

## **Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps** Its Foreign Policy and Foreign Legion

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**Abstract:** Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) pursues missions both domestic and foreign, chief of which are to maintain the power of the Islamic Republic of Iran and to expand Iran's prestige throughout the world. This article explores the wide-ranging political and military capabilities of the IRGC, including its export of Iran's Islamic Revolution to neighboring countries; its antagonism toward Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States; its command of a multinational, multidivision Shia Liberation Army; and its financial support for numerous proxy terrorist groups that are active in the Greater Middle East region.

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“We in the axis of resistance are the new sultans of the Mediterranean and the Gulf. We in Tehran, Damascus, and Hezbollah’s southern suburb of Beirut, Baghdad, and Sanaa will shape the map of the region. We are the new sultans of the Red Sea as well.”

~Iranian journalist Sadeq al-Hosseini<sup>1</sup>

Iran’s leadership is kept in power by its praetorian guard, the *Sepāh e Pāsdārān e Enqelāb e Eslāmi*, or Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC has both domestic and external missions. Its domestic security wing, the Basij, and expeditionary arm, the Qods Force, work in tandem with Iran’s other significant intelligence organization, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS).<sup>2</sup> The men and women of the IRGC serve as intelligence and security personnel; paramilitary land, air, and sea forces; special operators; prison guards; and interrogators. They are also morality police, cyberwarriors, university professors, and business operators.

Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran’s first supreme leader, dreamed of a 20-million-strong army of pious Shia youth recruited from a highly vetted grid of seminaries and universities to create a “new Islamic civilization.”<sup>3</sup> Though the IRGC numbers far fewer, it remains a formidable force. The Basij, the IRGC’s morality and antiriot police, is an inescapable presence in Iran. In uniform and civilian garb alike, its members enforce the social code of Iran’s mullahs. The

Basij was first established in 1980 as an independent agency and merged into the IRGC one year later.

The Qods Force, the IRGC's expeditionary unit, has trained and equipped proxy groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia insurgencies, and elements of the Taliban. Some of those surrogates target Western forces in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> The presence of the IRGC and militias under its control offers Iran both prestige and power throughout the region. The IRGC also controls Iran's most destructive military capabilities. It oversees the development of nuclear weapons and sophisticated missiles, and its military forces could be used against U.S. targets in a future conflict.

The United States has imposed incremental economic sanctions on the IRGC in recent years. The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control designated the IRGC a foreign terrorist organization in October 2017, and the U.S. Department of State followed in April 2019.<sup>5</sup> In announcing the latter measure, President Donald J. Trump explained that the United States recognized "the reality that Iran is not only a State Sponsor of Terrorism, but that the IRGC actively participates in, finances, and promotes terrorism as a tool of statecraft."<sup>6</sup>

### **A Vision of the World**

Iran's foreign policy is implemented, in part, by the IRGC. Ruling mullahs call Iran the epicenter of the Muslim world and feel morally compelled to spread revolutionary Shia Islam globally. The Qods Force serves as Iran's direct mechanism for projecting power in the Greater Middle East and elsewhere throughout the world.<sup>7</sup> Since coming to power in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has also supported Shia militias abroad.<sup>8</sup> The IRGC currently controls several divisions of foreign fighters, just as the Soviets led international brigades in the

Spanish Civil War and the Nazis commanded non-German *Schutzstaffel* (SS) divisions during World War II.

By 2018, Iran controlled or heavily influenced four capitals of Middle Eastern states—Damascus, Syria; Beirut, Lebanon; Baghdad, Iraq; and Sanaa, Yemen.<sup>9</sup> Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei referred to the situation in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria as signs that God favors Iran and “will assist [Iranians] with victory.”<sup>10</sup> With his ever-growing prestige in the Shia world, Khamenei uses foreign policy to boost Iran’s status, expand its power base in the Middle East, export its revolution, and battle its enemies. Iran also uses the IRGC to promote influence well beyond the Middle East by involving its personnel in foreign embassies, charities, and religious organizations worldwide.<sup>11</sup> After the Iranian Revolution, Iran developed close relations with several anti-American regimes in Latin America, including left-wing governments in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.<sup>12</sup>

Since 1979, Iran has openly vowed to export its revolution, and the mullahs and the IRGC have held to that pledge. The IRGC is hailed as the custodian of many causes, from liberating Jerusalem and safeguarding Islam to combating the leadership of the United States’ allies and proxies in the Middle East.<sup>13</sup> The IRGC projects Iran’s influence on the Arabic-speaking side of the Persian Gulf.

Iran’s regional power is entrenched, bold, and dynamic. The IRGC has built a land bridge through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, fulfilling an ancient Persian and modern Iranian strategic goal of creating a contiguous route to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>14</sup> According to a former commander of the IRGC, Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the IRGC’s foreign mission is to aid revolutionary movements, resistance movements, and oppressed peoples worldwide.<sup>15</sup> In addition, Khamenei has said, “Whether in Syria, Iraq, or Lebanon, if there is a

need for help, we will help.”<sup>16</sup> The current IRGC commander, Major General Hossein Salami, claimed that the IRGC could block all exports through the Strait of Hormuz, through which one-fifth of all global oil consumption passes.<sup>17</sup>

Iranian intelligence operatives and diplomats partner closely together abroad.<sup>18</sup> The Qods Force is particularly well-represented in foreign embassies, since its staff and leadership tend to be ideologically committed and highly trained.<sup>19</sup> Like other branches of the IRGC, the Qods Force is charged with ensuring the regime’s survival. Unlike other departments, however, its central role is propelling Iran to become the most significant power in the region.<sup>20</sup> The commander of the Qods Force, Major General Qassem Soleimani, presently leads multinational armies.<sup>21</sup>

The U.S. government has defined the Qods Force as a “branch of the IRGC that conducts sensitive covert operations abroad, including terrorist attacks, assassinations, and kidnappings, and is believed to have sponsored attacks against coalition forces in Iraq.” Major General Jafari affirmed in 2016 that nearly 200,000 Shia youths from across the Middle East were organized and armed under the command of the Qods Force, which supports non-Iranian Shia by providing arms, funding, and paramilitary training.<sup>22</sup> Qods Force employees are often posted in Iranian embassies, charities, and religious and cultural institutions that support Shia Muslims.

