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Background Report: Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the *Pasdaran*

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Analysis. by: Dr. Fariborz Saremi, in Hamburg. The US Government at the end of October 2007 unilaterally imposed a new package of economic and political sanctions against Iran, and by November 3, 2007, had agreement among the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council to consider a third full set of sanctions against Iran if it failed to satisfactorily answer UN questions about its nuclear program.

The US sanctions already include a move to isolate one of Iran's most significant strategic tools: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC: *Pasdaran*). The US Government charged the *Pasdaran* with proliferating weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the IRGC's *al-Quds* special forces units with supporting terrorism. On August 15, 2007, the US Government had named the *Pasdaran* a "terrorist organization". This series of measures was designed to warn Iran that its actions would lead to serious consequences.

The moves capped a year of growing US pressure on Tehran, involving, for example, billions of dollars in arms sales to its Persian Gulf allies and to Israel, interception of Iranian arms shipments into Iraq and Afghanistan, detention of Iranian agents in Iraq, and pressure on the United Nations and its European allies to increase Iran's isolation.

The IRGC, which is said to contain 125,000 or more troops, is the one of the most powerful and flexible arms of Iran's military structure [the conventional Armed Forces, however, are bigger, with an estimated 350,000+ men and more than 360,000 Reserves]. The *Pasdaran*, however, is broadly involved in the political structure and controls a growing sector of the economy, including construction companies, aspects of the oil industry, pharmaceutical plants, and ordinary commerce. It also operates some key front companies which procure nuclear technology.

The IRGC is a product of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. "*Ayatollah*" Ruhollah Khomeini established the force to protect the Islamic order of the new Iranian Government. The IRGC clearly has close ties to the Supreme Leader, and is far more political and ideological than the regular armed forces. A number of senior officers in the IRGC have relatives and close ties to leading members of Iran's leading clerics. Operationally, it is geared to a greater extent than the Armed Forces toward asymmetric warfare and covert operations.

It has been alleged that the IRGC and the Armed Forces have remained in a state of mutual suspicion since the Islamist take-over of Iran in 1979. This, however, is not borne out by reports from within the two structures from trusted GIS/*Defense & Foreign Affairs* sources. There is now considerable and growing trust and cooperation between the two bodies, particularly as the older Armed Forces personnel, trained during the Shah's period in the West (and often in the US), retire. At the same time, however, most *Pasdaran* officers have become less radical and more professional than during the immediate post-Shah period.

The IRGC's *al-Quds* force and other military units are — and have been for many years — active in covert operations and are often deployed openly abroad, working, for example, with the Shi'ite *HizbAllah* militia of Lebanon, the Shi'ite Militia in Iraq, and Shi'ites or even the *Taliban* in Afghanistan. It was members of the IRGC that seized 15 British soldiers and Royal Marines, whom it alleged were illegally operating in Iranian waters in March 2007.

The IRGC operates most of Iran's surface to surface missiles and is believed to be in possession of the potential to deploy nuclear weapons, most or perhaps all of the existing chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) weapons. In addition they are thought to be responsible for operating Iran's nuclear armed missile forces.

It would not be imprecise to compare the IRGC to Germany's political troops during World War II: the *Waffen SS* (*Waffen Schutzstaffel*: the élite conventional armed force structure of the security service developed in 1939 from the SS itself, which had been created to protect the Nazi party of Führer Adolf Hitler).

IRGC Land Forces

The IRGC has small elements equipped with armor. It has conventional-style army units trained in covert missions and asymmetric warfare. Nevertheless, most of its forces are lightly equipped to carry out internal security missions. These forces are reported to have between 120,000 and 130,000 men, but such totals are uncertain. They also include conscripts recruited from the same pool as regular Army conscripts, and training and retention levels are low. The IRGC land forces do, however, control the *Basij* (*Basij* Resistance Force: *Nirouye Moqavemate Basij*) domestic paramilitary force, and other paramilitary forces, if they are mobilized for war. Within the IRGC Land Forces, it is said that there are two armored, five mechanized, 10 infantry, and one special forces divisions — clearly of less than Western strength for a division — and about 15 to 20 independent brigades. It would seem, in fact, that many of the divisions are the equivalent of large (Western) brigades. The total numbers within the IRGC could maintain only three to five divisions by Western standards. The number of members would point to the existence of five to six light infantry brigades maximum. There is also claimed to be one airborne brigade. The IRGC claims to conduct very large exercises, sometimes with 100,000 men or more. The exact size of such exercises is unclear, but they are often a small fraction of IRGC claims.

