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Query response on Iran: Information on the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) [a-11755-2]

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Non-English language information is summarised in English. Original language quotations are provided for reference in the document or upon request.

General information and legal framework

According to Article 150 of the Iranian Constitution of 1979 (last amended in 1989), the IRGC acts as “the protector of the revolution and its achievements” (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989, Article 150). This defensive duty of the IRGC is reaffirmed in the Statute of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of 1982 (MRG, 26 June 2020, p. 14)

The US Congressional Research Service (CRS) describes the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as “a military and internal security force, and an instrument of Iran’s regional policy”, with Major General Hossein Salami its commander-in-chief (CRS, 29 July 2021, p. 6).

The IRGC answers directly to the Supreme Leader (CFR, 6 May 2019). As per Article 110 of the Constitution of 1979 (last amended in 1989), one of the functions and authorities of the Supreme Leader is “[t]o appoint, dismiss, or accept resignations of [...] [the] Chief Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.” (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989, Article 110).

As the US Department of State (USDOS) notes in a June 2020 report, “[t]he IRGC is composed of five primary branches: the IRGC Ground Forces, IRGC Air Force, IRGC Navy, the Basij, and the IRGC-Qods Force (IRGC-QF).” (USDOS, 24 June 2020, chapter 5)

A June 2020 report by the Minority Rights Group International (MRG) includes the following general overview of the IRGC:

“Unlike the army, which is primarily responsible for protecting Iran’s frontiers, the IRGC’s main role is to protect the revolution and the Islamic Republic. Hence, its ideological role has given it a unique position within the security and political structures of the country. It is important to note that the IRGC is a multifaceted entity: as well as being a military organisation, it has entrenched political, cultural, ideological and economic dimensions. In fact, a very large segment of the Iranian economy is controlled by the IRGC. The IRGC plays a decisive role in the intimidation and prosecution of those whom it considers a threat. The IRGC’s Intelligence Organization is the most powerful security entity in Iran and can affect court rulings through its allied judges. In the frontier regions such as Kurdistan and Baluchistan, where most people are ethnic and religious minorities, the IRGC is known for both brutality and the suppression of dissent.

The IRGC’s domestic paramilitary force, the Basij or Mobilisation Force, is present across Iran. Basij members are present at universities, schools, governmental organisations and have formal bases in neighbourhoods across the country. It has played a dominant role in cracking down on street protests. Although many of its members are young volunteers, it is one of the

main security entities of the Islamic Republic and is widely accused of violations of human rights. The Qods Force, established in 1990, is the formal expeditionary force of the IRGC, tasked with advancing Iran's national security interests and strategy outside the country. It is known for clandestine activities overseas and directing major military operations in the region, including in Syria and Iraq." (MRG, 26 June 2020, p. 13)

The BBC News states that the IRGC-controlled paramilitary Basij Force has "helped suppress domestic dissent, while through its Quds (Jerusalem) Force, "[t]he IRGC exerts influence elsewhere in the Middle East by providing money, weapons, technology, training and advice to allied governments and armed groups". Apart from these entities, the IRGC also controls "the powerful bonyads, or charitable foundations, which run a considerable part of the economy". (BBC News, 3 January 2020)

As of April 2020, "approximately 190,000 people were serving in the IRGC", according to a June 2020 Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) report authored by Saeid Golkar, a political scientist at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga (USA). (WINEP, June 2020, p. 13).

Historical evolution

As Golkar explains in the WINEP report, the IRGC was created in May 1979 with the aim of protecting the Islamic Republic "against a possible coup by Iran's conventional army, the Artesh." (WINEP, June 2020, p. 2). "Answering to Iran's supreme leader, its command structure bypassed the elected president" and "operated beyond the bounds of the law and the judiciary" (CFR, 6 May 2019)

The structural changes the IRGC subsequently underwent during the 1980s and 1990s are outlined in the WINEP report as follows:

"At the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, in September 1980, the IRGC was rapidly expanded to include ten departments. It incorporated the National Mobilization (Basij-e Melli), which was created independently several months earlier, on April 30, 1980. The Basij became one of the IRGC's units and was renamed the 'Downtrodden or Oppressed Mobilization' (Basij-e Mostazafan) in 1981. Moreover, the war necessitated the division of the Guard into three branches (air force, ground force, and navy), parallel to the Artesh, on September 17, 1985. The IRGC could no longer simply perform the function of protecting the clergy given the war against a formidable external adversary.

Despite calls by some politicians, including Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, for the IRGC to be dissolved and merged with the Artesh at the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the Guard was instead expanded into five branches thanks to support from its newly selected leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Both the Artesh and the IRGC fell under the coordination of the Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS).