While providing some humanitarian support, Qods Force personnel also engage in paramilitary and destabilizing operations, including plots to kill. Iran’s proxies, such as Hezbollah, have previously targeted Israelis abroad, such as in Europe, India, and Thailand.<sup>23</sup> Qods Force operatives likely participated in the lethal attack on a Jewish center in Argentina in 1994, which was later called the “Latin American 9/11.” It is also presumed that the IRGC directed the 1996

Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia and many insurgent attacks in Iraq since 2003.<sup>24</sup>

In Syria and Iraq, children supporting the Islamic State and children supporting Iran sometimes fight each other. Former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Hailey noted in 2018 that Tehran had produced many films and television shows to recruit children. Those IRGC-produced films encourage boys to become “the protectors of the holy places” in Syria. Similarly, the Islamic State recruits boys to become “Cubs of the Caliphate.” Children in both societies are raised in aggressive environments and trained in weapons use early in their adolescence.<sup>25</sup>

## **World Conquest or Defeat**

**Map 1.** Map of the Middle East



Source: Perry-Casteñeda Library, University of Texas at Austin

During the Cold War, Ayatollah Khomeini saw the Third World as an arena to defeat Western influence. Before the Iranian Revolution, Iranian activists, namely Ali Shariati and Mostapha Chamran, rallied to promote their theories of universal

social justice. Today, the IRGC tries to outflank American, European, and Israeli diplomatic and economic efforts in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Latin America, and elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Iran contests U.S. global influence, and the Third World provides many venues and opportunities for unconventional and nonkinetic warfare.<sup>27</sup>

The IRGC pursues three primary foreign policy goals. The first goal is to use international initiatives to build Iranian regional dominance in the Middle East and western Afghanistan. The second goal is to export the revolution. Since the early days of the Islamic Republic, the IRGC has tried to disseminate Khomeini's ideas, particularly to states with significant Shia populations.<sup>28</sup> The third goal is to support states that attack enemies of Iran.

As in Adolf Hitler's Germany and Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, Iran's rulers are ideologically driven to pursue vast conquest. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler proposed steps by which he would forge a racial German empire extending to the Ural Mountains. Lenin's Red Army drove west in 1920 to master Europe, but it was halted by the Poles during the Battle of Warsaw. After the Soviets captured Berlin in 1945 at the end of World War II, Stalin began building satellite states in Eastern Europe.

Iran, too, has global goals, and it uses the IRGC to achieve them. Mullahs display a lachrymose nostalgia when they speak about a Greater Iran.<sup>29</sup> The ancient Persian Empire extended throughout the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan. Since 1979, Iranian leaders have wanted to reestablish Greater Iran, stretching from Israel to Afghanistan and based loosely on the pre-Islamic Persian Empire, to advance Iran's strategic position.

King Abdullah II of Jordan is credited with coining the term *Shia Crescent* to describe the region in which Iran has threatened the larger Middle East since the fall of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein in 2003.<sup>30</sup> Today, the IRGC's Qods

Force can move personnel and materiel—including weapons and military equipment—through that land corridor. Iran also possesses an air bridge to Damascus International Airport and other Syrian airfields.

Like the IRGC's first goal of generating regional mastery, its second goal of exporting the revolution promotes Iran's prestige and political power. That goal emphasizes the global mandate of spreading Iran's state religion of Twelver Shia Islam and Khomeini's religious, spiritual, and political beliefs to large Shia minorities currently existing in Afghanistan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Yemen.<sup>31</sup> In Latin America, Iran has already created a base to export revolutionary ideas, and it hopes to further project its influence throughout the Western Hemisphere.

The third major goal of the IRGC is combatting Iran's declared enemies, the most reviled of whom are the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. A leading IRGC-controlled media outlet claims that those three countries "finance terrorists and provide them with weapons."<sup>32</sup> Iranian hatred of the United States is deep and enduring. Early in his adulthood, Khomeini named the United States the "Great Satan," a moniker that endures today.<sup>33</sup> Historical disputes between the two countries still cause friction. Iranian leaders often clamor that the United States has dominated weaker countries for centuries and proclaim that the United States intends to destroy Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>34</sup> In Iran, there are broadcasts, television shows, movies, songs, and video games with the theme of destroying America.<sup>35</sup>

Iranian leaders have also repeatedly pledged to annihilate Israel, which they call the "Little Satan." An IRGC commander even went so far to declare that destroying Israel was a central national goal.<sup>36</sup> Khomeini coined the saying, "The path to Jerusalem goes through Karbala," which means that the path to the ultimate Islamic goal—ownership of Jerusalem—passes through Iranian-

controlled areas that have historically been part of Sunni hegemony.<sup>37</sup> The annihilation of Israel is a reoccurring theme among the mullahs and their devotees.<sup>38</sup> Speaker of the Parliament of Iran Ali Larijani called Israel the “mother of terrorism” and the greatest disaster of the twentieth century. In 2015, Khamenei predicted that Israel would no longer exist in 25 years.<sup>39</sup>

