

Mideast Freedom Forum Berlin
Policy Paper

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) A threat to internal security in Germany and Europe

What are the Islamic Revolutionary Guards?

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards ("Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution", abbreviation: IRGC) are part of the armed forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Guards must be understood as a network that was formed primarily during the Iran-Iraq war. A tight elite from the leadership circle, including Hossein Salami, Esmail Ghaani, Mohammad Bagheri and the late Qasem Soleimani, play a decisive role in determining the policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Military ranks have more of a symbolic significance within the guards, while personal relationships and unconditional loyalty to Ali Khamenei are decisive.

The IRGC were founded during the Islamic Revolution as a counterweight to the regular army and played a role in spreading the Islamic and anti-Semitic state ideology. Since the late 1990s in particular, the IRGC has established itself as an independent political actor. The IRGC has numerous subdivisions, with the Al-Quds Brigade being particularly relevant. This brigade has a decisive influence on the regime's foreign policy and is responsible for supporting terrorist organizations as well as influencing other states. Despite its formal subordination to the Supreme Leader, the IRGC enjoys extensive operational autonomy and acts as a powerful political force within Iran.

Institutions within the regime are heavily infiltrated by the IRGC. Its cadres have been present in local administrations, in parliament and in government positions for at least two decades. The IRGC's power politics have repeatedly led to tensions within the regime and conflicts with other sub-groups of the regime. Former Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif openly criticized the IRGC for its influence on foreign policy and stated that he no longer had any influence on Iranian foreign policy.

IRGC and the Iranian Economy

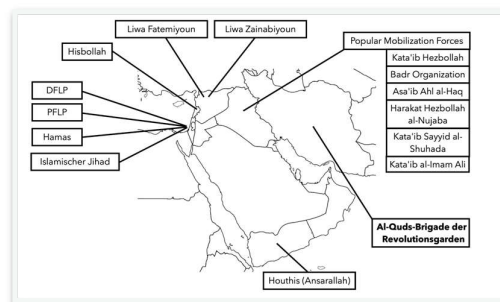
The IRGC's influence on the Iranian economy is profound. In particular, the Bonyad-e Mostazafan Foundation and the Khatam al-Anbiya conglomerate secure it significant economic power. The latter makes the IRGC an important player in the oil and raw materials industry as well as in the arms industry. IRGC companies are known for dubious business practices and tax avoidance strategies. According to estimates, the IRGC already controlled around a third of Iran's economic output before the sanctions were lifted by the JCPOA. Current estimates assume that this share has risen to up to 80%.

The IRGC also operates banks that are important for international business, particularly in Germany. These banks, such as Bank Melli, Bank Saderat and Bank Sepah, are affected by US sanctions due to their involvement in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the financing of terrorist groups. Furthermore, there is a complex network of companies in Germany with a focus on the steel industry and IT, some of which are clearly attributable to the IRGC. Several of these companies have been sanctioned by the USA for years.

IRGC and Terror as a Political Tool

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been using terrorist organizations and irregular militias as tools of an aggressive foreign policy for several decades. This has an anti-Israeli and anti-Western orientation under the banner of the "Axis of Resistance". It deliberately blurs the boundaries between civilian and military areas. Military and civilian infrastructure, economic investments, development aid and military presence as well as terrorism merge into one another. This becomes clear, for example, in the use of civil aviation, including the state-owned Iran Air, for the purpose of arms trading.

The IRGC's network of foreign militias or "proxies" stretches across the entire Middle East and geographically encircles the states of Israel and Saudi Arabia, which are marked as enemies of the regime. The Al-Quds Brigades are of particular importance for this hybrid strategy. A shadow war against Israel is a central component of Iranian power politics in the region.



In Iraq, the Islamic Republic of Iran used the power vacuum created after the fall of Saddam Hussein to strengthen its influence by supporting existing militias. In the Syrian civil war, the IRGC founded Shiite militias to support the Assad regime in cooperation with Hezbollah. Numerous Palestinian terrorist organizations such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad also receive extensive support. The Lebanese Hezbollah, which was created by the IRGC, acts as a vehicle for Iranian influence in Lebanon. Hezbollah is considered to be the most powerful terrorist organization in the world, and its missile arsenal exceeds that of many countries.

Supporting Terrorism and Exerting Influence in Germany and Europe

The complex network surrounding the IRGC and its partner Hezbollah has reached as far as Europe since the Islamic revolution and poses a significant threat to public security. Exiled Iranians as well as Jewish individuals and organizations with ties to Israel are particularly at risk. Since 1979, more than 500 Iranian opposition members have been kidnapped or murdered outside Iran. In Europe, the Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah have carried out attacks and murdered numerous Iranian opposition members since 1980. Since the 2010s, IRGC activities in Germany have been strongly directed against Jewish and Israeli-affiliated organizations. In 2016, for example, the then chairman of the German-Israeli Society was spied on with the aim of assassinating him if the conflict with Israel came to a head. Other Jewish targets in Germany included a Jewish kindergarten. In 2018, security authorities foiled a plot to attack the annual conference of Iran's National Council of Resistance in Paris. There were further concrete attack attempts in Sweden. A failed attack on a synagogue in Bochum in 2022 is particularly explosive. In its ruling against the perpetrator, the Düsseldorf Higher Regional Court explicitly assumed that this attack was carried out by an Iranian state agency. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution continues to warn of a high risk from the IRGC.

The IRGC and its network have been using unsuspecting-looking institutions as a cover for their activities for several decades. For example, those responsible for the attacks in Argentina in the 1990s and the perpetrators of the Mykonos attack in 1993 moved around cultural and diplomatic institutions during preparations. The terrorist Assadollah Asadi, who was arrested in 2018, also worked as a diplomat in the Iranian embassy in Vienna as a cover. The network of the IRGC and its close ally Hezbollah is often congruent. The Islamic Center Hamburg (IZH) was the central hub for propaganda and networking in Germany and Europe until it was banned for supporting terrorism. Further action against such structures appears to be urgently required in view of the growing threat situation.

In addition to the religious sector, the IRGC network is also attempting to exert its influence in the West via the education sector. This includes, in particular, the Iranian University of Religions and Denominations (URD), which is closely linked to the IRGC and Hezbollah. It has 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. The network of Revolutionary Guards in Germany also includes the Al-Mustafa Institute in Berlin, which is associated with the Iranian Al Mustafa University in Ghom/Iran.

Recommendations

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.
- **revokes 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 movements in Iran and in exile. Only in this way is a sustainable policy towards the regional ambitions of the Islamic Republic possible.

This policy paper is based on the comprehensive publication "The Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC). A threat to internal security in Germany and Europe" by the Mideast Freedom Forum Berlin (MFFB), which is available [here](#).

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