Since 1990, the IRGC has added one new branch, the Qods (Jerusalem) Force, [...] was established [...] to implement the regime's regional and international policies, export its revolution, and defend its regional interests.

Closer to home, the Downtrodden Basij unit was upgraded and renamed the Basij Resistance Force. The goal was twofold. First was to build a social base for Ayatollah Khamenei, who suffered from a lack of religious and charismatic authority held by his predecessor, the Islamic Republic's founding leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Second was to maintain the regime's social and political order through moral policing and the suppression of internal dissidents. [...]

To achieve the regime's political goals, the Basij structure was dramatically expanded, including through the creation of Basij Resistance Areas to manage provincial-level Basij forces. For the purpose of suppressing internal unrest, the Basij also established security/military battalions called Ashura and al-Zahra, for male and female Basij members respectively, from 1991 onward. The Basij was a major tool in Ayatollah Khamenei's domestic political repertoire in the second decade after the 1979 revolution—namely, the control of pragmatists (embodied in the Kargozaran Party) and reformists (eslahtalaban)." (WINEP, June 2020, pp. 2-3)

As Golkar goes on to say in the same report, the post-9/11 US invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq led to the adoption of a new military doctrine around 2005 that "focused specifically on a possible confrontation with the United States". This "territorial defence doctrine" comprised a "layered and flat defense" strategy based on four layers of territorial defence, with a specific IRGC unit or the Artesh assigned to each layer:

"The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, changed the Islamic Republic's threat perceptions and 'accelerated the pace of Iranian military change at the cognitive, doctrinal and organizational levels.' [...] Based on these lessons, and

focused specifically on a possible confrontation with the United States, the Khatam al-Anbia Central Headquarters produced a new doctrine, called the 'territorial defense doctrine,' based on Iran's strengths and weakness. [...]

Another element of Iran's new military doctrine involves a tactic known as layered and flat defense. [...] The Iran-U.S. battlefield should have four layers, the territorial defense doctrine asserted: one beyond Iran's borders, in other countries (IRGC-QF [Quds Force]); one along Iran's border (Artesh); one scattered throughout Iran's interior (IRGC-GF [Ground Force]); and one operating in Iranian provinces, especially in urban areas, making each province a separate battlefield (IRGC-PG [Provincial Guard])." (WINEP, June 2020, p. 4)

The role of the IRGC GF in defending the country's interior, which includes countering insurgent groups and securing political order, is explained in the same report as follows:

"The IRGC-GF would be a third layer of defense located deeper within the country. Its mission: to assist the Artesh ground forces in defending the country and halt invading enemy forces. The IRGC-GF— the backbone of the Guard—has eleven regional commands throughout the country, with each responsible for the IRGC land brigades and battalions in their respective areas of responsibility. [...] The main objective is to defend the Islamic Republic against the possibility of high-intensity warfare and low-intensity challenges such as insurgency or civil war. The IRGC-GF is also responsible for countering 'armed semi-hard threats,' such as insurgent groups, and securing political order should it be threatened by mass uprising. Since 2001, it has fought against the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Kurdistan—both the Iranian province and sometimes even in Iraq—and against Sunni Baluchi groups such as Jundallah in Sistan and Baluchestan province." (WINEP, June 2020, p. 5)

At the provincial and local level: IRGC Provincial Guard and Basij

The same source goes on to describe the role and structure of the IRGC Provincial Guard, a unit that was formed in 2008 and is "responsible for managing and utilizing all IRGC and Basij members in each province" (WINEP, June 2020, p. 7):

"The IRGC has one Provincial Guard command in each of Iran's provinces except Tehran, which received two Provincial Guard units, one for the city of Tehran, and a second for other cities in Tehran province. Right now, the IRGC has a total of thirty-two Provincial Guard units throughout the country.

Horizontally, each Provincial Guard unit mimics the structure of the IRGC and is therefore composed of three main branches: military command, counterintelligence, and Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader. The Organization for the Protection of Intelligence (Sazeman Hefazat-e Ettelaat) is primarily responsible for protecting the IRGC's personnel against both physical and moral threats and identifying foreign spies, while the Supreme Leader's representative focuses on indoctrinating, and mobilizing, the IRGC and the Basij. [...]

According to Iran's administrative divisions, each province is divided into several counties. Iran has 437 counties, and the IRGC has created 502 IRGC Basij regions. [...] Furthermore, each county is divided into several districts comprising multiple cities and rural districts [...]. The Provincial Guard has created at least a few IRGC-Basij districts for each city in its provinces. For 3,915 urban and rural areas throughout Iran, 8,823 IRGC-Basij districts have been formed. [...]