Today, many Iranian leaders look to the final days of Israel’s existence. A missile bearing an inscription in both Hebrew and Persian that reads “Israel should vanish from the page of time” was displayed at an IRGC exhibition in 2018.<sup>40</sup> Iran loudly supports Palestinian nationalism and militancy, and it underwrites and trains Hezbollah as well as various Sunni Palestinian militant groups.<sup>41</sup> Iran has transformed Hezbollah into a combat force with powerful military capabilities, perhaps unrivaled by any other nonstate actor. An Israeli general conceded that Hezbollah’s arsenal “would not shame any army in the world.”<sup>42</sup>

Since the 1990s, Iran has partnered with Hamas, the largest and most powerful of the Palestinian Islamist groups. In 2018, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif vowed his country’s continued backing of the “Palestinian resistance movement,” an expression used to describe anti-Israel terror groups.<sup>43</sup> In January 2019, the commander of Iran’s Air Force, Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh, said that his pilots hoped to strike into the heart of Israel: “The young people in the Air Force are fully ready and impatient to confront the Zionist regime and eliminate it from the Earth.”<sup>44</sup>

The Iranians also loathe the Saudis, whom the mullahs see as mortal enemies and heirs to usurpers of true Islam. That ancient rivalry is likely to continue indefinitely because Iran feels duty bound to defend the world’s Shia from Sunni.<sup>45</sup> IRGC-affiliated publications accuse the Saudis of promoting economic warfare and harming Iranian pilgrims to holy sites in Saudi Arabia.<sup>46</sup>

Consequently, the Qods Force has sponsored lethal attacks on Saudi and U.S. personnel and property in Saudi Arabia, such as a June 1996 truck bombing in the city of Dhahran that killed 19 U.S. servicemembers.<sup>47</sup>

Iranian intelligence operatives from both the IRGC and MOIS tried to kill senior Saudi statesman Adel al-Jubeir in 2011. Speaking impeccable English and wearing well-tailored suits, al-Jubeir was long a fixture on the diplomatic circuit. However, for Iran, he represented both the Saudi royal family and Muslim collaboration with the United States. An Iranian-born Texas man was ultimately charged in the plot to kill al-Jubeir. In another instance, Belgium charged an Iranian diplomat who worked at the Iranian embassy in Vienna, Austria, and three other individuals with planning to bomb a meeting of an exiled Iranian opposition group in France in 2018.<sup>48</sup> That same year, Denmark accused Iran of plotting to assassinate an Iranian Arab opposition leader on Danish soil.<sup>49</sup>

All three of Iran's main enemies—the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia—take Tehran's threats seriously. While their leaders disagree on many issues, they dread the prospect of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons and fear its burgeoning conventional capability. Saudi Arabia's former ambassador to the United States, Khalid bin Salman, called on the international community to meet the Iranian threat and take the rhetoric of Iranian leaders seriously. He urged the world "not to approach Iran with the sort of appeasement policies that failed so miserably to halt Nazi Germany's rise to power," such as the Munich Agreement of 1938.<sup>50</sup>

Echoing those sentiments, former U.S. national security advisor John R. Bolton opined that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the 2015 agreement by which the United States released billions of dollars in exchange for Iran's postponing weaponizing its nuclear program, was the "worst act of appeasement in American history."<sup>51</sup> Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu

stressed in 2018 that Iran has been persistently and aggressively developing its nuclear weapons program.<sup>52</sup> Like bin Salman, Israeli statesman and historian Michael Oren drew parallels to the 1930s, when Western forces appeased Nazi Germany as the latter built a vast arsenal of advanced weaponry to conquer neighboring countries.

### **Iran's Three-Phased Plan**

Iran possesses a flexible, grand strategic plan to spread its influence globally. In several parts of the world, the Qods Force uses nonmilitary tactics, techniques, and procedures to build influence. When testifying before Congress about the IRGC's penetration in Latin America, U.S. national security analyst Joseph M. Humire explained Iran's three-phased strategy to gain influence there. Humire's model has broad application for Iran's efforts to gain sway in many Third World, non-Muslim-majority countries.<sup>53</sup> The phases—first, cultural and economic influence; second, diplomatic impact; and third, military penetration—usually progress sequentially, but they can occasionally occur contemporaneously.

The first phase is developing cultural and economic influence. Iran uses cultural activities to infiltrate and proselytize foreign states, first by cultivating prominent Shia in those states and then by introducing operatives into the broader Shia community, which may involve outflanking Sunni sheiks and mosques. Iran subsidizes building new mosques to be run under the direct or indirect control of Teheran. In 2015, U.S. Marine Corps general John F. Kelly, commander of United States Southern Command, testified that Iran had built 80 cultural centers in Latin America alone. General Kelly reported, "The purported purpose of these centers is to improve Iran's image, promote Shi'a Islam, and increase Iran's political influence in the region. As the foremost state sponsor of terrorism, Iran's involvement in the region and these cultural centers is a matter

for concern, and its diplomatic, economic, and political engagement is closely monitored.”<sup>54</sup>

As the Qods Force establishes a cultural beachhead in targeted countries, it expands its economic influence through both legal and illicit activity. In Latin America, that involves using corrupt systems to influence political outcomes. According to the nongovernmental organization Transparency International, Latin America is among the world’s most corrupt regions. In Venezuela and Argentina, for example, Iran has passed funds to politicians in hopes of receiving favors.

