

Revolutionary Intelligence: The Expanding Intelligence Role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

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# Revolutionary Intelligence: The Expanding Intelligence Role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

## Author Biography

Udit Banerjea is a graduate student at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, studying international relations and international economics, with a concentration in South Asia studies. He is also a South Asia Research Fellow at New America and an Assistant Editor for Foreign Policy's South Asia Channel. Mr. Banerjea focuses on security issues and foreign policy in South Asia and the Greater Middle East. Prior to his graduate studies, Mr. Banerjea worked as a management consultant in Washington, DC.

## Abstract

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is a military and paramilitary organization that is meant to defend the ideals of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979. Since its formation, the IRGC has grown in influence and its intelligence role has expanded. This paper examines the role of the IRGC in Iran's intelligence system through a comprehensive analysis of the organization of the IRGC's intelligence arm, along with its operations and capabilities. In doing so, the scope, objectives, resources, customers, and sponsors of the IRGC's intelligence activities are also analyzed. Additionally, this paper explores how the IRGC interacts with the government of Iran, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), other key internal stakeholders, and foreign client organizations. A key focus of this analysis is the evolution of the relationship between the IRGC and the MOIS and the growing influence of the IRGC in Iran's intelligence community over the last decade. The paper concludes that the IRGC has now eclipsed the MOIS within Iran's intelligence community and is one of the most powerful institutions in Iranian politics today, using its intelligence activities as its key means of maintaining power and influence within the country.

## Introduction

Prior to the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iran's primary intelligence apparatus was an organization known as SAVAK, an acronym for *Sazman-e Ettela'at va Amniat-e Keshvar* (National Security and Intelligence Organization). The pre-revolutionary government of Iran, under the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, had been installed with the help of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and the British, and had aligned with the West in the Cold War. SAVAK was created with the assistance of the United States and Israel in the interest of protecting the Western-friendly Shah's regime from potential communist threats, given Iran's shared northern border with the Soviet Union. SAVAK grew to be a military-dominated organization of expansive scope, with "15,000 full-time agents and thousands of part-time informants."<sup>1</sup> SAVAK developed a reputation for brutality, but up until the 1979 Revolution, it successfully suppressed dissenters to the Shah's regime. SAVAK's brutal repression was an integral factor in the growing unpopularity of the Shah, which culminated in the Islamic Revolution.

In 1979, an Islamic Revolution swept across the country, and a clerical regime led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini took power. Shortly thereafter, the new Islamic government set up a number of small intelligence agencies with various mandates alongside an organization known as SAVAMA (*Sazman Ettela'at va Amniat Melli* Iran), which inherited the pre-revolutionary intelligence apparatus from SAVAK. However, SAVAMA was more interested in finding and eliminating the Revolution's opponents—at home and abroad—than in collecting information. At this time, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) provided most of its foreign intelligence information. A few years after the revolution, the intelligence services were consolidated under the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). MOIS was and remains under the nominal control of the president of Iran, who is elected by the people and is in charge of running the government bureaucracy.

Meanwhile, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was established as an independent security force—reporting directly to the Supreme Leader—to preserve the ideals of the revolution and to serve as a counterbalance to the regular military. The IRGC was created as a guarantor for the Islamic clerical regime that took power in Iran after the 1979 Revolution. The very existence

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Research Division, *Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security: A Profile*, (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2012), 6.

of the IRGC affords the organization special status, as it stands deliberately separate from the country's regular armed forces. The head of the IRGC reports directly to the Supreme Leader, and under Iran's constitution the Supreme Leader alone reserves the right to undertake the "appointment, dismissal, and acceptance of resignation of" the chief commander of the IRGC.<sup>2</sup>

