



The Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC)

A threat to internal security in Germany and
Germany and Europe

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Executive Summary

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) are part of the armed forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a parallel institution to the army. They are one of the most important tools of the Iranian regime. At the same time, the IRGC itself is also one of the most important players within Iran's political class. It is also in charge of a large economic empire. In close alliance with Ali Khamenei, it dominates the Iranian state. Limiting the investigation of the IRGC to the formal organization falls short of the mark. It must be understood as a network.

The IRGC is interwoven with the entire regime through close personal relationships and loyal ex-cadres. Time and again, it also fills important ministries with cadres. This has enabled it to become a decisive force in the regime's foreign policy. Under the label "Axis of Resistance", the IRGC is primarily responsible for supporting numerous terrorist groups and militias in the Middle East. The groups supported include Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis and Al-Qaeda. The aim of this hybrid approach is the terrorist fight against Israel, the USA and the West in general. The IRGC enjoys the full trust of Ali Khamenei.

The IRGC's terrorist activities are not limited to the Middle East. Numerous attacks around the world have been carried out by it or with its assistance, often in close cooperation with structures of the Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah. In Western countries, the IRGC and its network regularly attract attention with espionage activities that allow clear conclusions to be drawn about preparations for attacks. In Germany, in addition to exiled Iranian actors, the main targets are people and institutions with links to Israel as well as Jewish people and institutions. At the end of 2022, an arson attack on a synagogue in Bochum was commissioned by the IRGC.

One thing is clear: the IRGC poses a threat to global security. Germany is also at risk. Tough action against the IRGC and its network is therefore essential. A ban on the IRGC's activities at national level is an important step in this regard, which will also provide the necessary legal certainty for the network's future actions. In the medium term, a listing on the EU terror list remains important for a sustainable security policy.

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What are the Islamic Revolutionary Guards?

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards ("Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution", abbreviation: IRGC) as a politically relevant actor of the Iranian regime encompasses more than the organization of the same name. In order to adequately portray their influence, former cadres and their personal networks must also be taken into account.¹ The focus is on the formal organization, but individuals from the immediate environment remain just as relevant. In addition, a complex company network also plays an important role. In the following, we therefore refer to members of the Revolutionary Guards as opposed to members. The structure of the IRGC thus reflects a fundamental peculiarity of the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The entire system of rule is characterized by a complex network of informal power blocs and rope networks.²

The network character of the IRGC is diffuse and multidimensional. On the one hand, it represents a network in its entirety, but on the other hand there are also various interconnections within the IRGC. There has been a close network within the leadership of the Revolutionary Guards since the 1980s. This network is characterized by a web of personal relationships that has developed over the course of the Iran-Iraq war. Mohammad Bagheri, Hossein Salami, Esmail Ghaani and Qasem Soleimani, for example, were and are part of this network.³ The comparatively low significance of explicit military rank for the position and influence of individuals within the IRGC network is remarkable. The awarding of ranks appears to have primarily symbolic significance, with a male-bonded structure originating from the time of the Iran-Iraq war dominating.⁴ The events of the Iran-Iraq War under the slogan of "Holy Defense" were also of decisive importance for the development of the IRGC's ideological identity. Even today, this term is important for the organization's self-image and external presentation as a religiously legitimized actor.⁵

The IRGC as an organization was founded in the course of the Islamic Revolution as a counterweight to the regular military, which dated back to the era of the Shah. In contrast to the army, the focus from the outset was also on fighting the opposition. Its role as defender of the revolution is enshrined in the constitution.⁶ Together with the regular army, the IRGC has the constitutional task of promoting the worldwide spread of Islamic and anti-Semitic state ideology.⁷ The official English translation explicitly calls this action a "jihad".⁸ During Khatami's presidency from 1997 to 2005 at the latest, the IRGC constituted itself as a political actor in its own right.⁹ After the Khatami era, the IRGC greatly intensified the ideological training of its members. Unconditional loyalty to Ali Khamenei and absolute personal willingness to make sacrifices are considered key qualifications for cadres.¹⁰ Within Iran's political landscape, the organization is clearly on the side of the most radical wing of the regime¹¹. The cleric Ayatollah Ayatollah Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, whose teachings give almost unlimited priority to the fight for the continuation of the Islamic Revolution, had

a significant intellectual influence on the Revolutionary Guards. His legitimization also allows action to be taken against supposedly counter-revolutionary parts of the clergy.¹²

Bei der Bildung und Ausrüstung der Verteidigungskräfte des Landes müssen Glauben und Ideologie als Grundlagen gebührend berücksichtigt werden. Aus diesem Grund werden die Armee der Islamischen Republik und das Korps der Revolutionsgarden im Einklang mit diesem Ziel aufgebaut und **sind nicht nur für den Schutz und die Verteidigung der Grenzen verantwortlich, sondern auch für die ideologische Mission, nämlich den Jihad auf dem Weg Gottes und den Kampf zur Verbreitung der Herrschaft des Gesetzes Gottes in der Welt.** (Und rüstet gegen sie auf, soviel ihr an Streitmacht und Schlachtrossen aufbieten könnt, damit ihr Allahs Feind und euren Feind – und andere außer ihnen, die ihr nicht kennt – abschreckt).*

*Koran [8:60]

در تشکیل و تجهیز نیروهای دفاعی کشور توجه بر آن است که ایمان و مکتب، اساس و ضابطه باشد. بدین جهت ارتش جمهوری اسلامی و سپاه پاسداران انقلاب در انطباق با هدف فوق شکل داده میشوند و نه تنها حفظ و حراست از مرزها بلکه با رسالت مکتبی یعنی جهاد در راه خدا و مبارزه در راه گسترش حاکمیت قانون خدا در جهان را نیز عهدهدار خواهند بود و اعدوا لهم ما استطعتم من قوة و من رباط الخیل (ترهبون به عدو الله وعدوكم و آخرین من دونهم)

Excerpt from the Preamble of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic: The IRGC plays a central role in spreading the state ideology, which is explicitly linked to global jihad.
Text source: see footnote 8

One of the IRGC's most important units is the Basiji militia. This popular army plays a key role in the brutal fight against the domestic opposition. Like the Revolutionary Guards themselves, it was founded in the course of the Islamic Revolution and cooperated closely with it from a very early stage. In the Iran-Iraq war, it ensured ideologically exploitable successes through its great willingness to make sacrifices. The Basiji have a broad presence in Iranian society through student organizations and workers' groups. The militia has been formally affiliated with the IRGC since 2007.¹³ Another important sub-group of the Revolutionary Guards is the Al-Quds Brigades. The very name, "Al Quds" as the Arabic and Persian name for Jerusalem, marks the ideological claim to power and clearly indicates their basic anti-Israeli orientation. There are different reports about the exact period of its foundation, but its responsibility for covert operations and its proximity to terrorism are undisputed.¹⁴ Especially under the leadership of Qasem Soleimani from 1998 to 2020, the department's relevance increased significantly. They are now responsible for the majority of the Revolutionary Guards' foreign operations and are the primary tool for exerting Iranian influence in the region.¹⁵ In 2019, the Al-Quds Brigades had a budget of 6 billion US dollars.¹⁶ An important project dominated by the Al-Quds Brigades is Iran's cooperation with non-state proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, various Shiite militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen, known as the "Axis of Resistance". This pillar of Iranian foreign policy in the immediate region, which is based on asymmetrical structures, emerged in the mid-2000s in response to the American presence in Iraq. Their fight is directed against the USA and Israel. Its most important state partner is the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Politically and ideologically, the "Axis of Resistance" is subordinate to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.¹⁷

Although the IRGC as an organization formally reports to the Supreme Leader, it is largely autonomous in its practice. Early on in its existence, the organization succeeded in evading comprehensive control by the government and the clergy. In particular, the decisive authority over appointments to positions within the organization lies with the IRGC leadership.¹⁸ Clerical representatives appointed by the Supreme Leader primarily serve the ideological control of the organization and the avoidance of direct political confrontation. Operational independence in particular has been strengthened since 2007 on the initiative of the then commander Mohammad Ali Jafari through innovations in the command structure. In conjunction with its broad operational field, this form of autonomy enables the Revolutionary Guards to act as a political force in contrast to the regular armed forces.¹⁹ Today, the IRGC acts in the form of anticipatory obedience. As an actor that enjoys the full benevolence of Ali Khamenei, its activities are considered sacred and cannot be politically attacked within Iran.²⁰

The IRGC and the political class of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Like the IRGC, the Islamic Republic itself is characterized by complex networks. Its hierarchical structure is determined by personal dependencies and is sometimes reminiscent of feudal systems.²¹ Relationships through instrumental marriage between clans and extended families are an important aspect of this. This type of informal power politics has a long tradition in the Shiite clergy that goes back historically to the Islamic Republic.²² Since the 18th century, a practice of strictly hierarchical clerical networks has been established, which in the case of Iran has resulted in the development of para-state structures.²³ The most powerful clans within the Iranian regime include the Khomeini, Khamenei and Larijani families in particular. They also have numerous cross-connections to IRGC circles, for example through Mohsen Rezai, Mojtaba Khamenei and Ali Larijani.²⁴ This can partly be observed in Mojtaba Khamenei, son of Ali Khamenei and his presumed successor as Supreme Leader. He has long been firmly integrated into the structures of the IRGC.²⁵ He is also closely networked in politics. His father-in-law Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel is considered the "father figure" of the hardline faction around the IRGC cadres Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Saeed Jalili.²⁶ The practice of family closeness develops a special dynamic together with the other comradeship structures. The relationship between Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr and Sadeq Larijani, brother of Ali Larijani, is also striking. IRGC cadre Zolghadr, brother-in-law of former IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari, was deputy interior minister under Ahmadinejad from 2005 to 2007. In 2010, he was appointed as his deputy by the then Chief Justice Sadeq Larijani.²⁷ After Mohsen Rezai's departure in 2021, Sadeq Larijani, who had since been promoted to Chairman of the Arbitration Council, appointed Zolghadr as Secretary of the body.²⁸ The practice of closeness through family ties now seems to include Hezbollah to some extent. In 2021, Qasem Soleimani's daughter married the son of Hashim Safi al-Din, cousin of Hassan Nasrallah and deputy head of Hezbollah.²⁹

The regime's formal institutions are also deeply infiltrated by the IRGC. Here, too, it represents a significant power factor. Within the political apparatus, members of the IRGC have

been widely represented in local administrations, in parliament and as part of the government in cabinet positions for at least two decades.³⁰ The previous high point of direct participation in cabinets was during the Ahmadinejad era (2005-2013) with 18 cadres out of a total of 45 cabinet members during the first term and 19 out of 42 during the second term.³¹ The period after the end of Khatami's presidency from 2005 is considered an authoritarian restoration.³² The subsequent presidency of Rohani (2013-2021), who is sometimes described as reformist, did not bring about a turnaround in the IRGC's position. In recent years, a consolidation of its dominance, supported by Ali Khamenei, has been observed. The IRGC had an open presence in the Raisi government through high-ranking cadres; overall, 40% of cabinet members were internationally sanctioned when they took office in 2021. Furthermore, an international arrest warrant has been issued by Interpol for Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi and Vice President for Economic Affairs Mohsen Rezai due to their involvement in the attack on the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1994.³³ The appointment of Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, who was closely allied with Qasem Soleimani, to the Foreign Ministry was also particularly explosive.³⁴ The consequences of Amir-Abdollahian's accidental death for the IRGC network cannot be fully assessed at the present time, but his death nevertheless represents a serious loss.

This enforcement of the political class puts the IRGC in a very influential position within the Iranian regime. It is powerful enough to seek out conflicts with ministries that are not determined by it. The resulting conflicts sometimes become public. In April 2021, parts of an interview with former Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif in which he sharply criticized the IRGC became public. During his time in office, he was forced to subordinate his own policies. The leading figure in this was Qasem Soleimani. He had used the state airline Iran Air to transport weapons to Syria and had also allowed the use of Iranian airspace for Russian bombers on their way to Syria without consultation.³⁵ Large parts of the IRGC's deployment in Syria were also kept secret from the government and the Foreign Ministry. According to Zarif, he only became aware of this through US Secretary of State John Kerry. Soleimani's direct interventions in negotiations also undermined the work of the Foreign Minister. Soleimani also regularly intervened in the nuclear negotiations.³⁶ Zarif literally described his own influence on foreign policy as "zero".³⁷ The reactions from the ranks of the IRGC to these publications are striking: Zarif's statements were not denied. Parliamentary Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf defended Soleimani and accused Zarif of strengthening the West with his behavior. An official IRGC publication commented that if Soleimani had left the policy to the government, the campaign against the Islamic State would not have been successful. It explicitly states that both diplomacy and military operations were not left to the government.³⁸