The second phase is diplomatic. While some diplomatic activity in Iranian embassies, consulates, and associated offices is authentic, Iran also conducts intelligence and influence operations under the guise of diplomacy. Sometimes, the IRGC and MOIS partner with host-nation intelligence services. Other times, they act autonomously and in violation of the host nation’s laws and agreements. Iran uses diplomatic personnel to promote film festivals, book fairs, and youth activities to spread its influence. Iranian staff working in foreign embassies target three particular communities: women; young people; and, in the case of Latin America, indigenous groups. Iran uses what Joseph Humire refers to as a *soft-power cultural strategy*, such as broadcasting a Spanish-language, 24-hours news service throughout Latin America. In addition, Iran’s embassies also serve as a hub for military sales and purchases of strategic minerals.

The third phase is military penetration. In many Middle Eastern states—particularly Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria—Iran’s military presence is evident. In other countries, however, Iran’s military and intelligence footprints are far more subtle. In Latin America, Humire points to an example of cooperation between the

Iranian Basij and Venezuelan political, military, and intelligence leaders in which both sides have exchanged lessons learned from counter-protest tactics.<sup>55</sup>

### **The Shia Liberation Army**

The Islamic Republic of Iran has long championed Shia militias abroad.<sup>56</sup> IRGC personnel are positioned in countries throughout Latin America, North Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia. Since the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, Iran has trained, funded, and equipped Shia recruits from international sources.<sup>57</sup> It also calls on Shia volunteers to fight alongside Iranian soldiers, and many Shia have answered the call. Nearly 4,600 foreign nationals have been killed wearing Iranian military uniforms, most of whom were Shia Afghans and Iraqis who had taken refuge in Iran, while others came from Bahrain, India, Kuwait, and Pakistan.<sup>58</sup> By 2017, there were approximately 80,000 foreigners organized into various groups that were working with the Iranians in Syria.<sup>59</sup>

The Shia Liberation Army (SLA) is made up of non-Iranians serving under the control of Tehran and led by Qods Force commander Major General Soleimani.<sup>60</sup> The SLA's three divisions are supplied with armored personnel carriers, artillery, antitank guided missiles, man-portable air-defense systems, and small arms. Some SLA recruits are sent to one of the Qods Force's military training camps inside Iran to undergo basic training courses, which typically last between 20 and 45 days. Those who pass proceed to advanced training courses on logistics and support as well as advanced weapons skills. Those more specialized courses cover strategy and warfare, explosives, mortars, and sniper tactics.<sup>61</sup>

Iran's tactics are not new to the global landscape. During several significant wars of the twentieth century, armies used foreign nationals to augment their ranks. Foreign nationals either served in international divisions,

fought with independent-but-affiliated units, or were inducted directly into the host's armed forces. The French Foreign Legion is perhaps the best-known and longest-enduring example.

The Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Iran have all commanded foreign personnel in units often termed *international bridges* or *international divisions* (table 1). The Soviets recruited Communists and antifascists to fight in the Spanish Civil War in the late 1930s. Each commander was a Stalin loyalist and confirmed Communist, while many of the 35,000 volunteers of the Soviet International Brigades were dedicated Communists, as well. The defense of the Spanish Republic against Spain's Nationalist faction was romanticized among Western intellectuals, particularly Britain's Bloomsbury academics and American celebrity journalists such as Ernest Hemingway.<sup>62</sup>

Nazi Germany also created international units to serve during World War II. SS leader Heinrich Himmler built foreign divisions of SS to fight for the Reich, particularly after the German defeat at Stalingrad in early 1943. The *13th Mountain Division* of the Waffen SS, also known as the "Handschar," recruited Balkan Muslims to serve in its ranks. The Mufti of Jerusalem, then living in Berlin, called them to Jihad. After the Axis were defeated in 1945, nearly 4,000 traveled to Syria to fight with the Arab Liberation Army against Palestinian Jews.<sup>63</sup> Volunteers in the German SS, as with those in the Spanish International Brigades, were often starry-eyed, unemployed men who hoped to craft a new world.<sup>64</sup>

Like the Soviets and Nazis before them, Iranian leaders have built a legion of foreign volunteers to fight for a common cause. The SLA is composed of three divisions of men who wear a standard uniform, carry a single banner, and are commanded by Iranians. They include an Afghan division, the Fatemiyoun; a Pakistani division, the Zaynabiyoun; and an Iraqi division, the Hayderiyoun (figure 1).

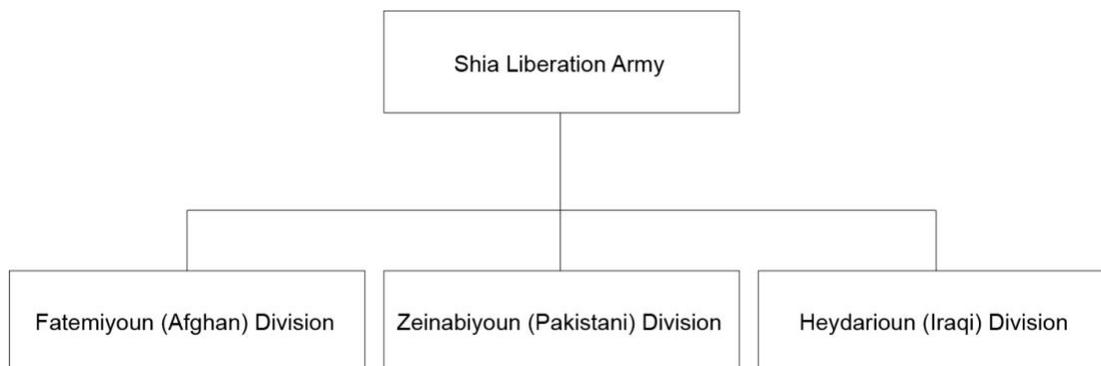
There are three underlying reasons why many Afghans, Iraqis, and Pakistanis join the SLA: poverty, religion, and resentment. Many recruits face unemployment or underemployment, are depressed and destitute, and have few prospects for economic success at home. They need to provide for themselves and their families, and they see service in the SLA as a means to do so.

