

# Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps An Open Source Analysis

By MATTHEW M. FRICK

In *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, President George W. Bush singled out the Islamic Republic of Iran as perhaps the greatest challenge facing the United States today.<sup>1</sup> Iran is specifically identified as a direct obstacle to accomplishing a majority of the Nation's strategic objectives. Among these are preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), promoting freedom by ending the rule of tyrannical regimes, denying terrorists state-sponsored support and sanctuary, and defusing regional conflicts.<sup>2</sup> Despite, and in many instances because of, the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, perpetual conflicts on every continent, and the battle with terrorist organizations in every corner of the globe, the Iranian government has positioned itself to become the focus of the world's collective attention.

Translating the strategic objectives outlined by the President into effective operational plans requires carefully studying the enemy and determining his centers of gravity (COG). The availability of accurate, relevant intelligence is a key element to correctly identifying a COG, which is a "source of moral or physical strength, power, or resistance."<sup>3</sup> Knowledge of the enemy's culture, history, sociopolitical and economic infrastructures, and leadership is as important in COG determination as knowing his military capabilities and force disposition.

Unfortunately, after the storming of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, and the subsequent hostage crisis that lasted 444 days, access to information on the current political, military, and social structures within Iran has been severely limited, complicating the task of identifying centers of gravity. Much of the available information is found in official statements, press releases,

government-sponsored Web sites (several in English), and interviews on one side, and a litany of Internet-published documents, as well as official and unofficial testimony from exiled dissident groups and defectors, on the other. The result is a virtual maze of material that must be navigated with care, keeping in mind the perspective and underlying motive of each source. Knowing the limitations on available information, it is nevertheless possible to surmise an accurate, albeit imperfect, COG identification.

By analyzing only this open source material, it is evident that the key center of gravity in Iran is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), or *Sepah-e Pasdaran*

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Islamic Revolutionary Guard commanders show support for Iranian president

AP/Wide World Photo (Rouhollah Vahdati)

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>2008</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2008 to 00-00-2008</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps: An Open Source Analysis</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, 260 Fifth Ave SW (BG 64) Fort Lesley J McNair, Washington, DC, 20319</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>7</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

(Pasdaran). The IRGC's conventional military strength, uncompromising execution of its conceptual and constitutional mandates, political and economic influence, and direct as well as indirect control of the country's WMD programs combine to make the Pasdaran the source of the clerical regime's power both domestically and internationally.

### Conventional Military Strength

The Pasdaran emerged from the war with Iraq (1980–1988) as the premier military institution in Iran. With numbers that now equal as much as half of Iran's regular military, the IRGC alone boasts a force as large as or larger than any in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and Israel.<sup>4</sup>

air and sea warfare enjoyed by the regular military forces.<sup>8</sup>

While the IRGC air force maintains minimal air assets, it has increasingly received the bulk of Iran's latest technology and aircraft procurements as an attempt to bolster this force's capabilities and to put it on par with the regular air forces, the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force. However, the IRGC air force remains an insignificant threat.<sup>9</sup>

The IRGC navy is not only more visible than the IRGC air force (for example, its capture of 15 British sailors and marines on March 23, 2007), but it is also more effective in conducting conventional military operations.<sup>10</sup> With approximately 20,000 members, including 5,000 marines, the IRGC navy

navy poses a threat to naval forces throughout the Persian Gulf.<sup>12</sup> It has upgraded many of its vessels with three new indigenous antiair and antiship missile systems of varying but reportedly improved capabilities: Noor, Kowsar, and Nasr.<sup>13</sup> The IRGC navy is trained in utilizing swarm tactics in and around the Strait of Hormuz to hit an enemy when it is at its most vulnerable position.<sup>14</sup> To demonstrate this point, Revolutionary Guard navy Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi announced the test of an underwater missile during war games in the Persian Gulf in April 2006. He claimed that the missile was undetectable by sonar and traveled up to 328 feet per second, making it too fast for a target vessel to evade.<sup>15</sup> If Fadavi's claims are true, this

Iran test-fires Fajr-3 missile



AP/Wide World Photo (Islamic Republic News Agency)

*the Revolutionary Guard essentially removed the sole ownership of air and sea warfare enjoyed by the regular military forces*

Iran's total active duty military strength numbered 538,000 in 2005, with 145,000 of those in the IRGC.<sup>5</sup> The Revolutionary Guard maintains a small air contingent and a more robust and increasingly capable naval force. The naval and air components were officially established in 1985 by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, although the Revolutionary Guard had operated a small force of marines as early as 1982.<sup>6</sup> The Pasdaran was also given control of Iran's ballistic missile program in both missile employment and development.<sup>7</sup> Originally established to add more domestic ideological and political weight to the IRGC as a whole by becoming, at least in appearance, a more conventional force, the Revolutionary Guard services essentially removed the sole ownership of

numbers more than the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN). The numbers alone, however, are not an accurate measure of its combat potential. While the IRIN operates the three frigates and two corvettes in the Iranian naval inventory—as well as the country's fleet of three *Kilo*-class, three midget-type, and as many as three domestically produced coastal submarines—the IRGC navy maintains a robust, highly capable force that poses a potentially more dangerous threat, particularly to blue-water oriented navies such as the U.S. Navy.<sup>11</sup>

With 10 Hudong patrol boats equipped with C-802 antiship missiles, 40 Boghammer patrol boats, 14 Chinese-made MIG-G-1800 and MIG-G-1900 armed patrol craft, and countless other small patrol vessels, the IRGC

weapon seriously increases the threat to forces entering and exiting the Persian Gulf.