The IRGC and the Iranian Economy

In order to adequately reflect the multidimensional nature of the IRGC phenomenon, the close ties to the Iranian economy must also be taken into account. Companies in the IRGC environment repeatedly attract attention with questionable business practices and tax avoidance strategies. The Khatam-al-Anbiya conglomerate and the officially non-profit Bonyad-e Mostazafan Foundation are considered to be the most important hubs of the IRGC's current economic empire. It is sometimes difficult to provide more precise figures

and to attribute companies to the IRGC due to concealment. It is estimated that IRGC companies accounted for around a third of Iran's total economic output, at 140 billion dollars, even before sanctions were lifted after the JCPOA was signed. It can therefore be assumed that this share has increased significantly during the period of temporary opening, with estimates going up to 80%.³⁹ In practice, international sanctions regimes have proven to be a double-edged sword for the IRGC. On the one hand, it has succeeded in the past in exploiting the resulting economic vacuum in Iran to its advantage and greatly expanding its empire. During Ahmadinejad's presidency in particular, the IRGC was able to gain control of numerous formerly public companies, such as telecommunications, in the course of increasing privatization. On the other hand, the recent tightening following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA has proven to be a serious problem for the economic activities of the IRGC.⁴⁰ In the recent past, the arms trade to Russia has also become an increasingly important business area. Around 1.75 billion dollars have been spent on Shahed 136 suicide drones alone.⁴¹ What is striking about these transactions is the partial use of passenger aircraft for arms deliveries. Airlines with close links to the IRGC are used for this purpose. The Ukrainian government names Iran Air, Mahan Air, Pouya Air and Saha Airlines as being responsible for the arms shipments and continues to point to arms shipments by sea using ships belonging to the IRGC-owned Iranian Industrial Company.⁴²

The Khatam al-Anbiya conglomerate is of particular importance as a driving force for development and industrial projects. Its current head is Gholam Ali Rashid.⁴³ He is part of the core of the IRGC's management network.⁴⁴ Khatam al-Anbiya is considered the most important technological arm of the IRGC and is one of the largest contractors for industrial and development projects in Iran. Khatam al-Anbiya also plays a central role in the oil and raw materials industry.⁴⁵ The conglomerate's portfolio also includes companies in the arms industry and those directly related to the missile and nuclear programs.⁴⁶ A total of 135,000 employees are said to work directly for Khatam al-Anbiya, with a further 300,000 in the immediate vicinity.⁴⁷ In 2006, the then deputy director Abdolreza Abedzadeh said in an interview that Khatam al-Anbiya's profits were also used for armaments projects.⁴⁸ Khatam al-Anbiya companies are also active in friendly foreign countries. According to reports, its subcontractors are also responsible for the construction of a missile launch pad in Venezuela.⁴⁹ There are also close contacts with China and Sri Lanka.⁵⁰

Khatam al-Anbiya's business practices clearly show how IRGC companies benefit from their proximity to government agencies. It has been well documented for decades that Khatam al-Anbiya is regularly awarded public contracts without a tender.⁵¹ According to reports, Khatam al-Anbiya even ousted its foreign competitors Shell and Repsol from natural gas production in 2010.⁵² It has also been documented that the IRGC has used force to drive competitors out of business in the past. In 2004, the IRGC forced the closure of Imam Khomeini Airport in Tehran through a military occupation on the grounds that a Turkish company with business contacts to Israel involved in the operation posed a security risk.⁵³ After the contracts were terminated, companies with IRGC connections took over operations.⁵⁴

In addition to the corporate conglomerates, the Bonyad Foundations also play a special role for the IRGC in the Revolutionary Guards' extensive economic empire. The Bonyad-e Mostazafan (Foundation of the Oppressed), founded on the initiative of Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979, is particularly important here.⁵⁵ It is deeply integrated into the Iranian economy through a dense network of subsidiaries and companies. Iran Watch estimates the number of subcontractors at up to 350. The economic activities of the foundation have been tax-exempt since 1993 on the initiative of Ali Kahmenei.⁵⁶ The foundation is currently chaired by IRGC Brigadier General and former Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan.⁵⁷ Dehghan is a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war and was involved in the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran in 1979 and the founding of Hezbollah in Lebanon in 1982.⁵⁸ The companies owned by Bonyad-e Mostazafan include numerous large financial, mining and oil companies.⁵⁹ Large companies in the agricultural and food industries as well as construction companies are also part of the foundation's network. Bonyad-e Mostazafan companies were involved in the construction of Terminal 1 of Imam Khomeini International Airport in Tehran. Like Khatam al-Anbiya, Bonyad-e Mostazafan companies also do business abroad.⁶⁰

Furthermore, there are a number of banks within the IRGC's economic empire through which international business is conducted. These represent an important part of the Is-



The former head of the Khatam al-Anbiya Saeed Mohammad, next to him: The flags of the Islamic Republic of the Khatam al-Anbiya and the IRGC.
Image: More News CC 4.0

lamic Republic's economic activities abroad, particularly with regard to Germany. Some of them are private companies, others are state-owned. Bank Mellī, Bank Saderat, Bank Sepah, the European-Iranian Trade Bank (EIH), Bank Saman and the Middle East Bank have offices in Germany. In addition to Frankfurt am Main, Hamburg is a regional focus.