The IRGC was initially tasked with enforcing revolutionary mandates and eliminating counterrevolutionaries. The IRGC eventually assumed an intelligence role, a role which has since expanded greatly.<sup>3</sup> After an opposition movement coalesced in 2009 to protest fraudulent elections, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei, consolidated major intelligence agencies across various organizations under an expanded IRGC Intelligence Organization. The newly-empowered IRGC dismantled the opposition movement and has maintained greater influence in Iran's intelligence system relative to MOIS ever since. Khamenei retains direct control of the IRGC Intelligence Organization as a check on potentially dissenting forces within the government. Meanwhile, the IRGC has grown into a potent political force itself, using its intelligence capabilities to gain control over the internet, telecommunications, and key economic sectors. As a result, the IRGC is arguably the most powerful force in Iranian politics with its own interests, which are, for the time being, mostly aligned with those of the clerical regime and the Supreme Leader.

### *Literature Review*

Research for this paper uncovered a dearth of academic literature on the intelligence role of the IRGC, with most sources focusing on its military and paramilitary operations. Of course, the IRGC's intelligence activities have historically been in support of its military and paramilitary activities, and they are closely linked. But the recent expansion of the IRGC's intelligence role beyond its historic scope has not been adequately covered in academic literature. Moreover, the IRGC is usually treated as a secondary consideration in the exploration of broader topics of research, such as Iran's foreign policy and its nuclear program. Iran's nominally principal intelligence agency, the MOIS, has been covered—most thoroughly in the Library of Congress's Federal Research Division report entitled *Iran's Ministry of*

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<sup>2</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 110, Foundation for Iranian Studies, available at: <http://fis-iran.org/en/resources/legaldoc/constitutionislamic>.

<sup>3</sup> Federal Research Division, *Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security: A Profile*, pp. 6-10.

*Intelligence and Security: A Profile*, which serves as a valuable source of background information on Iran's overall intelligence apparatus for this article. Similar in-depth, comprehensive, and current coverage of the IRGC's intelligence operations, however, remains lacking in the academic context. Given that the IRGC has now supplanted MOIS as the most powerful intelligence organization in Iran, it deserves a greater degree of academic study.

While academic sources have been scarce, journalistic sources on this topic have been relatively abundant. Major newspapers and news magazines have taken the lead on providing analysis of recent developments. Due to the geopolitical importance of Iran to the West, the Western news media has made coverage of Iranian intelligence issues a priority. As the IRGC has evolved rapidly over the past decade, news outlets have been better able to keep up with the changes in the system, while academic journals have lagged behind. While news outlets are excellent at providing great breadth of coverage, they are unable to provide much depth—one notable exception is Dexter Filkins's detailed and excellent profile of the Quds Force and its commander for *The New Yorker*, titled "The Shadow Commander." This exception notwithstanding, a more scholarly approach is required to address this need. Even beyond Iran's intelligence apparatus, the IRGC has grown into arguably the most powerful institution in Iranian politics today, and its intelligence activities are a key means of maintaining power and influence within the country. The IRGC's expanded stature necessitates additional research into this essential topic.

## Organization

The IRGC has historically been a martial organization, having spent its formative developmental years combating Iraqi forces during the Iran-Iraq War. Overall, the IRGC consists of an estimated 125,000 members across all of its divisions.<sup>4</sup> But in addition to its more traditional military forces, which include the IRGC Land Forces, the IRGC Air Force, and the IRGC Naval Forces, the IRGC houses Iran's key unconventional warfare, covert operations, and intelligence forces. These include the Quds Force, the Basij, and the IRGC Intelligence Organization (formerly the IRGC Intelligence Branch). This paper focuses on these non-military divisions, as they are

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces (Rough Working Draft)* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 16, 2007), 3-10, available at: [http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/070816\\_cordesman\\_report.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/070816_cordesman_report.pdf).

responsible for conducting and coordinating the IRGC's intelligence operations.

