The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

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Iran's attack on Israel in April of this year and the ongoing debates about the organization's possible placement on the EU terror list have once again drawn international attention to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, Persian: Pasdaran), which played a leading role in the planning and execution of the operation. Although it does indeed carry considerable weight with regard to the country's military capacities, a conceptual misjudgment of that institution in the West hinders an assessment of its widespread activities and at the same time dilutes the view of its stabilizing effect on the theocratic regime of the Ayatollah. At the same time, it is

largely unknown that the IRGC plays a considerable role in the fact that Iran's rapprochement with the Western world will remain a desideratum for the foreseeable future. The aim of this contribution is to create a basic understanding of the IRGC while dispelling prevailing stereotypes so that more in-depth knowledge can then be presented in further articles.

It is often not known where the IRGC fits into the organizational structure of the Iranian state. The fact that it makes up the country's army is just as common a misconception as its – contradictory – portrayal as a strong elite force. Formed by order of Ayatollah Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini during the final stages of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 from numerous and largely heterogeneous militias, the force's initial aim was exclusively domestic: The focus lay on consolidating the newly established rule of Shiite clerics under a "Supreme Jurist" (Welayat-e-faghih), who could not rely on the unconditional support of the regular military, which was still predominantly loyal to the Shah in the fall of 1978 and only pledged its neutrality in the course of the change of power in February 1979.

However, just one year later, in September 1980, the still barely professionalized troops were given their first actual military mission: The attack by Iraq under Saddam Hussein made it necessary to quickly mobilize large numbers of soldiers, especially because the regular army had lost considerable strength due to the ideologically motivated execution, internment or removal of officers from their posts. This also led to the founding of the Basij as a sub-branch of the IRCG, which Ayatollah Khomeini referred to as the "army of 20 million". In the style of the Carpathian tactic, child soldiers and senior citizens were sent by the thousands into minefields as part of human waves or exposed to enemy artillery fire in futile infantry attacks. However, the breadth of recruitment achieved at that time continues to have an effect today: Although only relatively few Basij members are currently full-time members of the unit's cadres and therefore count as active soldiers, the force shapes daily life in Iran through regional and affiliation-specific sub-groups of volunteers: For example, an arm of the Basij consisting solely of professors exerts pressure on dissident students; and overall, the paramilitary organization as such is tasked with supporting the morality police in enforcing strict Islamic customs.

In addition, the Corps' economic influence has increased dramatically over the years, starting with its commissioning to rebuild Iran's infrastructure after the end of the First Gulf War in 1988. Already almost twenty years ago, the German Heinrich Böll Foundation reported on the special position of the IRGC in economic matters; for example, it does not have to pay taxes or import duties. To this day, the expansion of the extensive network of IRGC companies, which are responsible for an estimated one to two-thirds of Iran's GDP, continues in practically all sectors.

In military terms, the IRGC is still a parallel institution to the regular Iranian armed forces and outnumbered by half: While the army, navy, air force and air defence amount to around 420,000 soldiers, the IRGC has to

rely on only about half as many troops (190,000). This includes the Quds Force with officially around 5,000 members as a separate branch of the Pasdaran, which is a mixture of a classic commando unit and intelligence service and is responsible, among other tasks, for building up allied militias exclusively abroad. This is perhaps the reason why the IRGC has an international reputation for being an elite unit, as it is mostly Quds members who are involved in covert operations, particularly in Lebanon and Syria. However, like the regular armed forces, the respective branches of the IRGC also have their own commando units (Takavaran); the best known of these is probably the *Saberin Takavar Brigade, which was founded in 2000*.

But the Revolutionary Guard's contribution to stabilizing the Iranian regime is by no means limited to the exercise of military power and economic and social control: It is the intertwining with the radical Islamic ideology that dominates the country as a conceptually inherent core of the Pasdaran that gives that formation its significance. Once it was the Ayatollah who was dependent on armed security for a rule that had not yet been consolidated – but now the members of the Pasdaran need the theocratic system to justify their existence. The organization, meanwhile a state within the state, could not exist under any other form of government; and it must also suppress ideological renewal if it does not want to contradict its long-standing tradition. 45 years after its establishment, it is perhaps more dogged than ever as the "guardian of the revolution" – but not least out of interest in its own continued existence.

The fact that a rapprochement between Iran and the West – and Israel in particular – seems extremely unlikely for the foreseeable future sounds like a truism. However, the extent of the IRCG's influence on this circumstance should be subject to more in-depth scientific research.

In conclusion, the following points can be made: