



## IRAN DEMOCRACY MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of  
Radicalism and Reform in Islamic Republic of Iran

# Iran Democracy Monitor No. 205

April 28, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Military Innovation; Global Health; Iran; Iraq

### PARANOID IN TEHRAN

Even as the Islamic Republic struggles to cope with the national health crisis caused by the coronavirus, regime hardliners remain deeply suspicious of the global community - and wary of accepting assistance from its representatives. Ali Shirazi, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's personal representative to the Qods Force, the IRGC's dedicated paramilitary arm, has denounced the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and called for the countering of its activities in the country. "The enemies of Islam are pursuing their own aims through international and public educational institutions," Shirazi has said. "Under the cover of topics such as human rights advocacy, promoting children's and women's rights, and supporting gender equality, America aims at turning the Islamic lifestyle into a western way of life. UNICEF seeks to achieve the same aims in Iran." (*Radio Farda*, April 13, 2020)

### FULL STEAM AHEAD ON IRAN'S MILITARY BUILDUP...

Iran is currently grappling with the coronavirus pandemic, which to date has exacted a devastating human toll on the Islamic Republic. This, however, does not seem to have had an impact upon the Iranian regime's military priorities. In a recent interview with state media sources, Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi, the head of Iran's navy, disclosed that the country was moving forward with plans to build nuclear submarines. The development of "[nuclear-generated] submarine propulsion is on the agenda of the Navy," Khanzadi confirmed to the Mehr News Agency.

Simultaneously, new details are emerging regarding the Iranian regime's technological advances in another arena: that of unmanned aerial vehicles. In a recent in-depth interview with the official Tasnim News Agency, Col. Akbar Karimloo, the man who has emerged as the IRGC's "drone czar," laid out the growing importance of UAVs to the Islamic Republic's strategic priorities, from reconnaissance and surveillance of Iran's hostile neighbors to monitoring and even counter-insurgency operations against dissident groups and opposition elements within the country. (*Jerusalem Post*, April 19, 2020; *Jerusalem Post*, April 27, 2020)

### ...AS THE REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS DRAW A REDLINE

In the wake of a recent skirmish with U.S. naval forces in the Strait of Hormuz, Iranian military commanders are warning of dire consequences in the event of what they view as future American provocations. "I have ordered our naval forces to destroy any American terrorist force in the Persian Gulf that threatens [the] security of Iran's military or non-military ships," Major General Hossein Salami, head of the IRGC, said in a public speech in the wake of the incident, in which Iranian vessels harassed U.S. navy ships in the Strait. "Security of the Persian Gulf is part of Iran's strategic priorities." "I am telling the Americans that we are absolutely determined and serious in defending our national security, our water borders, our shipping safety, and our security forces, and we will respond decisively to any sabotage," Salami continued. "Americans have experienced our power in the past and must learn from it." (Reuters, April 23, 2020)

### A STEP BACKWARD FOR IRAN IN IRAQ

For years, Iran has held controlling interest in the domestic politics of neighboring Iraq, exerting influence via a vast network of sympathetic Shi'a militias. That control, however, appears to be slipping - at least a little. In mid-April, four of the country's most prominent militias - the Imam Ali, Ali Al Akbar, Abbas and Ansar Al Marjaiya - formally opted to place themselves under the control of the Prime Minister's office.

The move is more than a mere administrative reshuffle. All four groups are ideologically aligned with the Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the influential Iraqi cleric who preaches a quietist strain of Shi'a Islam that is at odds with Iran's activist revolutionary one. As such, their defection represents an important political signal. Back in 2014, Sistani officially blessed the formation of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) - of which these militias were previously part - as a way to combat the rise of the Islamic State terrorist group. Their decision to withdraw from the PMU now reflects Sistani's dissatisfaction with Iran's current, pervasive level of influence over the group - and, by extension, Iraqi politics at large. (*Baghdad Al-Menasa*, April 26, 2020)