

IRGC, Iranian Identity, and the Prospects of a Sassanian Revival

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Disclaimer: This essay presents a strategic and historical analysis of Iranian governance, national identity, and institutional evolution. It is grounded in political realism, historical interpretation, and comparative state analysis, drawing on publicly available historical sources, scholarly literature, and observed patterns in state formation, collapse, and continuity. The essay does not claim normative neutrality or predictive certainty; rather, it advances an analytical framework for examining how power, identity, and institutions interact over long historical time horizons. The discussion of contemporary actors, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), is analytical rather than advocative and does not constitute endorsement, policy recommendation, or political instruction. Historical analogies to the Sassanian period are used for structural insight, not for direct equivalence or deterministic forecasting. Any assessment of public sentiment or institutional trajectory is necessarily provisional and interpretive. The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not represent any organization, government, or institution. This essay does not constitute legal, financial, military, or policy advice. While care has been taken to ensure analytical rigor and internal consistency, historical interpretation involves judgment and uncertainty. Readers are encouraged to engage critically, consult diverse sources, and evaluate alternative explanatory frameworks.

Introduction: The Quest for Iranian Continuity

Since the fall of the Sassanian Empire in 651 CE, Iranian society has experienced a persistent mismatch between indigenous governance and cultural continuity. Foreign conquest, ideological imposition, and political fragmentation repeatedly disrupted the organic development of Iranian statehood. Despite these historical ruptures, the Iranian people have maintained a deep attachment to both pre-Islamic heritage and Islamic civilization, seeking a synthesis that honors history without erasing the spiritual and cultural fabric shaped over centuries. This dual aspiration—preserving Iranian identity while maintaining Islamic tradition—has rarely been realized. Past regimes, including the Safavids, Qajar, Afsharid, and Pahlavi dynasties, often prioritized ideology, dynastic legitimacy, or external validation over durable institutional continuity rooted in Iranian society itself. Contemporary governance, structured around clerical authority, continues to privilege ideological primacy over national integration. This raises a structural question rather than a moral one: when clerical authority recedes, which institution is positioned to inherit effective power, and how might that power evolve?

Popular Sentiment and National Aspirations

Empirical observation of cultural production, historical discourse, and elite signaling suggests that significant segments of Iranian society seek the revival of indigenous state identity—not as imperial nostalgia or dynastic restoration, but as a balanced reclamation of Iranian agency. This aspiration commonly includes:

- Recognition of pre-Islamic history, literature, and governance traditions.
- Continuity of Islamic cultural and spiritual practices as social foundations rather than totalizing political ideology.
- Preference for domestic sovereignty and policy-making grounded in Iranian interests rather than transnational ideological commitments.

This synthesis reflects a pragmatic form of nationalism oriented toward historical continuity and functional governance. It does not inherently privilege clerical rule, nor does it demand secular rupture. Such sentiment creates potential legitimacy for a post-clerical governance structure centered on nationality rather than ideology.

Clerical Power, the Creation of the IRGC, and Institutional Inversion

The Islamic Republic emerged through a clerical seizure of revolutionary legitimacy, but it required enforcement mechanisms to translate ideological authority into durable control. The IRGC was created as that enforcement instrument—tasked with protecting the revolution, suppressing internal threats, and executing the strategic directives of clerical leadership. For decades, the IRGC functioned primarily as an executor rather than an autonomous political actor, operating within a framework defined by religious authority. However, institutional dynamics evolve. Over time, the IRGC accumulated operational experience, economic reach, bureaucratic depth, and internal complexity. While clerical ideology shaped its origins, the organization itself became increasingly multi-factional, incorporating technocrats, nationalists, pragmatists, veterans of asymmetric warfare, and administrative elites alongside religiously motivated members. This diversification matters structurally: an institution composed of multiple power centers is less likely to remain ideologically rigid once its founding authority weakens. If clerical dominance erodes—through demographic change, legitimacy decay, or internal exhaustion—the IRGC is the only institution with the organizational capacity to assume systemic control. Crucially, this would represent not a clerical continuation, but an institutional inversion: the former enforcer becomes the *de facto* sovereign. In such a scenario, ideological clerical priorities are unlikely to remain central. Governance would instead shift toward stability, cohesion, and national survivability—objectives historically associated with state rather than clerical logic.

The IRGC as a Structural Successor State

Viewed through a historical lens, the IRGC increasingly resembles a proto-state apparatus rather than a mere military organization. Its centralized command structures, capacity for territorial administration, economic management, and strategic coordination parallel features of earlier Iranian imperial systems, including the Sassanian state. Like the Sassanians, the IRGC operates across military, political, and economic domains, enabling coordinated national action without reliance on external patrons. Yet historical analogy also warns of failure. The Sassanians collapsed not solely due to external invasion, but because internal factionalism and legitimacy erosion undermined cohesion. External alliances proved unreliable, and overcentralization without adaptive reform weakened resilience. These lessons are directly relevant: IRGC dominance without internal balance or societal integration would replicate historical vulnerabilities rather than resolve them.