The Provincial Guard controls and manages Basij bases, units, and associations, which are dispersed throughout society. According to Brig. Gen. Gholam Reza Soleimani, the IRGC controlled 54,000 Basij bases in 2020, more than 16,000 of which were created after 2009. Out of those 54,000, 23,000 are located in mosques. In addition to these bases, the Basij has created 40,000 Basij strata associations and 60,000 'pupil' Basij units in 105,000 schools throughout the country" (WINEP, June 2020, pp. 6-7)

Moreover, the same report emphasises the role of the Basij force's Fatehin special force and the IRGC Provincial Guard's Imam Ali battalions in suppressing protests and countering insurgency and other domestic security issues:

"The Basij also has a special force called Fatehin ('victorious'), made up of members who have passed through more military training, including work with snipers. [...] Although the Fatehin is not explicitly an anti-riot force, it has been used to suppress mass unrest and social protests since 2018. According to Gen. Muhammad Yazdi, commander of the Tehran Provincial Guard, the effectiveness of the Fatehin unit in suppressing the November 2019 protests convinced the IRGC-PG to strengthen these units more than ever before. [...]

The Provincial Guard is also involved in countering semi-hard threats such as insurgency and other internal security challenges. The IRGC not only created an independent intelligence organization parallel to the Ministry of Intelligence and Security in 2009, it also developed a new series of units called Imam Ali battalions, comprising cadre and active members. Administratively, an Imam Ali battalion aligns with the Basij district or precinct level. Just to clarify, Imam Ali battalions [...] are anti-riots units responsible for suppressing internal dissent and maintaining order.

Imam Ali battalions in each province, under control of the Provincial Guard's security unit, have their training, education, and logistics coordinated through a central command called the Imam Ali Headquarters, led by former Basij head General Gharib Parvar and reporting directly to the IRGC commander. Imam Ali Headquarters proved its high efficiency in suppressing the mass uprisings in November 2019. Imam Ali battalions in each city have a close relationship with the Iranian police (NAJA by its Persian acronym) as a means of effectively controlling society. [...]

Members of Imam Ali battalions have been used for security patrols in the neighborhoods where they operate. The Basij has always played a role in any initiative related to morality policing and patrolling society. Although morality policing was discontinued after 2008, Gharib Parvar announced the relaunch of the Basij patrolling plan a decade later, in 2018. [...] Security patrols also enlist IRGC informants to identify any groups or individuals in their neighborhoods seen as posing a threat to the regime. Of course, not all Iranians are being watched, but Basiji snitching on colleagues is common within the state bureaucracy, university system, and elsewhere. The intelligence department in each IRGC-PG unit is directly subordinate to the IRGC's Intelligence Organization (Sazeman-e Ettelaat va Amniyat-e Sepah), an entity that was established in 2009 and has since been expanded under the management of Hossein Taeb." (WINEP, June 2020, pp. 15-16)

Intelligence activities

The IRGC's intelligence activities and the role of its IRGC Intelligence Organisation are further discussed in an August 2021 report of the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, authored by Saeid Golkar and Kasra Aarabi:

"The IRGC has been involved in security and intelligence operations since its inception. However, the Guard's domestic intelligence units were disbanded in 1984, when the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (VAJA) was established to incorporate several security and intelligence organisations under one roof. During Khatami's administration, the IRGC's internal intelligence branch became active again on Khamenei's orders due to the 1998 purge of the VAJA after the so-called chain murders of Iranian intellectuals by VAJA personnel.

Today, the IRGC's security-intelligence vertex is embedded in the Guard's Intelligence Organisation, which was officially created in 2009 after the antiregime Green Movement riots. Hard-line cleric and IRGC member Hossein Taeb was appointed as the head of this new body. The IRGC's most central security commanders in Iran, including Hossein Nejat, belong to this centre of power. Like the Guard's political arm, the security-intelligence vertex is strongly aligned with the Office of the Supreme Leader. Hard-line cleric and IRGC member Hojatoleslam Gholam Hossein Ramazani, head of the Counter-Intelligence Organisation in the Office of the Supreme Leader and former head of IRGC counter-intelligence, is a perfect example of someone who belongs to the IRGC's security-intelligence vertex.

The main priorities of the Guard's security-intelligence focus are to repress dissidents, maintain political order and safeguard Khamenei's regime." (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, August 2021, p. 28)

A March 2021 article by Azadeh Zamirirad, a researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), notes that during the Rouhani presidency [2013 – August 2021], the IRGC Intelligence Organisation expanded its power base, including vis à vis the Ministry of Intelligence:

"Rouhani's promise of a less securitized domestic sphere never materialized. While groups like Ansar-e Hezbollah continued to pressure the government outside the formal realm, institutionalized security actors, most notably the Intelligence Organization of the IRGC, managed to expand their power base. The IRGC's intelligence branch assumed a much larger role in domestic security, when it was restructured to counter 'internal threats' in the aftermath of the 2009 mass protests that followed the controversial re-election of Ahmadinejad. It has since sidelined the Ministry of Intelligence, which falls under the authority of the government, while the president has no say or power when it comes to the IRGC.