### *The Basij*

The Basij is a volunteer paramilitary reserve force and the largest security organization in Iran by manpower. The Basij has about 90,000 active personnel and can draw upon a combined active and reserve strength of up to 300,000. When fully mobilized, the Basij is capable of commanding nearly 1,000,000 men.<sup>5</sup> Part of the Basij's mission is to help generate popular resistance against a potential U.S. invasion, with Basij battalions integrated into the IRGC's military forces. However, the main mission of the Basij is riot control and internal security. The Basij serves as a non-sophisticated, decentralized, popular force that can be mobilized across the country on short notice. Basij volunteers were called upon to disperse and arrest protesters after the 2009 Green Revolution, which they successfully did, destroying the momentum of the opposition movement.<sup>6</sup>

### *The IRGC Intelligence Organization*

Prior to 2009, the IRGC Intelligence Branch was the official intelligence arm of the IRGC and had about 2,000 personnel. This division was responsible for gathering and analyzing intelligence in the broader Muslim world and targeting domestic opposition groups and individuals. The IRGC Intelligence Branch was "a largely politicized force with a political mission," whose "conformity and loyalty to the regime are unquestionable."<sup>7</sup> Events in 2009, known as the Green Revolution, however, led to a major expansion in the scope and importance of the Intelligence Branch. Major protests erupted after claims of fraud in the June election, in which Islamist hardliner President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (an IRGC veteran) was officially declared to have won a second term against reformist Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Khamenei and IRGC leaders became concerned that a united opposition movement could threaten the legitimacy of the clerical regime. In the wake of the post-election protests, Iran's intelligence apparatus underwent its largest reorganization since the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989. Ali Khamenei expanded the IRGC Intelligence Branch to form a new intelligence

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<sup>5</sup> Cordesman, *Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Marc Champion, "Revolutionary Guard Tightens Security Grip," *Wall Street Journal*, November 13, 2009, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB125797782460044139>.

<sup>7</sup> Cordesman, *Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, p. 13.

and security division, the Intelligence Organization, within the IRGC that would report directly to his personal office.

The new organization vastly expanded the existing IRGC Intelligence Branch and comprises seven separate intelligence and security divisions, including Khamenei's personal intelligence office known as Department 101, the Internal Security Directorate within MOIS, the Security Directorate of the Basij paramilitary force, and other plainclothes and paramilitary police units.<sup>8</sup> The IRGC Intelligence Organization also includes the newly created Cyber Defense Command. Hojjatolislam Hossein Taeb, a cleric who had been acting commander of the Basij since 2008, was named the head of the IRGC Intelligence Organization. Taeb, who has served in the IRGC since 1982, is an ardent Khamenei loyalist. He had been a student of Khamenei during the 1979 revolution and he is a friend of Khamenei's son.<sup>9</sup>

While it is evident that the reorganization was undertaken as an effort to more effectively quell internal dissent from protesters and politicians alike in the aftermath of the fraudulent elections, it is unclear where the decision originated or how it was finalized. The creation of the IRGC Intelligence Organization was not a standalone event. Simultaneously, the IRGC conducted a secret purge within MOIS, removing hundreds of intelligence agents and directors from their positions.<sup>10</sup> This solidified the IRGC's control of Iran's intelligence apparatus and weakened the government's ability to challenge the IRGC's authority and to impede its activities in cracking down on dissenters.

Khamenei and the clerical regime undoubtedly felt threatened by the protests and the public challenges to their legitimacy, and the reorganization provided greater protection for them. Khamenei suspected that key MOIS officials sympathized with the opposition and would present a dangerous internal threat. But arguably the even bigger beneficiary to this reorganization (and purge) is the IRGC itself, which was able to assume much greater influence and power once the dust settled. It is likely that Khamenei and IRGC leaders acted in concert, as they found their interests to be aligned, as they so often

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<sup>8</sup> "Iran Exile Group Says Khamenei Tightens Intelligence Grip," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 12, 2009, available at: [http://www.rferl.org/content/Iran\\_Exile\\_Group\\_Khamenei\\_Tightens\\_Intelligence\\_Grip/1876444.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Iran_Exile_Group_Khamenei_Tightens_Intelligence_Grip/1876444.html).

