



IRAN DEMOCRACY MONITOR

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

Iran Democracy Monitor No. 221

January 5, 2022 **Ilan I. Berman**

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RISE OF THE "INDOCTRINATED TECHNOCRAT"

Recent years have witnessed a profound decline in clerical authority within Iran. For instance, a September 2020 poll by GAMAAN, a Netherlands-based polling institute, found an "unprecedented" degree of secularism in Iranian society, with nearly half of all respondents disclosing a migration away from their faith in recent years. This increasing secularism has created a major problem for the country's clerical elite - one the Iranian regime is actively attempting to solve.

One way it is doing so is through the creation of a new political class of "indoctrinated technocrats" capable of better addressing government shortfalls and grassroots dissatisfaction. Writing for the Tony Blair Institute, scholars Saeid Golkar and Kasra Aarabi profile this cohort, drawn from Iran's premier civil service educational institution, Imam Sadegh University. With the endorsement of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, they note, Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi "is replacing the Islamic Republic's old cohort of specialists – faces familiar to the West like Javad Zarif, a former foreign minister, and Ali Akbar Salehi, a former head of Iran's atomic energy agency – with new, so-called jihadi and *hizballahi* technocrats who have undergone years of intensive ideological indoctrination alongside their skills training."

This cohort now includes key figures in the Raisi government, including economics minister Ehsan Khanoozi, deputy foreign minister Ali Bagheri Kani, and Central Bank of Iran governor Ali Salehabadi. But the consequences are likely to be more than administrative, Golkar and Aarabi note. "These changes, the first of their kind in 42 years, are shifting the power equilibrium in Iran's regime. These replacements are not aimed at displacing Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the clerical regime's ideological army, as the bedrock of Raisi's administration... Rather, Raisi's push to purify the technocracy is precipitating the mass rise of another elite group in Iran – one that is entirely unfamiliar to the West." (GAMAAN, January 2021; Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, November 2021)

THE IRGC'S EXPANDING FORTUNES

The Islamic Republic's most significant strategic actor is getting even stronger. The latest Iranian governmental budget, which was submitted to Iran's parliament, or *majles*, in mid-December, includes a massive funding expansion for the country's clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Per legislation put forth by the government of President Ebrahim Raisi, the IRGC will receive 930 trillion rials (\$22 billion) in fiscal 2022 - more than double the amount that was allocated to it the preceding year.

The expansion is expected to significantly enhance the IRGC's asymmetric warfighting capabilities in its immediate neighborhood. "The IRGC, through its use of proxy militias, drones, unconventional naval warfare and missiles, cost-effectively provides Tehran the ability to inflict costs on its neighbors to ensure [a] deterrent capability," Michaël Tanchum of the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy explains. "With the increased budget, further advances in the IRGC aerospace division's capability to use ballistic missile[s] and next-generation UAVs could shift the strategic equation in Iran's favor without countervailing action on the part of [regional rivals] Saudi Arabia and the UAE." (*Defense News*, December 16, 2021)

CHINA'S IRANIAN FOOTPRINT GETS BIGGER

In the wake of last year's massive quarter-century strategic accord between Iran and China, the PRC is expanding its diplomatic presence within the Islamic Republic. Former diplomats have told the Iran Labor News Agency (ILNA) that Beijing has plans to open a consulate in the Iranian southern port city of Bandar Abbas in the near future. The new diplomatic outpost, they say, is intended as a liaison office for the "leading role" Chinese companies are expected to take in developing Iran's coastal Makran region, which runs along Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province and Pakistan's Balochistan. Iran's government formally approved the establishment of the new Chinese diplomatic outpost in late December. (*Iran International*, January 1, 2022)