Khamenei has further empowered the Intelligence Organization in recent years in the face of perceived rising domestic threats, allowing it to become a ‘full-fledged intelligence service.’ Today it assumes a broad range of responsibilities, including countering protests, combating terrorism [...].” (Zamirirad, March 2021, pp. 5-6)

IranWire also provides an overview of the activities of another organisation tasked with intelligence duties, the IRGC Cyber Defense Command:

“The IRGC Cyber Defense Command [Farmandehi-e Padafand-e Cyberi] was established in 2014. It is the IRGC’s cyber intelligence organization. Its missions include monitoring and prosecuting organized cybercrimes, terrorism, espionage, and fighting against online destruction of cultural and social values, tracking insult or defamation of revolutionary values, upgrading users’ security in cyberspace, and producing content. The IRGC’s Center for Investigating Organized Cybercrimes, and Gerdab (Whirlpool) website are two units in this organization.

The IRGC Center for Investigating Organized Cybercrimes was established in 2007 and is also known as the ‘cyber army.’ The cyber army has been involved in various famous cyber operations, including ‘Mozellin’ (Deceivers) which tracked and shut down pornographic websites in Iran, as well as operations which tracked and suppressed cyber political dissidents such as ‘Mersad,’ ‘Woodpecker,’ and ‘Deep Sedition.’ These operations resulted in the arrest of dozens of cyber activists and web administrators.” (IranWire, 9 April 2019)

Ideology

As regards current ideological strands within the IRGC, the August 2021 Tony Blair Institute for Global Change report by Golkar and Aarabi notes that “[w]hile the IRGC is a hard-line organisation that is absolutely committed to the Islamic Revolution, a subtle ideological spectrum exists within the Guard, rooted in ideological nuances among the core constituency that makes up the IRGC’s recruits.”:

“In broad terms, the IRGC’s social fabric consists of the Islamist or religious right of the regime’s support base – the hizbullahi constituency. Within this base, one can identify three main political ideologies: regime protectors, followers of Khamenei’s cult of personality and so-called Islamist justice seekers.

Regime Protectors

Preserving the regime and its interests is the most important goal for religiousright regime protectors. Individuals in this category defend the regime regardless of its structure, policies or leaders. [...] As a result, of all the ideological strands of the Islamist right, this group is the most pragmatic and opportunistic. For example, despite being on the hard-line Islamist right, members of this group are prepared to deal with the US – as with the 2015 international agreement on Iran’s nuclear programme – if it is in the interest of preserving the regime. This strand of political ideology is visible among the IRGC’s ranks and senior IRGC commanders, including Shamkhani.

Followers of Khamenei’s Cult of Personality

The most prevalent political ideology among IRGC members, not least the Guard’s senior ranks, is based on Khamenei’s cult of personality. Followers of this ideology support the regime on the basis of clerical superiority and the idea of velayat-e faqih [Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist]. This strand is centred on absolute devotion to the supreme leader as God’s representative on Earth and the deputy of the Twelfth Imam. As such, for this group, following the practical, day-to-day commands of the supreme leader is more important than any other priority. Absolute obedience to Khamenei’s orders always comes first for members of this group, even if implementing those orders puts the regime’s existence at risk. [...] Through rigorous indoctrination and selection processes as well as lucrative rewards for loyalty, including promotions within the ranks, this strand of political ideology is most prevalent among senior commanders of the Guard, including the late Qassem Suleimani and Hossein Salami.

Islamist Justice Seekers

The so-called Islamist justice seekers (edalat khahan-e eslami) are perhaps the smallest but most fanatical group of the IRGC’s religious-right constituency. As ideological purists, those who subscribe to this strand of political ideology support the regime because of its Islamist policies and what they consider to be just. From their point of view, the supreme leader and the regime are legitimate as long as they follow and implement Islamic sharia law, most importantly in terms of justice. For these ideological purists, advancing these policies, which

they consider to be rooted in religious scripture, is the most important goal, higher than protecting the interests of the regime and the supreme leader. There are no visible examples of followers of this strand of ideology among the IRGC's senior ranks because rigorous mechanisms ensure that only absolute Khamenei and regime loyalists are given senior positions. However, given that Islamist justice seekers have a strong following among the socio-economic class from which the IRGC's members are drawn, this political ideology can be expected to exist in the Guard, albeit tacitly." (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, August 2021, pp. 30-31)

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