<sup>9</sup> "Iran's new spymaster," *Iran Focus*, June 20, 2010, available at: [http://www.iranfocus.com/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=20815:irans-new-spymaster&catid=29:exclusive-reports&Itemid=121](http://www.iranfocus.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20815:irans-new-spymaster&catid=29:exclusive-reports&Itemid=121).

<sup>10</sup> "Iran's new spymaster," *Iran Focus*.



have been. Ultimately, the clerical regime was able to maintain its legitimacy through a show of force, which was provided by the IRGC. In turn, the IRGC reduced its oversight, removed rivals within MOIS from positions of power, and took over key MOIS functions.

Tensions over intelligence matters between Khamenei and the government have continued since the 2009 shake-up. In April 2011, Ahmadinejad had removed the intelligence minister, Heydar Moslehi, from his cabinet, as was his right as the elected head of the government. Only a month later, in May, Ahmadinejad was forced to accept the MOIS head back into his cabinet after Moslehi was publicly reinstated to his post by Khamenei. The move by Khamenei was less about Moslehi's value in intelligence and more about publicly demonstrating of the limits of the government's power in such matters. Moslehi was far from a competent intelligence minister—he had a history of inventing foreign plots, and he publicly denied the success of the U.S. raid that killed Osama bin Laden, claiming to have evidence proving bin Laden had long since died of illness.<sup>11</sup> In effect, Khamenei strong-armed Ahmadinejad into keeping an incompetent intelligence minister in his cabinet as a check on his authority over intelligence matters. This development further eroded the government's oversight and control over the country's intelligence system, to the benefit of the IRGC.

### *The Quds Force*

The third major intelligence organization within the IRGC is the Quds Force, which is the most difficult to delineate. The Quds Force is primarily responsible for all Iranian intelligence activities and covert operations conducted abroad. However, the Quds Force often works very closely with Iran's other intelligence organizations, including MOIS, which can blur the distinction in responsibilities.<sup>12</sup> The size of the Quds Force is estimated to be 15,000 personnel<sup>13</sup>—though the true size is hidden even from the Iranian Parliament<sup>14</sup>—located in bases both in and outside of Iran. In many of Iran's embassies abroad, the Quds Force has sections that are closed off to most of

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran's Ahmadinejad affirms Khamenei decision, tensions remain," *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2011, available at: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/irans-ahmadinejad-affirms-khamenei-decision-tensions-remain/2011/05/08/AFpK82QG\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/irans-ahmadinejad-affirms-khamenei-decision-tensions-remain/2011/05/08/AFpK82QG_story.html).

<sup>12</sup> Federal Research Division, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security: A Profile, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Cordesman, Iran's Revolutionary Guards, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Scott Shane, "Iranian Force, Focus of U.S., Still a Mystery," *New York Times*, February 17, 2007, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/17/world/middleeast/17quds.html>.

the embassy staff. Members are selected for both competency and their allegiance to the Islamic principles of the 1979 revolution. New recruits are trained in Shiraz and Tehran before being sent for indoctrination at the Jerusalem Operation College in Qom.<sup>15</sup>

The Quds Force is divided into units called directorates based on regional scope. There are at least five such directorates: 1) Iraq; 2) Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan; 3) Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India; 4) Turkey and Arabia; 5) Central Asian former Soviet Republics, Europe, North America, and North Africa.<sup>16</sup> After receiving training, rookie Quds Force operatives are deployed for several months on missions to Afghanistan and Iraq to gain field experience.<sup>17</sup> The Quds Force maintains close relationships with Iranian client organizations like Hezbollah—active primarily in Lebanon—and Shia groups in Iraq. Within the Quds Force, a secret group known as Department 9000 was responsible for providing training and support to Shia insurgents in Iraq to combat U.S. forces during the U.S. occupation.<sup>18</sup>

