess their own air-fleet. This notably includes some 80 of the "PC-57 Pilatus" Swiss training planes which were transformed in Milan into fighting planes and are now in use against Kurdish rebels.

Second, they intend a phase-two dismantling of the regular armed forces, which fought well when it came to freeing Iranian territory from Iraqi occupation, but was dragged down as soon as Iraqi territory was entered. A new offensive, in that regard, could discredit if not destroy the regular army for good.

The fight for the government

The *Pasdarans* have quite a few allies within Iran. This was strongly underlined during the Aug. 15 parliamentary

crisis when several government ministers were rejected by the *Majlis* or parliament, including Dr. Marafi, the minister of health, who is close to Khomeini. Only a last minute intervention by Ayatollah Khomeini, who told the parliament, in effect, "I am dying, and I want the institutions to be stable to die in peace," caused the next round of ministers to be approved.

At the roots of the crisis was the hard core fundamentalist lobby led by Hojatessalam Azari-Ghomi. They want more mullahs in the government to ensure that the clergy, which already controls the *Pasdarans*, the justice apparatus, and a part of the leadership of the army, will have full control of the country. Hence, while four lay ministers were rejected, the parliament immediately approved the appointment of Hojatessalam Mohammed Mohammedi Reyshahri as minister of intelligence.

Reshahri is the third mullah to enter the government, joining Ayatollah Nateq-Nuri, the minister of interior, and Ayatollah Khatemi of the ministry of Islamic guidance. He becomes the first head of a ministry created a year ago to centralize the activities of all the intelligence services: the *Savama*, until then controlled by the prime minister, and the intelligence services of the *Pasdarans* and of the foreign ministry. Reyshahri is thus a super-intelligence czar, whose appointment may not be accidentally related to the bomb which exploded Aug. 23 in central Teheran, killing 20 and tilting the national mood in favor of the hardliners.

War or peace?

Supporting the *Pasdarans* in their bid for power are the *Hezbollahi* (Party of God) which, together with the Guards, have launched a new wave of activism abroad. This has been seen in recent weeks in the demonstrations organized by Iranian pilgrims in Mecca as well as the Aug. 22 ransacking of the Saudi Arabian embassy in Beirut.

However, a major obstacle for the *Pasdarans* and their friends is their inability to gain total control of the Supreme Defense Council, which can alone decide on war or peace. Presiding over the Council is Iran's President, Hojatessalam Khamenei, who primarily represents Moscow's interest within the country. If Moscow decides that a new *Pasdaran*-led offensive against Iraq is the best card to hasten the collapse of Iran and its takeover—the Kremlin's ultimate aim—Khamenei will ally with the *Pasdarans*.

Counterbalancing such influences is the speaker of the parliament, Hojatessalam Hashemi-Rafsanjani, the personal representative of Khomeini within the Council, a position with much weight. Rafsanjani together with former Prime Minister Ayatollah Madhavi-Kani have been busy sending out feelers to the Iraqis on a potential settlement. This may lead nowhere, but together, Madhavi-Kani and Rafsanjani have the backing of the army and of several paramilitary factions, as well as an important theological weight which the *Pasdaran* fanatics cannot ignore.