All of these banks are subject to US sanctions. The banks Melli, Sepah and EIH are sanctioned due to their involvement in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. According to the US, Bank Sepah is the linchpin of the financing of the Iranian missile program. The US sanctions against Bank Saderat are based on findings of involvement in the financing of Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad.⁶¹

In addition to the banks mentioned, there are other company networks with links to the Iranian regime in Germany. The regional focus appears to be Düsseldorf and neighboring Meerbusch. The IT company Softqloud is particularly relevant. According to research, the company is also used to process international payment transactions with the Iranian provider ArvanCloud. A person directly associated with Softqloud was involved in the circles of the perpetrators of the Mykonos attack in 1993.⁶² The network of the Düsseldorf-based Ascotec Group also has links to the regime in Iran. According to its own information, Ascotec is a subsidiary of the state holding company Iranian Mines & Mining Industries Development & Renovation (IMIDRO). It reports directly to the Ministry of Industry and Trade.⁶³ According to technical experts, this involvement in the steel trade serves to procure hardened steel suitable for the manufacture of uranium centrifuges and nuclear warheads.⁶⁴

Terrorism as a Political Tool

Working with terrorist organizations and irregular militias as a means of regional and supra-regional power politics under the label "Axis of Resistance" has been an integral part of Iran's foreign policy for several decades. Especially after October 7, 2023, a significant intensification of the shadow war against Israel can be observed. Tehran's IRGC-led network goes far beyond the most prominent grouping, Hezbollah, and Palestinian terrorist organizations. The dissolution of the separation between civilian and military areas is striking. The Iranian proxies naturally and deliberately use residential areas, hospitals and schools for military purposes. Attacks on civilians are also part of their tactics. In doing so, they are following the explicit demands of Ruhollah Khomeini, who condemned generally recognized standards of international law as un-Islamic and called for both the duty of civilians to be ready to die and targeted attacks on enemy civilians.⁶⁵

The relationship with the regime's partners and proxies is sometimes very instrumental, their specific form following the respective purpose. Sometimes groups are founded, sometimes existing ones are supported or taken over. Today, the Al-Quds Brigades of the IRGC represent the organizer at the center of this hybrid strategy, which was decisively shaped by Qasem Soleimani. The way the Taliban, who were enemies at the time, were dealt with in the late 1990s to early 2000s can be seen as a prototype for the regional approach. Instead of directly intervening militarily after the attack on the Iranian consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998, in which nine Iranian citizens, including eight diplomats, were killed, the IRGC organized massive support for the Northern Alliance in its fight against the Taliban under the guidance of Soleimani. The Western intervention that followed shortly afterwards was also supported by intelligence.

Only the US confrontation with Iraq as part of the expansion of the War on Terror brought this cooperation to a standstill.⁶⁶ As a result, the Islamic Republic changed its approach towards the USA. As early as 2007, there were clear indications that weapons were being supplied to the Taliban via the Al-Quds Brigades.⁶⁷ From 2010, there were also reports of Iranian bounty payments to the Taliban for killed US soldiers, concealed by a complex network of the Al-Quds Brigades.⁶⁸ The fight against the regional presence of the USA became one of the most important pillars of Iranian policy. Today, there are close contacts between Tehran and those in power in Kabul. Following the accidental death of Iranian President Raisi in May 2024, Taliban Vice President Abdul Ghani Baradar and Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi attended the funeral as state guests.⁶⁹

Tehran and the Taliban are now openly discussing possible support for the Iranian proxies' war against Israel through Afghan troops and suicide bombers.⁷⁰ By the end of 2001 at the latest, Al-Qaeda, which is allied with the Taliban, had also sought Tehran's proximity. Support in the form of weapons and money for their holy war against the USA was provided under the direction of the Al-Quds Brigades. Since then, Iran has repeatedly served as a strategic retreat.⁷¹ At present, Al-Qaeda continues to maintain important infrastructure in Iran with the connivance of Tehran. The leadership around Saif al-Adel is also in the country.⁷² According to reports, Tehran has also succeeded in significantly improving relations with Al-Qaeda splinter groups in Yemen, Iraq and North Africa via the parent organization, including possible cooperation with IRGC proxies.⁷³

The Iranian regime used the power vacuum caused by the fall of Saddam Hussein in neighboring Iraq to expand its regional dominance. Qasem Soleimani and the Al-Quds Brigades once again set the tone. Under their leadership, dozens of armed militias were formed to fight the allied troops and consolidate Tehran's influence in Iraq. From 2006 to 2011, the Asaib Ahl al-Haq group was responsible for over 6,000 attacks on targets associated with the USA.⁷⁴ The case of Iraq also illustrates the instrumental component: In 2008, Soleimani mediated between Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki and the influential Shiite cleric Muqtada al Sadr as part of the Shiite uprising against the Iraqi government. The agreement reached weakened the Iraqi government, in some cases significantly.⁷⁵ The agreement succeeded in significantly expanding the influence of pro-Iranian forces in Iraq

by merging Shiite organizations with government forces.⁷⁶ Iranian proxies are also participating in the political process and elections in Iraq. A deliberate blending of the military and civilian dimensions of the actors is clearly observable.⁷⁷



The emblems of many of the proxies coordinated by the IRGC already show striking similarities.

After the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the Fatemiyoun and Zeynabiyoun groups were founded under the leadership of the Al-Quds Brigades and recruited from Shiite Afghans and Pakistanis. Both militias play an important role in fighting the insurgents and securing the Syrian regime.⁷⁸ Tehran itself creates the conditions for fighters willing to make sacrifices: Fatemiyoun recruits largely from Afghan refugees living in inhumane conditions in Iran, who are offered the fight for Tehran as the only way out to a legal existence. According to reports, this is sometimes done under threat of deportation.⁷⁹

The number of groups supported by Iran in Syria has increased significantly since the outbreak of the civil war. In 2019, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) identified a total of 24 different organizations.⁸⁰ While on the one hand successes were achieved in supporting Assad, the IRGC and Soleimani in particular were confronted with the accusation from 2014 onwards that their misjudgements of the Islamic State had enabled its rapid successes. In Iran, this led to internal disputes within the regime.⁸¹ As a result of the further advance of IS in Iraq, the IRGC organized the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in mid-2014 as an umbrella organization for pro-Iranian militias. The PMF cooperate closely with the Iraqi military in some cases and represent a major power factor within Iraq.⁸² The Iraqi population is in part clearly opposed to this creeping takeover of power.