The Quds Force has been led by a man named Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani since 1998. Suleimani has been described by one former CIA officer as “the most powerful operative in the Middle East today.”<sup>19</sup> Suleimani is a powerful figure within the Iranian intelligence community, and his influence has made the Quds Force an important stakeholder in determining Iran’s foreign policy. At times, Suleimani has been personally involved in shaping political developments in the regions, as demonstrated when he negotiated a truce in 2008 between the Mahdi Army, the Shia militia, and Iraqi government forces—although the Quds Force itself had been propping up the Mahdi Army.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Suleimani has often communicated indirectly with senior U.S. officials, including General David Petraeus, the commander of coalition forces, and Ryan Cocker, the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq as a negotiating tactic in the Iran-U.S. proxy war in Iraq.<sup>21</sup> Evidently, Suleimani wields considerable autonomy in the deployment of Quds Force operatives and in communicating with foreign officials, and the influence of the Quds Force is closely tied to his political stature.

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<sup>15</sup> Dexter Filkins, “The Shadow Commander,” *New Yorker* 89, no. 30 (September 30, 2013): 10.

<sup>16</sup> Cordesman, *Iran’s Revolutionary Guards*, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Filkins, “The Shadow Commander,” p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Hosenball, “Tehran’s Secret ‘Department 9000,’” *Newsweek*, June 4, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Filkins, “The Shadow Commander,” p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> “Iran’s ‘invisible man,’” *Middle East* no. 392 (August 2008): 28.

<sup>21</sup> Filkins, “The Shadow Commander,” pp. 1-23.

## *Intelligence Operations and Capabilities*

The IRGC's intelligence activities include both domestic and foreign operations. Domestic operations are focused on internal security issues and eliminating dissent. These are primarily conducted by the Basij paramilitary force and the IRGC Intelligence Organization's cyber intelligence divisions. Foreign operations are usually directed at the United States and its allies in the Middle East, principally Israel and Saudi Arabia, or to preserve or expand Iranian influence in the region. The IRGC supports and coordinates with foreign client organizations that serve as proxies for Iranian interests, principally through the Quds Force. The IRGC also has a history of conducting targeted killings of individuals seen as particularly harmful to the clerical regime. Underpinning all of these operations and capabilities are the vast economic resources of the IRGC, which it generates through its involvement in the Iranian public and private economy.

## *Internal Security*

During the 2009 post-election protests, the IRGC led the crackdown on opposition supporters, making arrests through the Basij paramilitary force. The Security Directorate of the Basij was moved under the newly expanded IRGC Intelligence Organization, and the head of Basij, Hassan Taeb, was named head of the IRGC Intelligence Organization—Taeb was thus likely personally leading the crackdown. The IRGC held political prisoners in Evin prison in Tehran, in the “2A” ward operated by the IRGC. This ward was off-limits to regular prison guards, judiciary officials, and even MOIS officials. In a sign of the open power struggle between the IRGC and the government bureaucracy, the information ministry warned journalists that the IRGC had taken control of security in the country and that their contacts at MOIS would not be able to help locate or release them if arrested.<sup>22</sup>

## *Foreign Proxies*

The IRGC has consistently supported foreign armed groups that further Iranian interests in the Middle East and beyond. After the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Quds Force played an integral role in the creation and development of Hezbollah. Qassem Suleimani, now the head of the Quds Force, has developed close ties with Hezbollah leaders and oversaw the delivery of Iranian rockets to Hezbollah for use against Israel in the 2006

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<sup>22</sup> Champion, “Revolutionary Guard Tightens Security Grip.”

war.<sup>23</sup> Suleimani and the IRGC are also suspected of being involved in the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri, the former prime minister of Lebanon.<sup>24</sup> The IRGC has also at times supported Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in their operations in Palestine.<sup>25</sup>