Most recruits are also religiously devout and find Khomeinism appealing. Just as foreigners were drawn to the Soviet cause during the Spanish Civil War or the Nazi regime in World War II, many Shia see Iran as an advocate for their cause. In Iraq, they guard an-Najaf and Karbala, two cities particularly revered by their religion. There is also much resentment among Middle Eastern and South Asian populations toward the secondary social, religious, and economic status that Shia hold in Sunni-dominated countries. Historically, Shia needed to hide their religion when they lived under Sunni suzerainty. For many Iranians, this ancient rivalry still gates. Many Shia continue to live under that sufferance today in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Islamic World.

**Table 1.** Selected foreign military units under the control of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Iran

|                               | <b>Soviet foreign forces during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)</b>  | <b>Nazi Waffen SS foreign forces during World War II (1939–45)</b>  | <b>Iranian Qods force-controlled foreign forces today</b>   |
|-------------------------------|--|---|---|
| <b>Names of notable units</b> | British Battalion; Lincoln Battalion; Sixth of February Battalion; 24 Battalion; Dimitrov Battalion; and more                                    | SS Viking; Fleming Division; 1st Ukrainian Division; Cossack Division; Charlemagne Division; Nederland Division; Nord Division; Handschar Division; and more                            | Fatemiyoun Division; Zaynabiyoun Division; Hayderiyoun Division; Hezbollah Division   |
| <b>Nationalities</b>          | British, Irish, American, French, German, Italian, Polish, Belgian, Cuban, Canadian, Balkan, and many others—a total of 50 countries represented | Those from countries allied with or occupied by Nazi Germany, including French, Spanish, Belgian, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Balkan, Finnish, Norwegian, British, Arab, and many others | Afghan, Pakistani, Iraqi, Lebanese, and others  |
| <b>Theater of operations</b>  | Spain  | European theater of World War II  | Greater Middle East, most notably Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen   |
| <b>Operational control</b>    | Commanded by Spanish operatives within the Soviet Union’s interior ministry  | Generally commanded by German SS officers   | Commanded by Qods Forces officers   |
| <b>Military capabilities</b>  | These divisions included few professional soldiers, many of whom were brave but untrained  | Some units, including the Viking and Nord Divisions, were highly regarded, while others, such as the mostly Muslim Handschar Division, performed relatively poorly in battle            | Some units, namely Hezbollah, are relatively professional and highly trained by the standards of modern Middle Eastern armies |
| <b>Results</b>                | 35,000 combatants, half of whom became casualties  | 275,000 foreign personnel in all divisions at the maximum strength of each division   | International divisions are still deployed  |

**Figure 1.** Organization of Shia Liberation Army



*The Afghan Division*

Today, a sizable share of the Shia population in Afghanistan serves as a pool of recruits for the SLA. During the 1980s and 1990s, Iran shipped money, supplies, and arms to Afghan mujahideen groups fighting Soviet and Afghan Communists during and after the Soviet-Afghan War.<sup>65</sup> Though Iran never liked the Taliban, one of those anti-Communist Islamic groups that it saw as vulgar, it nevertheless supported the Taliban and its precursor organizations because they fought Iran's enemies.

The IRGC developed, trained, and supplied the Fatemiyoun.<sup>66</sup> Today, the Fatemiyoun comprises several brigades and anywhere between 12,000 and 14,000 fighters, of whom 3,000 to 4,000 are currently active in Syria.<sup>67</sup> At the height of its involvement in the Syrian Civil War, the Fatemiyoun deployed nearly 10,000 Shia fighters to Syria.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, more than 2,000 Afghans have been killed fighting in Fatemiyoun uniforms throughout the Middle East.<sup>69</sup>

Recruits join the Fatemiyoun for numerous reasons, but the dominant drive is economic. Those Afghans who are among the poorest of the world's poor—unemployment in Afghanistan is about 27 percent—turn to Iran for help.<sup>70</sup> They are paid between \$100 and \$500 per month to fight.<sup>71</sup> Though international law states that recruits must be 15 years old or older, many fighters are even younger.