From 2019, there were also some violent protests against the growing Iranian influence. The Iranian consulate in Kerbala, Iraq, was also attacked.⁸³ Pro-Iranian militias responded

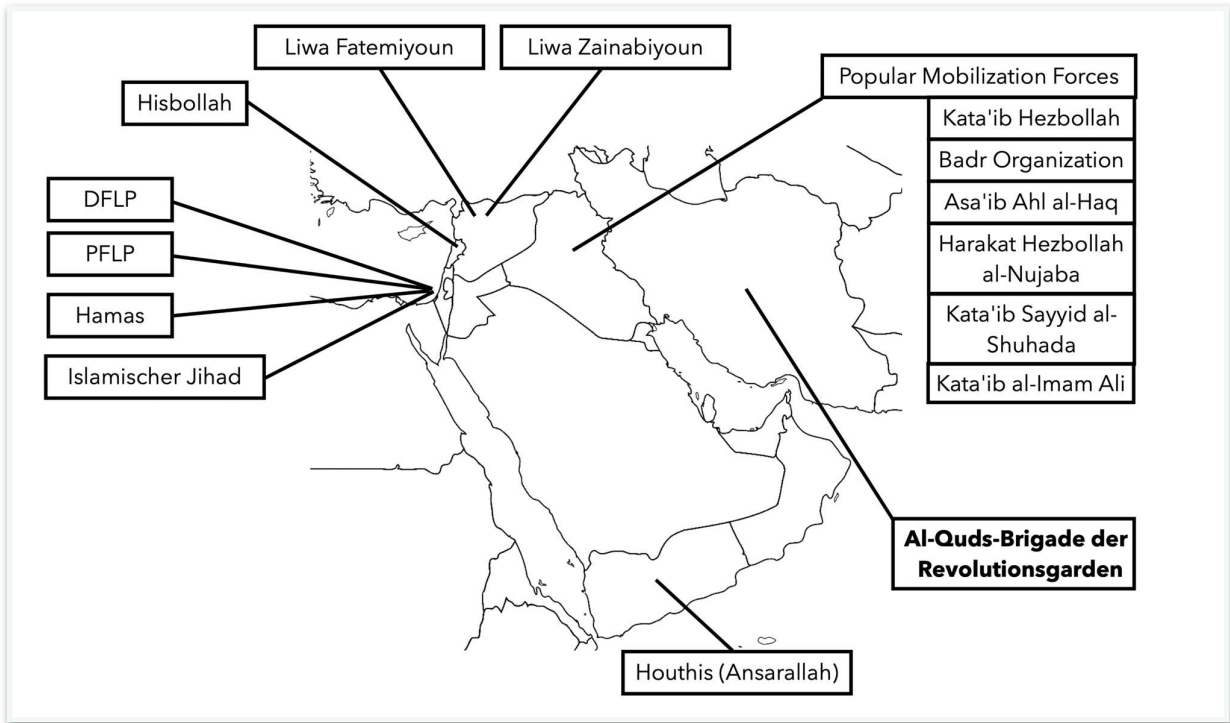
with brutal violence.⁸⁴ Some of the alleged leaders of the demonstrations were deliberately murdered.⁸⁵ The integration of the PMF into state structures makes it possible to estimate their manpower on the basis of the government budget. The IISS estimated that there were more than 100,000 fighters in 2018.⁸⁶ Kataib Hezbollah, the most important group belonging to the PMF alongside Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and smaller actors closely associated with it have shown increased activity, particularly in the recent past. Since the terrorist attack by Hamas and the subsequent Israeli military operation in Gaza, rocket and drone attacks on Israeli territory have taken place regularly. Video footage of these attacks is used intensively for propaganda purposes.⁸⁷ In addition, Kataib Hezbollah is also increasingly acting against the American presence in the region as well as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Jordan. Attacks on US military bases in Iraq in particular have increased significantly. At the end of January 2024, three US soldiers were killed in an attack on a military base in Jordan.⁸⁸

Another partner of increasing relevance is the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Their links to the Iranian regime date back to the 1979 revolution, but only intensified as the civil war in Yemen intensified in 2009. The Houthis became an important instrument for bringing Iranian influence directly to the border with Saudi Arabia. With Iranian support in the form of arms supplies, funds and training, the Houthis succeeded in overthrowing Yemeni President Saleh in 2014 and bringing large parts of the country under their control.

In addition to the IRGC, the Lebanese Hezbollah also plays a decisive role in providing support.⁸⁹ Tehran's ideological influence on the Houthis is also clearly reflected in their propaganda. As a direct adaptation of Iranian slogans, the Houthis use the slogan "God is great! Down with America! Down with Israel! Cursed be the Jews! Victory to Islam! "on their flag.⁹⁰ The Houthis have become an important instrument in regional power politics. Claiming to show solidarity with Hamas in Gaza, the group launched a large-scale campaign against international shipping between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula after October 7, 2023. Numerous freighters were shot at with rockets, attacked with drones or hijacked. This approach has the potential to have a lasting negative impact on global trade (Partington, 2024). Furthermore, the Houthis are using the same legitimization to conduct a missile campaign against Israel.⁹¹ The Houthis also took part in the Iranian missile attack on Israel on April 13, 2024.⁹²

In its projected fight against Israel, the Islamic Republic also supports numerous Palestinian terrorist organizations through the IRGC. Their own political orientation plays a very subordinate role, the unifying factor being the fight against the Jewish state. The groups supported include the Marxist-Leninist PFLP, PFLP-GC and DFLP as well as numerous Islamist actors. The most important of these are the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas. According to estimates, Hamas alone, which has ruled the Gaza Strip since 2007, receives around 100 million US dollars in financial support from Iran every year.⁹³ Its principled opposition to any settlement predestined Hamas as a new main partner for the Iranian regime, especially against the backdrop of the Oslo peace process in the early

1990s.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, Hamas never became Tehran's only partner for instrumental reasons.



Overview of the geographical distribution of a selection of Iranian proxies. The encirclement of Saudi Arabia and Israel is clearly recognizable. Given its geographical location, Jordan appears to be a plausible target for the next expansionist steps.

The large number of supported groups and their ideological differences result in intra-factional competition, which the Islamic Republic exploits to expand its own influence.⁹⁵ Under the leadership of Hamas and PIJ, the organizations have formed the Palestinian Joint Operations Room to coordinate their activities since 2006. Qasem Soleimani and the Al-Quds Brigades are considered responsible for the initiation and material support of this alliance.⁹⁶ This alliance shows clear parallels to the formation of the PMF in Iraq.⁹⁷ In the recent past, close coordination with Hezbollah and the IRGC can also be observed.⁹⁸

In addition to monetary and in-kind contributions, Palestinian terrorist organizations are also regularly supported through training. Most recently, large-scale exercises were reported in Iran in September 2023, organized by the Al-Quds Brigades. A direct link to the terrorist attack on October 7 is unclear.⁹⁹ Shortly after the terrorist attack, there were reports that parts of Hamas were specifically trained by Hezbollah in Lebanon for this attack.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, numerous maneuvers have taken place in Gaza itself in recent years that corresponded to the actions of the Palestinian terrorists on 7 October. As the Israeli Meir Amit Institute reported at the beginning of 2021, the Palestinian Joint Operations Room has been conducting such exercises for attacks on IDF bases and kidnappings since 2014.¹⁰¹ Even if the details of the background to the terrorist attack are not available at this time, it is clear that the infrastructure set up by the IRGC and the Al-Quds Brigades was used for military training and was of great importance for carrying out the terrorist attack on October 7.