Strategic Principles for a Post-Clerical Transition

If the IRGC becomes the dominant governing institution after clerical authority recedes, several principles will determine whether this transition produces consolidation or fragmentation:

- **Ideological Decompression:** Governance must move away from rigid clerical doctrine toward a flexible national framework that accommodates religious tradition without enforcing ideological uniformity.
- **Internal Factional Equilibrium:** The IRGC's internal diversity must be managed institutionally, preventing factional capture while preserving plural operational perspectives.
- **National Integration Over Ideological Export:** Strategic focus must prioritize domestic legitimacy and cohesion rather than external ideological projection.
- **Historical Continuity:** Reintegrating pre-Islamic Iranian identity alongside Islamic heritage can provide symbolic legitimacy without necessitating cultural rupture.

Historical Significance: Completing an Interrupted Cycle

If such a transition stabilizes, it would mark the resolution of a long historical interruption. From 651 CE to the present—approximately 1,369 years—Iranian governance has oscillated between external domination, ideological absolutism, and fragmented sovereignty. A post-clerical, institutionally nationalist state could, for the first time since the Sassanian collapse, align power, identity, and governance within a single coherent framework.

The IRGC as a Historical Instrument

The IRGC possesses structural advantages similar to those of the Sassanian state:

- Centralized authority capable of coordinating military, economic, and political priorities.
- Institutional discipline sufficient to enforce national policy across complex and diverse internal landscapes.
- Capacity to project influence both domestically and regionally without reliance on external patronage.

However, realizing a Sassanian revival requires careful emulation of historical successes. The Sassanians maintained durable relationships—both internally among factions and externally with neighboring states—to prevent fragmentation. They balanced military power with diplomacy and invested in infrastructure and administrative cohesion. Failure to manage internal factions or cultivate genuine alliances contributed to their collapse under Arab insurgencies. Even external dynastic support proved unreliable: the last Sassanian emperor's relationship with Tang China was not genuine, and when the emperor's son symbolically claimed authority under Chinese protection, he received minimal substantive support. Ironically, the Samanids, claiming descent from the House of Mihran, later emerged and preserved Persian history, enabling the works of Ferdowsi and the survival of Iranian cultural memory.

Strategic Principles for a Modern Revival

For the IRGC to lead Iran into a historically resonant and sustainable governance model, several principles are critical:

1. **Integration of Pre-Islamic and Islamic Heritage:** Policies must respect centuries of Islamic tradition while reclaiming Persian identity, literature, and historical continuity.
2. **Genuine Relationship-Building:** External partnerships, regional alliances, and internal factional trust must be cultivated with authenticity, avoiding the errors of superficial or logistically unsustainable investments seen in Sassanian interactions with distant powers like Tang China.
3. **Internal Power Management:** Factional balance within the IRGC is essential. Historical collapse demonstrates that centralized power is vulnerable if internal cohesion fails. Arab insurgencies succeeded not solely due to external pressure but because of internal fragmentation.
4. **Long-Term National Vision:** Strategic patience, investment in domestic institutions, and gradual capacity-building are necessary to ensure that Iran's governance is resilient over decades rather than vulnerable to short-term disruption.

Analytical Lessons from Contemporary Governance and Strategic Thought

The proposed Sassanian revival under IRGC stewardship can be informed by several analytical principles highlighted in [Abdulqasem Bakhshi's work](#):

1. **Power, Knowledge, and Verification ([Nuclear Governance Analogy](#)):**
Robust domestic institutions and disciplined governance are essential to prevent fragmentation, mismanagement, or internal factional conflict. Knowledge and expertise—whether military, administrative, or cultural—must be safeguarded, while external engagement should be guided by genuine relationships rather than short-term tactical alliances.
2. **Managing Asymmetry in Alliances ([Poland Analogy](#)):**
Historical missteps, such as the Sassanians' reliance on Tang China, illustrate the perils of superficial or externally imbalanced partnerships. IRGC-led governance must cultivate authentic alliances that respect Iranian sovereignty and provide mutual benefit, avoiding dependence on distant powers whose priorities diverge from Iran's national interest. Diversified relationships—including those with potential adversaries—can mitigate long-term strategic risk.
3. **Ideology vs. National Interest ([Radical Islamism Analogy](#)):**
Sustainable outcomes rely on institutional balance and strategic pragmatism rather than rigid adherence to absolutist principles. Unlike past clerical or dynastic regimes, IRGC governance focused on nationality could integrate Islamic and pre-Islamic values while maintaining institutional flexibility.

4. Strategic Patience and Long-Term Investment:

Enduring success depends on long-term perspective, incremental capacity-building, and careful management of risk. Hasty centralization, ideological extremism, or reliance on symbolic partnerships historically undermined Iranian statehood; the IRGC must avoid repeating these mistakes.

Conclusion

The prospect of an IRGC-led post-clerical order should not be understood as ideological endorsement or nostalgic restoration, but as structural analysis of power succession. Clerical authority created the IRGC as an enforcer; history suggests that enforcers often outlive their creators. Once clerical dominance fades, the IRGC's internal diversity, institutional capacity, and strategic pragmatism may drive a shift away from clerical priorities toward national ones. Whether this results in durable continuity or renewed fragmentation will depend on the institution's ability to manage internal factions, integrate Iranian historical identity, and govern with long-term national vision rather than inherited ideology.