The IRGC is, however, the center of much of Iran's effort to develop asymmetric warfare tactics to counter, for example, a US invasion. The IRGC has been systematically equipping, organizing, and retraining its forces to fight decentralized partisan and guerilla warfare. It has strengthened the anti-tank and anti-helicopter weaponry of IRGC battalions and stressed independent battalion-sized operations which could fight with considerable independence even if Iran lost much of the coherence in its command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) capabilities. Its exercises have included simulated attacks on US AH-64 *Apache* helicopters with Iran's more modern portable surface-to-air missiles using mines and using improvised explosive device (IED)-like systems to attack advancing armored forces. Within its divisional and brigade structures, the IRGC has created some 3,000 special units or cells consisting of three to four soldiers whose task it would be to remain behind lines of supply and communications. They would strike at elements in rear areas and ambush combat troops. Their operations would also involve dispatching troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, and possibly other areas, to attack US forces and foment local resistance. Moreover, teams would be sent to raid and infiltrate the southern Persian Gulf states (GCC) which are allies of the United States.

The IRGC, Iranian Army, and *Basij* now have the capacity to fight a war of attrition across a wide front involving elements which would scatter to maintain a constant storm of attacks against US forces and

lines of communication and supply. These elements would be able to operate independently of central command. The IRGC and Iranian Army have been inspired by the limited success of Saddam's *Fedayee* in holding up the US advance towards Baghdad and more so by the ability of Iraqi insurgents and militia to attack US and other coalition forces since the fall of Baghdad.

The IRGC remains the center of Iran's hard-line security forces, but has become steadily more bureaucratic and less effective as a conventional fighting force since the end of Iran-Iraq war in 1988. Corruption and careerism are growing problems, and the IRGC's rôle in the defense industry has led to financial abuses. At this time, it is the élite elements of the IRGC which give it real meaning beyond serving the Administration's need to control its population.

IRGC Air Force

The Air Force of the IRGC is understood to operate Iran's *Shahab-3* intermediate range ballistic missile (IRBM) units and, assuming this to be correct, it also controls Iran's major stocks of ballistic missile delivered chemical and biological weapons and probably all of its small stock of externally-acquired nuclear warheads/artillery rounds. In 2003, Iran's "Supreme Leader", "Ayatollah" Ali Hoseini-Khamene'i announced that *Shahab-3* missiles had been delivered to the IRGC. The operational numbers of *Shahab* series ballistic missiles remains uncertain, however. In addition, six *Shahab-3s* were displayed in Tehran during a military parade in September 2003.

intelligence, Abu Mussab Zarqawi was a key figure in the reorganized *al-Qaida* and its Iran link. The German intelligence services alleges that Iran is a key base for *al-Qaida* and claims there are about a dozen camps around Tehran where *al-Qaida* terrorists are being cared for by the IRGC. Moreover, the *Quds* force is the primary Iranian Government instrument in training, arming, and funding *HizbAllah* in Lebanon, and is now supporting both Shi'ite militia and the Sunni *Taliban* forces in Afghanistan. The Iranian clerics' main agent in Afghanistan is Gulbedin Hekmatyar. Hekmatyar assists Iran in smuggling money and weapons to the remnants of the *Taliban* and works with the IRGC.

Some Iranian arms shipments have already been directed at aiding anti-peace movements in the Gaza strip. Some proof exists that it assists, training, provides weapons and funds Palestinian elements in both the Gaza and the West Bank.