During the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, the Quds Force supplied Shia insurgent groups and, in some cases, even Sunni insurgents with training and materiel to conduct a proxy war against the United States and its coalition partners.<sup>26</sup> In December 2006, U.S. forces captured the head of operations for the Quds Force in Iraq, and a month later, another five Quds Force operatives were captured carrying diplomatic passports.<sup>27</sup> Over the past few years, the IRGC has also been shipping arms to Shia Houthi rebels in Yemen, including AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades.<sup>28</sup> Iran has increased its involvement in Yemen as Saudi Arabia has begun conducting extensive air strikes, setting off a proxy war between the two regional rivals. A similar rebellion with IRGC backing in Bahrain was put down through Saudi intervention.<sup>29</sup>

The IRGC has also been highly active in supporting Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria against Sunni-dominated rebels. Iran views the Assad regime in Syria as a vital link to Hezbollah. In August 2012, Syrian rebels captured forty-eight Iranian nationals, suspected by Western intelligence agencies to be members of the Quds Force, within the country. Suleimani took personal control over Iran's involvement in Syria, coordinating efforts between the Syrian military, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, and other IRGC commanders. Quds Force members currently in Syria are estimated to be in the thousands.<sup>30</sup> Suleimani has invested a great deal of personal effort in supporting the Assad government, and consequently, the IRGC is likely to remain invested in that goal as well.

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<sup>23</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, "Odd Twist for Elite Unit Guiding Iran's Proxy Wars," *New York Times*, October 12, 2011, available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/12/world/middleeast/new-plot-is-odd-twist-for-irans-elite-quds-force.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/12/world/middleeast/new-plot-is-odd-twist-for-irans-elite-quds-force.html?_r=0).

<sup>24</sup> Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> "Iran's 'invisible man,'" p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> Hosenball, "Tehran's Secret 'Department 9000.'"

<sup>27</sup> Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Eric Schmitt and Robert F. Worth, "With Arms for Yemen Rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role," *New York Times*, March 15, 2012, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/middleeast/aiding-yemen-rebels-iran-seeks-wider-mideast-role.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>29</sup> MacFarquhar, "Odd Twist for Elite Unit Guiding Iran's Proxy Wars."

<sup>30</sup> Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," pp. 4-5.

### *Targeted Attacks*

Iran has a history of conducting targeted killings and mass bombings to eliminate key opponents of the regime or to send a political message. American and Argentine officials believe that the IRGC was involved in the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires and the 1994 bombing of a Jewish Center in the same city, which combined to kill over 100 people.<sup>31</sup> Other attacks linked to the IRGC include the bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996 and the assassinations of Kurdish Iranian opposition figures in the early 1990s. The IRGC's Quds Force likely coordinated with MOIS to carry out these attacks. Under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, beginning in 1997, such large scale attacks were abandoned to prevent the increased international isolation of Iran.<sup>32</sup>

While the IRGC has not carried out a major attack on a similar scale in recent years, smaller operations have continued. The Quds Force attempted over thirty attacks on foreign soil between 2011 and 2013, including in Thailand, India, Nigeria, and Kenya. Most prominently, the IRGC attempted to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the United States. A Quds Force agent approached a Mexican drug cartel to detonate a bomb at a Washington, D.C. restaurant where the Saudi ambassador would be eating. The plan was immediately uncovered, however, as the cartel member approached was an informant for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.<sup>33</sup>

### *Cyber Intelligence and Signals Intelligence*

The IRGC has taken on a significant role in internet surveillance and censorship in recent years. The Iranian government formed the Supreme Council for Cyberspace in 2012 to consolidate oversight of the country's internet service providers. While Ahmadinejad was still president, he served as the head of the council at the behest of Supreme Leader Khamenei. Thus, the government wields significant statutory authority over the internet in Iran. But the IRGC maintains powerful channels of influence. First and foremost, the IRGC controls Iran's leading internet service provider. The internet sector was privatized in 2009, and the IRGC successfully bid for a controlling stake of the Telecommunication Company of Iran, the country's

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<sup>31</sup> Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> MacFarquhar, "Odd Twist for Elite Unit Guiding Iran's Proxy Wars."