Some Afghans serving in the Fatemiyoun find a path to citizenship in Iran for themselves and their families.<sup>72</sup> In 2015, the Iranian Interior Ministry estimated that 2.5 million Afghans were living in Iran, many of whom did so without residency documents. A significant number of those holding refugee status today were born in Iran but are not eligible for citizenship and are denied essential services.<sup>73</sup> One Afghan recruit explained that an IRGC recruiter promised, "We will send you to Syria. When you come back, we will give you an

Iranian passport, a house, and money.” The recruiter added that the Fatemiyoun would be fighting a “religious war” in Syria.<sup>74</sup>

Many Afghans fight for Shia Islam to escape Sunni-driven discrimination in Afghanistan and for the praise they receive from revered leaders. For young, poor Shia, Major General Soleimani is revered as a father figure.<sup>75</sup> Khamenei, too, praises the living Shia and salutes the Shia dead. If Hazara Afghans are disparaged by their Sunni counterparts, they are praised in Iran by Khamenei and Soleimani. Khamenei said, “I have personally seen that their seminary students felt an affinity with us. I have known them since old times.”<sup>76</sup> The Fatemiyoun are acclaimed in IRGC-produced culture, such as in the documentary entitled *The Conquerors of Tomorrow* (2015), and tombstones have described fallen Afghan child volunteers as “defenders of the shrine.”<sup>77</sup>

### *The Pakistani Division*

The Zeinabiyoun Division is the Pakistani Shia unit of the SLA. Its recruits are drawn mainly from the impoverished regions of Pakistan where there are records of Sunni Muslims attacking Shia.<sup>78</sup> Many of those fighters come from Parachinar, the main town in the Kurram tribal region, which has a sizeable Shia population and where sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia—including suicide attacks and bomb explosions—is common.<sup>79</sup>

In Pakistan, it is sometimes dangerous for Shia to participate in Ashura processions, an essential Shia ritual, without fear of harassment or attack. Major General Jafari called for efforts to provide welfare for Pakistani pilgrims entering Iran on their way to Iraq for Arbæen pilgrimage.<sup>80</sup> As with the Afghan and Arab Shia, Pakistani Shia rally to Iran’s causes from religious conviction.<sup>81</sup>

### *The Iraqi Division*

The Iraqi Heydarioun Division was created in 2015 to supplement Iranian-commanded or Iranian-sponsored units fighting in the Syrian Civil War.<sup>82</sup> While its soldiers engage in combat, the division's central mission is logistical support. Inside Iran, it maintains logistics depots near major airports, moving personnel and cargo—including weapons and equipment—into Iraq and Syria via military and commercial aircraft. It also moves military cargo across Iran's western border into Iraq, maintaining the IRGC's land corridor between Syria and Iran.

The Shia sect of Islam binds many Iranians and Iraqis together. Millions of Iranian and Iraqi Shia cross each country's borders to visit shrines of first-generation Muslim heroic figures, and throngs of Shia pilgrims converge on central Karbala in Iraq each year to pray at the shrine of Mohammed's grandson.<sup>83</sup> Unlike the SLA's Pakistani and Afghan recruits, the Heydarioun fight mainly on their home terrain. For many Heydarioun legionnaires, their war is personal.

### **A War Hero: Qassem Soleimani**

All wars have heroes. In World War II, the dashing Austrian-born Waffen SS commander Otto Skorzeny was celebrated by Hitler and respected by Winston Churchill, who called him "the most dangerous man in Europe." Skorzeny directed the rescue of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini from captivity in 1943 and also had a prominent role in the unconventional warfare waged during the Ardennes Offensive. Today, he is remembered as a respected and cunning fighter. Another hero of World War II was Vasily Zaitsev, the acclaimed sniper of the Soviet Union who boasted 225 kills during the Battle of Stalingrad, 11 of whom were German snipers. He developed daring and effective tactics that were taught in sniper schools behind the lines.<sup>84</sup> Well after the Allied victory, Zaitsev

was saluted in books and film, such as the 2001 Hollywood movie *Enemy at the Gates*.

Iran, too, has a war hero who stands far taller than others—62-year-old Major General Qassem Soleimani. He poses with national leaders, speaks to packed audiences, and rallies young people to patriotism amid roaring applause. He is also the IRGC's most-photographed commander.<sup>85</sup> Like the heroes of World War II before him, Soleimani was gallant in combat and won wide praise from his peers, quickly rising in the ranks of the IRGC.<sup>86</sup> The gray-bearded leader is close to Khamenei and, like the supreme leader, opposes détente with the United States and the West. He reportedly commands operations in some theaters.<sup>87</sup>

Khamenei praises Soleimani as the "Liberator of Iraq." The general's other moniker is "Silver Fox." He and Iranian foreign minister Zarif were named Iran's most-respected leaders in 2017.<sup>88</sup> Six years earlier, in 2011, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed sanctions on Soleimani under Executive Order 13224, which targets terrorists.<sup>89</sup>

By his own account, Soleimani yearns for martyrdom: "In light of the prestige earned by the martyrs, I pray to God for my own end to be martyrdom as well, and that He will not deny me this mighty blessing granted to outstanding individuals."<sup>90</sup> Others prefer that he remain alive, with one unattributed source in Iran stating, "The dead heroes now are not useful. We need a live hero." The 2016 Iranian film *Bodyguard* is a biography, if admittedly embellished, about his service.<sup>91</sup> His brother crowed, "Haj Soleimani has been born in our family, but he doesn't belong to us . . . he belongs to the country and to the Shiites."<sup>92</sup>

### **IRGC Proxies in the Middle East: Popular Mobilization Units**

Iran uses proxies to forge a new political and military order in the Middle East. Tehran subsidizes, equips, provisions, and directs Shia groups to weaken or defeat common enemies throughout the region. U.S. Department of State envoy Brian H. Hook has referred to Iran's "deadly trifecta" of supporting proxies, transferring illegal weapons, and planning terrorism. Iran has extended nearly \$5 billion in cash and credit to the Assad regime in Syria and has provided more than \$100 million to Palestinian groups such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.<sup>93</sup> It also spent at least \$16 billion in recent years in support of its Middle Eastern allies, according to Ryan Crocker, a veteran U.S. diplomat.<sup>94</sup> Major General Soleimani has reaffirmed Iran's full support for Palestinian resistance movements.<sup>95</sup>

The SLA also controls but does not command the Lebanese Hezbollah; the Yemeni Houthi; and Iraqi militias called Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), which pursue their own agendas while partnering with the Qods Force and give Tehran plausible deniability to attack its adversaries.<sup>96</sup> The PMU was formed in 2014, when Iraq's grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa calling on Shia to fight the Islamic State. Approximately 8,000 PMU fighters have been killed battling the Islamic State. Both Iran and the Islamic State vie for territorial control, political influence, and prestige in Iraq. While both factions are Muslim, they reenact the millennium-old struggle between the Shia and Sunni schools of Islam.