The active elements of the *Quds* force operate primarily outside Iran's borders, although it has bases inside and outside of Iran. The *Quds* troops are divided into specific groups or corps for each country or area in which they operate. There are Directorates for Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, as well as Turkey, the Arabian Peninsula, Asian countries of the former Soviet Union, EU countries, and North America

Al-Quds has offices or sections, which are closed to most embassy staff, in many Iranian embassies. It is not clear whether these are integrated with Iranian intelligence operations or if the ambassador in each embassy has control of, or has detailed knowledge of, operations by the *Quds* staff. However there are indications that most operations are coordinated between the IRGC and offices within the Iranian Foreign Ministry and VEVAK. There are separate operational organizations in Lebanon, Turkey, Pakistan, and several North African countries. There are also indications that such elements may have participated in the bombings of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina in 1992 and the Jewish Community in Buenos Aires in 1994.

Al-Quds seems to control many of Iran's training camps for unconventional warfare, extremists, and terrorists in Iran and countries like the Sudan and Lebanon. In Sudan, the *Quds* are believed to run a training camp of unspecified nature. As a one-time ally of the Sudanese President, Gen. Umar Hasan Ahmad al-Bashir, Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi — who cooperated closely with both the Iranian clerical Government and Osama bin Laden — was able to make Sudan a central piece in the Iranian-led terror mosaic.

In 1993, a few hundred IRGC troops were working in Sudan and about two years later there were

thousands of Iranian-trained terrorist instructors available, some from the IRGC and the *Quds* force and many others from the *HizbAllah*. The seriousness of the undertaking was proven by the presence of *HizbAllah*'s operational chief, Imad Mughniyah, along with a new ally: Osama bin Laden. The US indictment of bin Laden stated in 1998 that *al-Qaida* had forged alliances with the National Islamic Front of Sudan and with the Government of Iran and its associated terrorist group, *HizbAllah*, for the purpose of working together against perceived common enemies in the west, particularly the United States. There are other training camps in Qom, Tabriz, and Mashhad governorates, and in Lebanon and the Sudan. These include the Al-Nasr camp for training Iraqi Shi'ites and Iraqi and Turkish Kurds in northwest Iran, and a camp near Mashhad for training Afghan and Tajik revolutionaries. The *Quds* seems to help operate the Manzariyeh training center near Qom, which recruits from foreign students in the religious seminary and which seems to have trained some Bahraini extremists.

The Basij Resistance Force (Mobilization Resistance Force)

Like the IRGC, the *Basij* force grew out of the Revolution of 1979 by direct intervention of *Ayatollah* Khomeini. On January 1, 1981, the *Basij* was put under command of the IRGC. The *Basij* is a popular reserve force of about 90,000 men, with an active and reserve strength up to 300,000 and a mobilization capacity of nearly 1,000,000 men. It has up to 740 regionally commanded battalions, which consist of about 300-350 personnel each.

The *Basij* is controlled by the IRGC and consists largely of youths, men who have completed military service, and the elderly. Apparently, the *Basij* began to place an emphasis on riot control and internal security missions in the mid-1990s. As a consequence, it has developed for itself a formal military-style command structure and set up special battalions for internal security missions. Its overall brief has been

expanded, however, to include the provision of reserves and small combat units for the IRGC that will be used to defend against a US invasion.

The *Basij* is being used as a source of mobilization for the IRGC, and would in the case of invasion provide cadres and small independent units trained to resist. According to an IRGC general, a military exercise (*Great Prophet II*), conducted in the first two weeks of November 2006, employed 172 battalions of the *Basij* Resistance Force. According to the same source, the main mission of these troops was to guard "public alleyways and other urban areas" The *Basij* has a history of martyr-style suicide attacks dating to the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. Today, its main tasks are thought to consist of assisting locally against conventional military attacks, as well as quelling civil uprisings and civil disobedience. In addition, one of the Force's key rôles has been to maintain internal security, including monitoring internal threats from Iranian citizens and acting as a static militia force. In 1993, the *Ashura* Brigades were created from IRGC and *Basij* militia units as a response to anti-government riots. This unit is composed of roughly 17,000 men and women, and its primary purpose is to keep down civil unrest.

The IRGC Intelligence Branch

As part of the IRGC, the roughly 2,000 staff members of its intelligence force are a largely politicized force with a political mission. The main task of the IRGC Intelligence Branch is to gather intelligence in the Muslim world. As far as domestic security is concerned, the organization targets the enemies and opponents of the Islamic Revolution and also participates in their prosecution and trials. In addition, it works closely with the IRGC's *Quds* corps, which covertly operates outside Iran as mentioned before in depth.