<sup>33</sup> Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," p. 6.

dominant service provider, through an affiliated shell corporation called the Mobin Trust Consortium.<sup>34</sup>

The IRGC has also launched its own official website, Gerdab, which it uses to track the activities of suspected dissenters and to post public denouncements of them. Moreover, the IRGC also controls the Center for the Surveillance of Organized Crime and the Working Group for Determining Criminal Content, powerful groups with broad powers to censor and track internet users, through the IRGC Intelligence Organization's Cyber Defense Command.<sup>35</sup> In addition to its internal surveillance activities, there is evidence that the IRGC's cyber espionage extends outside Iran's borders as well. According to translations by an Israeli blog that covers Iranian military issues, the IRGC posted on its Gerdab website in 2010 that it's "cyber teams' had hacked '29 websites affiliated with the U.S. espionage network.'"<sup>36</sup>

To date, Iran's signals intelligence (SIGINT) capabilities are limited. As of 2006, Iran was operating two SIGINT stations in northern Syria and in the Golan Heights in cooperation with the Syrian government, with two additional SIGINT stations expected in northern Syria by 2007. These SIGINT stations are funded and operated by the IRGC and are used mainly to provide intelligence support to Hezbollah forces in Lebanon.<sup>37</sup> The IRGC also has the capability of flying reconnaissance aircraft to collect intelligence, but this capacity is limited to minor missions using only a few purpose-built aircraft. It is likely, however, that the IRGC monitors and tracks internet activity to collect domestic signals intelligence through its control of Telecommunication Company of Iran, the Center for the Surveillance of Organized Crime, and the Working Group for Determining Criminal Content.

### *Economic control*

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Slackman, "Elite Guard in Iran Tightens Grip with Media Move," *New York Times*, October 8, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Iran profile, "Special Edition: Surveillance," *Reporters Without Borders* website, available at: <http://surveillance.rsf.org/en/iran/>.

<sup>36</sup> "IRGC on the web," Iran Military News website, available at: <http://iranmilitarynews.org/irgc-on-the-web/>.

<sup>37</sup> Oliver Jones, *Iran insights – Iran's intelligence and security apparatus*, Newcastle: UK Defence Forum, 2011, available at: <http://www.ukdf.org.uk/assets/downloads/RS84CIraninsights-Iran%E2%80%99sintelligenceandsecurityapparatusx.pdf>.

After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, Iran began to privatize its economy under Khamenei and President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in an effort to spur economic growth. Privatization has accelerated over the last decade, with \$120 billion of Iran's public sector assets being sold off in that period. However, according to the Principal Vice President, only 17 percent of these assets are in the "true private sector," while the rest of the assets have been turned over to quasi-governmental organizations.<sup>38</sup> These quasi-governmental organizations include the IRGC and various IRGC-linked companies and associations, like the Mobin Trust Consortium which purchased the aforementioned Telecommunication Company of Iran, one of the largest publicly traded companies in Iran.

During this period of privatization, the IRGC has bought up controlling interests in various major economic ventures, most with some sort of security angle. Most of these purchases are conducted by nominally intermediate financial institutions, like the IRGC and Basij Cooperative Foundations, which are entirely controlled by the IRGC (and the Basij).<sup>39</sup> The IRGC controls pipelines, airports, illegal jetties, and a major bank. The IRGC-owned construction company Khatami Al Anbia regularly receives massive contracts for infrastructure projects, including \$342 million in 2007 to develop the Chah Bahar seaport and \$850 million in 2010 for several no-bid contracts in oil and natural gas development.<sup>40</sup>

But the increased economic activity of the IRGC has been publicly criticized in some sectors of Iran. The vast network of IRGC-linked companies has led to significant embezzlement. In 2009, the government blocked the purchase of a mine by an IRGC-linked company because the purchase price was far lower than the market value. Other IRGC and military leaders have been publicly chastised for corruption, and in 2013, a prominent businessman with close ties to the IRGC leadership was arrested in Turkey on corruption charges. Current President Hassan Rouhani has opposed greater economic involvement from the IRGC, cancelling several government contracts with the IRGC and associated firms in response to accusations of corruption.<sup>41</sup> In 2013, Khamenei himself told the leaders of the IRGC "that protecting the

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<sup>38</sup> Akbar Ganji, "Iran: The High Cost of the IRGC's Economic Might," *The National Interest*, December 4, 2013, available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/iran-the-high-cost-the-irgcs-economic-might-9495>.

<sup>39</sup> Ali Alfoneh, "All the Guard's Men: Iran's Silent Revolution," *World Affairs* 173, no. 3 (September/October 2010): 76.

<sup>40</sup> Ganji, "Iran: The High Cost of the IRGC's Economic Might."

<sup>41</sup> "Goon squad," *The Economist*, November 1, 2014.

revolution does not mean protecting the economic and political domains, hence expressing his displeasure with the IRGC's involvement in both politics and the economy."<sup>42</sup>

The IRGC's involvement in Iran's private sector economy has also made it vulnerable to international economic sanctions. Western intelligence agencies have become acutely aware of the IRGC's economic entrenchment, and they have attempted to use this to their advantage when devising sanctions. IRGC officers involved in the black market may actually be benefitting from the sanctions, as it drives a greater share of economic activity into their domain. But these IRGC officers are low- or mid-level officials with little political clout. High-level leaders of the IRGC have economic interests in larger companies that are negatively impacted by the sanctions.<sup>43</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Over the past decade, the IRGC has become the dominant intelligence organization within Iran, and arguably the dominant political organization as well. This is the result of several factors: a coordinated effort along with Khamenei to purge and weaken MOIS while consolidating power; the reputation and influence of individual IRGC leaders like Suleimani; and the gradual entrenchment of the IRGC in Iran's economy. Significant challenges to the IRGC's current position remain, however. Internal dissent remains the IRGC's greatest threat, and the danger of a Green Revolution coming to pass in full is ever-present. The IRGC was able to mobilize the Basij to disrupt the movement in 2009, but as social media and other potentially socially-disruptive technologies continue to evolve and as international economic sanctions continue to take their toll, it may be more difficult to contain it the next time. Economic sanctions are also hurting the economic interests of the IRGC itself, as the top leaders have a great deal of economic exposure through investments in large companies being targeted. Moreover, if the IRGC's participation in the Iranian economy continues to grow, it may contribute to more public resentment of corruption, eroding the legitimacy of the IRGC.

The stated mission of the IRGC is to defend the doctrine of the 1979 revolution. In theory, this is a vague enough mandate that could be interpreted in many different ways. But in practice, this translates to the preservation of the Iranian clerical regime, led by the Guardian Council and the Supreme Leader. Consequently, the fate of the IRGC is linked with the

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<sup>42</sup> Ganji, "Iran: The High Cost of the IRGC's Economic Might."

<sup>43</sup> "Goon squad."



fate of the Iranian theocracy. The two forces have formed a symbiotic relationship that keeps the current system in place. But if that system is threatened, the IRGC's leadership will have to adapt to a rapidly evolving environment to preserve its position of dominance. The IRGC has to-date supported the government's nuclear talks with the United States and other world powers, with Qassem Suleimani even defending the chief negotiator and foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif against hardliners in the Iranian parliament.<sup>44</sup> Should Iran reach a deal with the United States and thereafter establish more normal relations, the political, social, and economic landscapes in which the IRGC operates are likely to change significantly. In such circumstances, the pragmatic voices in the IRGC may choose to reexamine the organization's role in and relationship with the political sphere.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.