The most important group associated with the Iranian regime regionally and globally is the Lebanese Hezbollah. It is the first product of the export of revolution and part of the Iranian struggle against Israel. Due to the circumstances of its founding, it can be regarded as a genuinely anti-Israeli organization. The background to this was the Lebanon War in 1982, when several Shiite militias were merged into a pro-Iranian group under the direct guidance of the IRGC with the aim of liberating Lebanon from the Israeli invasion. The new organization openly declared its support for the rule of Khomeini and his successors as Supreme Leader (Velayat-e Faqih) early on.¹⁰² Its ideological ties to Tehran make Hezbollah unique among Iranian proxies. In the global power politics of the Islamic Republic, it is the "junior partner" of the Al-Quds Brigades.¹⁰³ In addition to its role as a loyal militia, it is an important means for Iran to export its revolutionary state ideology as well as an extended arm in Lebanese politics.¹⁰⁴ Once again, a fusion of civilian and military dimensions comes to light. As an Arab-dominated group, Hezbollah also functions as an important link in Iran's system of regional power politics, working closely with the Al-Quds Brigades to bridge potential ethnic tensions between Tehran and its proxies in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.¹⁰⁵ According to estimates, Hezbollah receives 700 million US dollars a year from Iran.¹⁰⁶ Hezbollah's extensive special status is also reflected in its equipment. It is considered to be the best-equipped militia in the world, comparable to state armies. In particular, its arsenal of missiles, which is primarily equipped with Iranian ammunition, is unprecedented for a non-state actor. Estimates range to well over 100,000 operational short-, medium- and long-range missiles.¹⁰⁷ The threat to Israel's security is acute. Since the Hamas terrorist attack on October 7, 2023, Hezbollah has regularly targeted northern Israel. In total, at least 60,000 Israelis are forced to live as internally displaced persons as a result.

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Hezbollah has also long been the spearhead of global terrorism linked to the Iranian regime. It works closely with the Al-Quds Brigades. Among the most serious attacks were the bombings of the Israeli embassy and the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994, which are considered to be a collaboration between the Al-Quds Brigades and Hezbollah.¹⁰⁹ In July 2012, a Hezbollah suicide bomber killed six people in an explosive attack on an Israeli tour group in Bulgaria.¹¹⁰ A few days earlier, a Hezbollah member was arrested in Cyprus for planning a similar attack.¹¹¹ Ahmad Vahidi and Mohsen Rezai, Interior Minister and Vice President for Economic Affairs in the Raisi government, are the subject of an international search warrant from Interpol due to their involvement in the attack on the Jewish community center.¹¹² In practice, the infrastructures of the Al-Quds Brigades and Hezbollah are difficult to separate. Many of the intelligence operations take place jointly. There are clear indications that both organizations have a broad network of sleeper cells in North America and Europe.¹¹³

The IRGC as a Threat in Germany and Europe

For several decades, the network around the IRGC and its junior partner Hezbollah has posed a massive threat to public security in Germany and Europe. Human rights organizations have counted at least 540 kidnappings and murders committed by the Islamic regime outside Iranian borders since 1979.¹¹⁴ Just one year after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, a cell controlled by the young regime attempted to assassinate the former Iranian

Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar in Paris in 1980. Iranian General Gholam Ali Oveissi and his brother were also shot dead on the street in Paris in 1984. ¹¹⁵

Shortly after Hezbollah was founded, members of the group were allegedly involved in a series of bomb attacks in Paris between 1985-87. ¹¹⁶ On June 14, 1984, a Hezbollah commando hijacked Trans World Airlines Flight 847 in Athens. ¹¹⁷ Hezbollah's terrorism-related activities in Germany can be traced back to at least 1987. In that year, Mohamad Ali Hamadi, one of the hijackers of flight TWA 847, was arrested at Frankfurt Airport while smuggling explosives. During the investigation, a stash of bomb-making materials was discovered in Saarland. Hamadi was the hub of a European Hezbollah network. ¹¹⁸

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the violent fight against the Iranian opposition abroad was a focus of the IRGC's activities in Europe. On July 13, 1989, the chairman of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, Abdul Rahman Ghasemlou, was assassinated by the IRGC in Vienna. ¹¹⁹ In addition to Ghasemlou, his deputy Abdollah Ghaderi and the political scientist Fadzal Rassul were also killed. Mohsen Rezai and Mahmud Ahmadinejad are said to have been among the clients. ¹²⁰ In August 1991 and 1992, two other members of the exile opposition were murdered in Paris and Bonn. ¹²¹ On September 17, 1992, the assassination of four Kurdish members of the Kurdistan-Iran Democratic Party in the Berlin restaurant Mykonos was the most momentous attack in Germany to date. Hezbollah member Kazem Darabi was largely responsible for the planning and execution. He received the order for the attack directly from Tehran. ¹²²



The Iranian embassy in Vienna, workplace of the terrorist Assadollah Asadi.
Image: Athenchen, Wikimedia Commons CC 3.0

The beginning of the 2010s saw a renewed wave of IRGC activity that continues to this day. Jewish organizations and individuals as well as persons and organizations with links to Israel are much more in focus than before. One focus is on intelligence service-like

activities and the preparation of possible attacks. In 2015, the British secret service discovered over three tons of ammonium nitrate, a fertilizer suitable for making bombs, in a Hezbollah warehouse in London. This had been part of large-scale attack preparations.¹²³ According to Mossad findings, Hezbollah also had several hundred kilograms of the fertilizer in Germany.¹²⁴ Germany appears to continue to serve as a logistical hub. Germany played an important role as a transit country in the preparation of the attack plan on the annual conference of Iran's National Council of Resistance in Paris in 2018, which involved Assadollah Asadi working as a diplomat under cover. Asadi himself was arrested in Bavaria in the summer of 2018.¹²⁵ In addition to directly preparing possible attacks, the network around the IRGC and Hezbollah is also active in Germany for the procurement of military material. On 15.07.2024, a Lebanese citizen was arrested in Salzgitter on suspicion of having procured components for the construction of military drones from Germany on behalf of Hezbollah.¹²⁶ Three other people were arrested in Spain at the same time on the basis of the same allegations.¹²⁷