Iran uses PMUs and other proxies to mask its efforts to undermine American, Israeli, and Sunni groups throughout the Middle East.<sup>97</sup> Tehran trains and equips foreign fighters in Iraq to kill U.S. soldiers, just as it provided for the Taliban fighting Americans in Afghanistan.<sup>98</sup> The PMU have enemies in common with Iran—namely Sunni Muslims and Westerners, who they decry as invaders. PMU fighters are deployed and garrisoned at different places and are sometimes

collocated with Iranian personnel. In Syria, PMU and Iranian forces are concentrated around Damascus, especially near the international airport and at religious shrines.<sup>99</sup>

Other dominant Iranian-controlled or Iranian-sponsored units include the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Badr Corps, the Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), and the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), which include between 10,000 and 20,000 fighters. The Badr Corps, KH, and AAH are the three core PMUs, with much of their senior leadership having been trained by Iranians. Today, the PMUs are generally deployed in Syria and Iraq.<sup>100</sup>

Iran created the Badr Corps from Iraqi refugees and prisoners of war during the Iran-Iraq War in the early 1980s.<sup>101</sup> Analysts have compared the Badr Corps in Iraq to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Badr Corps conducted covert paramilitary operations in Iraq during the 1980s and 1990s under orders from the IRGC's Qods Force. Many Badr Corps fighters have either dual Iraqi-Iranian citizenship or were born in Iran and only received their Iraqi citizenship after 2003, when Iraq was invaded by a United States-led coalition and Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime was overthrown. Badr Corps leaders have been very influential in Iraq's Ministry of Defense, which commands the Federal Police and Emergency Response Division, and Ministry of Interior by assigning recruits to those posts.<sup>102</sup>

The KH was founded in 2003 as an Iranian-funded, anti-American Shia militia that soon earned a reputation for targeting U.S. and coalition forces with roadside bombs and mortars. The U.S. Department of State designated it as a foreign terrorist organization in 2009.<sup>103</sup> The KH has also sent fighters to defend the Assad regime in Syria during the ongoing Syrian Civil War. In addition to its military and paramilitary roles, it is involved in organized crime, including kidnapping and strong-armed robbery. In April 2018, Qatar paid at least \$275

million to the KH and the IRGC to win the release of members of the Qatari royal family who had been kidnapped during a hunting trip in southern Iraq.<sup>104</sup>

The AAH was initially formed as an elite force in late 2006 with support, training, and funding from the IRGC.<sup>105</sup> It was founded as an offshoot of the Mahdi Army, which fought the United States in Iraq between 2003 and 2007. The AAH fought alongside Hezbollah against Israel in the 2006 Lebanon War. It temporarily shifted its focus to politics and social services in 2011 before resuming military activities against the Islamic State.<sup>106</sup>

Some observers downplay Iranian control of events in Syria and Iraq. For example, Harvard professor of international affairs Stephen M. Walt explained that “Tehran’s present allies will not blindly follow its orders if doing so would jeopardize their positions. To see these collaborations as a new Persian empire, as Henry Kissinger and Max Boot do, is risible.”<sup>107</sup> Other followers of events in the Greater Middle East hold a very different view. They see the IRGC as a potent force for enduring political, demographic, and military change.

### **The IRGC in Lebanon and Yemen**

Established by the IRGC in the early 1980s, Hezbollah flourished and supplanted the Amal Movement in the environs of Beirut. In 1982, Israel drove the Palestine Liberation Organization from southern Lebanon.<sup>108</sup> Although Iran was engaged in the Iran-Iraq War at the time, the IRGC took the lead in organizing, training, and equipping Hezbollah to fight back.<sup>109</sup> Hezbollah now recruits, trains, and leads other groups of fighters in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, espousing the same ideology as the Iranian regime and pledging its allegiance to Khomeini.<sup>110</sup> After Iran set up training camps among the Shia population in the Beqa’a Valley, a critical farming region in eastern Lebanon, training at an IRGC camp became a prerequisite for membership in Hezbollah.<sup>111</sup>

Hezbollah's leader describes the groups' struggle with Israel and the Jews as a "total life-or-death war." Major General Soleimani has claimed that the Lebanese Hezbollah has developed into a "resistance state" from its earlier status of a "resistance party." Hezbollah remains Iran's most skilled militia today, providing Iran with a measure of plausible deniability in regional meddling.<sup>112</sup> The IRGC, meanwhile, continues to use commercial cover to move funds to Hezbollah, which has built an imposing social base in Lebanon.<sup>113</sup> Today, many of its medical facilities are superior to those available in government hospitals.<sup>114</sup>

Hezbollah committed the 1983 truck suicide bombings of the U.S. Marine and French barracks at Beirut International Airport, killing 241 U.S. and 58 French servicemembers. That attack was later celebrated by a deputy commander of the IRGC, who proclaimed, "In 1983, the flames of Islamic revolution flared among Lebanese youth for the first time, and in a courageous act, a young Muslim buried 260 United States Marines under the rebels east of Mediterranean Sea."<sup>115</sup> Hezbollah also kidnapped Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) station chief William Buckley and American journalist Terry Anderson in 1983 and 1985, respectively, as well as several other U.S. citizens around that time.

After Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah became a major political party and was hailed as a victor to Shia Muslims around the world. Hezbollah has been adept at using cyber operations at a wide range of Middle East targets and deploys operatives around the world, including in Latin America.<sup>116</sup> It also recruits and trains for the IRGC's Qods Force in Arabic-speaking countries, including Iraq and Yemen. A typical Hezbollah member wears insignia resembling the IRGC and believes in the primacy of the *velayat-e faqih*, or Islamic Government religious doctrine. The Qods Force maintains a joint command-and-control structure with Hezbollah, in which Hezbollah assists the

Qods Force in its program to advise, support, and train other Shia militia groups.<sup>117</sup>

Iran also has a proxy network in Yemen to support the Shia Ansar Allah, or Houthi movement.<sup>118</sup> Yemeni security forces intercepted a shipment of weapons from the IRGC to the Houthis that included rocket-propelled grenades, surface-to-air missiles, and high explosives. In September 2014, the Houthis seized control of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, and soon forced its president to seek refuge in Saudi Arabia. The Houthis and their allies then advanced south, intending to seize the Gulf of Aden and unite the country under their rule. In March 2015, a military coalition of Arab nations led by Saudi Arabia launched a bombing campaign aimed at ousting the Houthis and restoring the Yemeni government.<sup>119</sup>

Houthi children, like Iranian children, are taught from an early age to fight and hate. A video purportedly showing schoolchildren being trained by Houthis shows a punishing regime for schoolchildren who scream the battle cries "Allah the Greatest, death to America, death to Israel, curse on Jews, the triumph of Islam."<sup>120</sup>

The Saudis fear that the success of the Houthis, who receive weapons shipments from Iran and are trained by Iranian proxies, such as Hezbollah, will stir nationalism among the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia.<sup>121</sup> Lieutenant General Sir Graeme Lamb, former head of United Kingdom Special Forces, opined that Iran's involvement in Yemen is one element of its Middle East strategy to promote civil unrest and establish a power vacuum, which allows Iranian forces and its proxies to fill that void and build security that favors Iran.<sup>122</sup>

## **Population Transfers**

Iran, just as with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union before it, uses panic and devastation in neighboring states to adjust regional ethnic and religious composition, employing coercive methods to drive Sunnis from their homes and to resettle the areas with Shia. Under Hitler's leadership, Germany sought to eliminate indigenous populations in Poland and Ukraine during World War II and repopulate the subjugated terrain with Germans and locals who conformed to specific racial characteristics. During Stalin's reign, the Soviet Union oversaw the forced resettlement of 6 million people, which was part of a larger plan to purge the new Soviet state of nationalists, religious leaders and believers, and freethinkers.<sup>123</sup>

Iran has also used demography as foreign policy. In recent years, wars have overwhelmed societies in Iraq and Syria and have dispersed besieged populations throughout the Middle East. Some families have taken refuge abroad in Europe or the United States. Iran, meanwhile, has resettled Shia populations in the region, where Shia clerics cultivate ties with the locals. By late 2017, Iran was consolidating its presence throughout Syria by settling militiamen and their families there. Schools teach the Persian language, and Iran subsidizes the tuition and food costs of many students between the ages of 8 and 15, each of whom receives a \$20 monthly stipend for attending.<sup>124</sup> The demographic lift in the Shia population throughout that Middle East boosts Iran's long-term influence there.<sup>125</sup>

## **Conclusions**

Iran's theocratic leadership has cast its foreign policy in the context of a holy war, and the IRGC's Qods Forces is the engine by which it expands its global power. Iran has built a land corridor through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon, supports Shia populations around the world, defends shrines in Syria and Iraq, and helps

prepare Hezbollah to destroy Israel's cities.<sup>126</sup> It provides Hezbollah with subsidies totaling \$700 million a year, offers Palestinian terrorist groups another \$100 million, and gives as much as \$300 million more to additional terrorist groups.<sup>127</sup> The IRGC continues to target its enemies for assassination in the Middle East, Europe, the United States, and elsewhere around the world, while the Qods Force's SLA comprises three international divisions that are deployed throughout Iran's Shia Arc.<sup>128</sup> Patiently and steadily, the IRGC is changing the demographics of the Middle East. Christians and Sunnis are declining in proportion throughout the region, while the number of Shia is growing.

As of early autumn 2019, the IRGC is a potent force in Iran and throughout parts of the Middle East. Some of its proxies and outposts in Lebanon and Syria have been battered by Israeli aircraft, and much of its external funding has been cut by international sanctions. Former U.S. national security advisor John Bolton affirmed in the summer of 2019 that "Sanctions are biting . . . Iran can never have nuclear weapons—not against the [United States] and not against the world." Nonetheless, Iranian political and military leaders have underscored their determination to meet all challenges and pursue their objectives at home and abroad. Major General Gholamali Rashid warned, "If a conflict breaks out in the region, no country would be able to manage its scope and timing."<sup>129</sup> When and where a conflict will erupt is not known, but what is certain is that if Iran becomes involved in large-scale hostilities, the IRGC will play a major role in that engagement.

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