Overall, the Iranian actors' approach follows a recognizable pattern. Ioan Pop and Mitchell D. Silber, former NYPD intelligence analysts, identify seven fundamental aspects of Al-Quds Brigades and Hezbollah's pre-operational approach to the West:

1. *Intelligence and surveillance activities*
2. *Credible diplomatic, business, educational and other disguises to conceal operational activities*
3. *Infiltration of Iranian dissident groups*
4. *Logistical planning for possible future attacks*
5. *Preparation of "human target packages" for the assassination of dissidents and opponents*
6. *Counterintelligence and operational security*
7. *Recruitment of agents with dual citizenship and Western passports from the Shiite diaspora*¹²⁸

Between 2018 and the end of 2022 alone, investigations were launched in Germany against 24 suspected Iranian agents.¹²⁹ At the beginning of 2023, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution had information on a total of 160 people with links to the IRGC in Germany.¹³⁰ The spying on the former chairman of the German-Israeli Society Reinhold Robbe since July 2015, which became known in July 2016, is particularly well documented. A Pakistani student had created an extensive personal profile of Robbe and others on behalf of the Iranian regime. The German authorities assumed that this was part of preparations for possible attacks in the event of a war with Israel.¹³¹ In January 2018, ten spies from the IRGC's Al Quds Brigades were uncovered who had been spying on Israeli and Jewish targets. The targets included the German branch of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), an Orthodox Jewish community in Berlin and the TuS Makkabi Berlin sports club. A state security official told FOCUS that the activities uncovered were presumably preparations for criminal acts.¹³² The Israeli embassy and the kindergarten of a Jewish community were also spied on.¹³³

Similar activities can also be observed in other parts of Europe. In March 2023, two members of an Iranian cell were arrested in Athens on suspicion of terrorism with the support of the Mossad. The two Pakistanis are accused of preparing an attack on an Israeli restaurant on orders from Iran.¹³⁴ In all these cases, the actions of the perpetrators reflect the

aspects of Iranian activities described by Pop and Silber, as well as the close link between spying and the preparation of terrorism.

A failed arson attack against the synagogue in Bochum in November 2022 is particularly explosive in the recent past. Evidence suggests that this was one of several planned attacks. Shots had already been fired at a synagogue in Essen shortly before. In addition, the perpetrator from Bochum attempted to incite another person to set fire to a synagogue in Dortmund. In all three cases, the name of a Hells Angels member who had fled to Iran appears as a suspected IRGC contact.¹³⁵ The perpetrator from Bochum was identified and sentenced in December 2023. In the grounds for the judgment, the Düsseldorf Higher Regional Court was clearly convinced of a state background to the crime. The convicted man had been specifically recruited to commit the attack by state authorities from Iran through an intermediary from organized crime circles. Personal motives could not be established. For contextualization, the court explicitly refers to the publications of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Federal Government's answer to a small question from the left-wing parliamentary group. Compared to the findings documented there on spying on possible targets by agents of the Revolutionary Guards, the Higher Regional Court saw a clear escalation in the execution of the crime.¹³⁶ The above-mentioned response from the German government documents the authorities' knowledge of intensive intelligence spying activities by the IRGC in Germany, directed primarily against the Iranian opposition abroad as well as "(pro-)Israeli and (pro-)Jewish targets in Germany".¹³⁷ The Düsseldorf Higher Regional Court thus also ultimately follows the close link between espionage activities by actors with links to Iran and the preparation of criminal offenses and terrorism, as described by Pop and Silber. In particular, the ongoing radicalization in Tehran requires that this aspect be given special consideration. As outlined above, the IRGC has now become a decisive cue for the regime's policies. Even the election of the supposedly moderate Pezeshkian cannot hide this fact.

The activities of the IRGC in Germany pose a real threat to the life and limb of individuals and groups marked as hostile by the regime. The pattern behind the attempted attack in Bochum appears to be part of a broader strategy. For several years now, there have been clear indications that parts of the regime have been using organized crime structures to spy on potential targets. For example, the assassination of IRGC dissident Masoud Molavi-Vardanjani in Istanbul in 2019. The USA also strongly suspects the involvement of criminal networks in the kidnapping of the German Jamshid Sharmahd in 2020.¹³⁸ At the end of May 2024, the Swedish secret service pointed to reliable evidence of targeted cooperation between the IRGC network and organized crime actors. Since February 2024, there had been several incidents near the Israeli embassy in Stockholm, Sweden, some of which were described by the authorities as "attempted attacks". The Mossad had already previously pointed to the existence of several such collaborations between Iranian agencies and organized crime in Europe. According to the intelligence service, the Iranian regime appears to want to use the new wave of anti-Semitism since the beginning of the Israeli anti-terrorist operation in Gaza to recruit assassins.¹³⁹ Another strategy that is increasingly being used is targeting individuals during visits to Iran in order to urge them to cooperate. According to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, this is intended to create access to infiltrate the foreign opposition through Iranian secret services.¹⁴⁰

The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution also continues to assess the threat posed by the Iranian secret service and the Al-Quds Brigades to persons and organizations in Germany marked as hostile by the Islamic Republic as high. Targeted spying on potential targets continues to be carried out. The attack in Bochum clearly shows that, in addition to the exiled Iranian opposition, Jewish organizations and individuals as well as individuals and organizations with links to Israel are particularly at risk from Iranian activities in Germany. It can be assumed that acts of violence and killings will be used to enforce the regime's interests.¹⁴¹

Supporting Terrorism and Exerting Influence in Germany and Europe

As Pop and Silber have shown, the Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah deliberately use unsuspecting-looking institutions as a cover for their activities. This can be clearly proven, for example, in the planning and execution of the terrorist attack on the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1994. The planners and perpetrators operated in a complex network of front companies and diplomatic institutions as well as in the environment of the At-Tauhid Mosque in Buenos Aires. The Argentinian special investigator spoke of a network of diplomatic, economic, cultural and religious camouflage that was used to conceal the terror preparations.¹⁴² A similar approach was observed in the case of the terrorist Assadollah Asadi, who worked as a diplomat.

Pro-Iranian cultural networks also exist in Germany and are sometimes suspected of supporting terrorism. Until it was banned, the most important hub in Germany and Europe was the Islamic Center Hamburg (IZH) and the affiliated Imam Ali Mosque. The Europe-wide networked institution openly served in part as a vehicle for spreading the Islamist state ideology of the Iranian regime in the Shiite diaspora.¹⁴³ The last head of the IZH was a member of the IRGC, according to his own statements.¹⁴⁴ In addition to the IZH, there are other smaller networks with ideological ties to the Iranian regime. These include the Islamic Community of Shiite Communities in Germany (IGS) and the Ehlibeyt network led by the late Muhammed Avci with locations in Offenbach am Main, Osterholz and Augsburg.¹⁴⁵ Although the exact work of these actors is difficult to understand from the outside, it is to be feared that IRGC and Hezbollah networking is also taking place here. An important indication of the importance of the Revolutionary Guards in these structures is the veneration of the slain Al-Quds Brigades general Qasem Soleimani in these communities. Tributes and memorial events for Soleimani were held in several local groups of the Ehlibeyt network as well as in the Center of Islamic Culture e.V. (ZIK) in Frankfurt Rödelheim, which is affiliated with IZH and IGS.¹⁴⁶

In addition to this religious network, there are other areas in which the Islamic Republic has created links in order to increase its influence. For example, a study from November 2023 showed that the Iranian University of Religions and Denominations (URD), which is closely linked to the IRGC and Hezbollah, has entered into cooperation agreements with teaching staff or institutions at five German universities, including the universities in Paderborn, Potsdam, Frankfurt, Münster and the Free University in Berlin.¹⁴⁷ The cooperation between the University of Potsdam and the URD has been the subject of criticism since

2013. At the time, religious scholar Seyed Mostafa Azmayesh from the URD explained that the aim of the URD University in Qom was "to promote lobbyists expatriated abroad who have the potential and ability to convince Western intellectuals that Iran speaks the truth and that the opinions of others are wrong. in network Guards' Revolutionary The¹⁴⁸" Germany also includes the Al Mustafa Institute in Berlin, which is associated with the Iranian Al Mustafa University in Ghom/Iran. The international Al Mustafa University functions as the IRGC's international recruitment and radicalization center and is responsible for exporting Islamist Shiite ideas to more than 50 countries worldwide. For the Al-Quds Brigades in particular, the Al Mustafa Institute is the most important international tool for recruiting foreign students for militias and terrorist cells. In December 2020, Al Mustafa was sanctioned by the USA for these reasons. However, the organization is still present in Europe.¹⁴⁹



Raid on the Imam Ali Mosque on the day of the IZH ban.
Image: Imaceforvou7. Wikimedia Commons CC 4.0

The IZH, including several sub-organizations, was banned by the Federal Ministry of the Interior on 24.07.2024. In addition to the IZH, the Islamische Akademie Deutschland e.V., the Verein der Förderer einer iranischen-islamischen Moschee in Hamburg e.V., the Zentrum der Islamischen Kultur e.V. in Frankfurt, the Islamische Vereinigung Bayern e.V. in Munich and the Islamische Zentrum Berlin e.V. are also banned.¹⁵⁰ In its press release, the Ministry of the Interior explicitly justified the ban with the support of Hezbollah. As part of the ban, a total of 53 properties in Hamburg, Bremen, Berlin, Lower Saxony, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia and Bavaria were searched on 24.07.2024. In addition to clear evidence of support for Hezbollah, numerous documents

relating to Hamas were also found.¹⁵¹ Searches also took place outside the direct association context. As reported by Radio Bremen, searches were also carried out at the operators of the muslim-market web portal and the Eslamica publishing house in Bremen.¹⁵² The number and geographical spread of the banned objects as well as the breadth of the house searches are clear indications of the strong network character of the IZH. The bans imposed on the four hubs in Hamburg, Berlin, Frankfurt and Munich therefore represent a serious blow to Iranian networks in Germany. However, it must be borne in mind that the IZH is not irreplaceable and that further action against such structures is essential for a sustainable policy.

Recommendations

The Iranian regime and its Revolutionary Guards have an extensive and dangerous network at their disposal to enforce their interests in Germany and Europe. Terrorism is clearly one of the methods of choice. Moreover, the political situation in the Middle East is likely to exacerbate the situation in the future. The attempted attacks and preparations for attacks that have been uncovered so far show this: The dangers posed by the IRGC and its network for internal security in Germany and Europe are real and concrete. There is an urgent need for action to protect exiled Iranian and Jewish citizens and institutions from possible attacks and assaults. Only credible political, diplomatic and criminal pressure can curb terrorist activities on European soil. One thing is clear: the network of the Revolutionary Guards is vulnerable. German and European politicians must take action and eliminate the crucial nodes.

In order to effectively and sustainably curb the threat to public security posed by the Revolutionary Guards and their network, it is essential that the federal government:

- **a ban on activities against the IRGC along the lines of the ban on activities against Hezbollah.** Such a ban must be the core of the German government's approach and provides clear legal certainty in the further handling of the IRGC network.
- **continues to campaign at EU level for the IRGC to be listed as a terrorist organization.**
- **continue to take decisive action against the structures of the Islamic Republic and the nodes of the IRGC network, even after the closure of the Islamic Center Hamburg.** In doing so, the use of bans must not be abandoned. As the bans on Hezbollah and the IZH have shown, the elimination of nodes has proven to be an extremely effective means of restricting the activities of the regime network.
- **sanctioning the network of banks and companies with close ties to the IRGC.** Such an approach is the most effective means of cutting off international money flows and combating proliferation networks.
- **revoking Iran Air's operating license in 2019, similar to the action taken against Mahan Air.** As the use of the airline to transport weapons to Syria and Russia shows,

Iran Air is also involved in the IRGC's machinations and thus forms a component of the overall structure.

- **is committed to pushing back and imposing comprehensive sanctions on all players in the axis of resistance in order to be able to decisively counter the highly dangerous power politics.**
- **building on this, is committed to supporting all regional forces that stand for reconciliation.** This also includes the opposition movement in Iran and in exile. Only in this way is a sustainable policy towards the regional ambitions of the Islamic Republic possible.

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