The IRGC navy is also responsible for Iran's coastal defense systems. These systems include over 300 HY-2 Seersucker or Silkworm antiship missiles at five to seven launch sites on the coast, including the Strait of Hormuz. The HY-2 units were reportedly augmented by as many as eight SS-N-22 Sunburn supersonic antiship missiles from Ukraine in the early 1990s. The IRGC navy also operates land-based artillery units along the shore.<sup>16</sup>

To further increase its importance in the international arena and within the Iranian military organization, the Pasdaran was placed in control of the Islamic Republic's missile program, including the development and procurement of ballistic missile systems. Under the Revolutionary Guard's leadership, Iran has evolved the capability to manufacture domestically produced missiles.<sup>17</sup> Iran's missile inventory includes approximately 10 Fateh A-110 solid fuel short-range missiles and 200 Shahab-1, 150 Shahab-2, and 20 Shahab-3 medium-range missiles. The Shahab-1 and Shahab-2 are variants of the Scud B and Scud C, while the Shahab-3 is based on the North Korean No-dong 2 ballistic missile.<sup>18</sup> The successful testing in 2006 of the Fajr-3 solid fuel rocket, which



can evade radar, according to IRGC air force commander General Hossein Salami, is an example of the technology available to the Revolutionary Guard.<sup>19</sup> It is also an example of the difficulty of gathering accurate intelligence on foreign military capabilities.

With successful tests and upgrades that include the ability to fire multiple warheads carrying up to 1,400 cluster munitions,<sup>20</sup> the Shahab-3, reportedly designed for use against naval installations and aircraft carrier battlegroups, poses a potent threat to Iran's regional adversaries.<sup>21</sup> The IRGC's al-Hadid Missile Brigade is specifically responsible for the Shahab program and formed 5 ballistic missile units with an armament of 15 Shahab-3 missiles. The Shahab-3 has an estimated range of 1,240 miles, enabling it to strike targets in Israel as well as any U.S. military facility in the Persian Gulf region. With the success of this missile, the IRGC has pushed for the development of both the Shahab-4, currently on hold, and the 2,480- to 3,100-mile-range Shahab-5.<sup>22</sup> The Revolutionary Guard's ballistic missile program alone makes it a key component of the country's nuclear weapons development program.

### Ideological/Constitutional-based Activity

In 1992, the Islamic Republic formed a joint armed forces general staff in an attempt to integrate the regular armed forces and the Pasdaran, at least at the higher command levels. Each side, however, retained its unique mandates. The regular military assumed the more conventional role of defending the territory of the Islamic

Republic, while the IRGC was to maintain internal security and continue to export the revolution.<sup>23</sup> It is precisely this separation of purpose, which existed from the adoption of Iran's constitution, that makes the Revolutionary Guard not only unique as a government and military institution but also such an all-pervasive entity in the daily domestic and international policy enforcement of the clerical regime.

Since its inception, the Pasdaran has developed into a powerful organization whose activities served as partial evidence to justify President Bush's naming Iran as one of three countries in the world's "axis of evil."<sup>24</sup> Several elements of the Revolutionary Guard enable it to carry out its assigned missions and maintain the ideological fervor that sparked its creation and organization during the Islamic Revolution. The first is an elite branch of the IRGC uncompromis-

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*the Quds Force is primarily responsible for "exporting the revolution"*

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ingly dedicated to the principles that define the Islamic Republic—the Quds (Jerusalem) Force (al-Quds). Headed by Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani since 1998, the Quds Force is primarily responsible for "exporting the Revolution."<sup>25</sup> There are an estimated 5,000 members of the Pasdaran assigned to the Quds Force, whose budget is controlled directly by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The nature of their mission dictates that they work almost completely *outside* of Iran.<sup>26</sup>

### Al-Quds

The Quds Force maintains closed sections in many Iranian embassies throughout the world. It is not known to what extent the ambassadors of these embassies are aware of the activities of al-Quds stationed in their respective countries, but it is believed that at least some of the Quds Force operations are conducted in concert with elements of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (*Vezerat-e Ettela'at va Amniat-e Keshvar*).<sup>27</sup> Separate corps elements operate in many countries, generally in support of Islamist groups whom they hope to influence politically and ideologically to become more in step with Iran's Islamic revolution.

The Pasdaran's exporters of the revolution continue to give direct support, through training, money, and weapons, to Palestinian groups such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command, as well as Muqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army and the Badr Organization of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and Hizballah in Lebanon.<sup>28</sup> It was also reported that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was granted refuge in Iran in 2004, and he visited training camps run by al-Quds while securing monetary and logistical support for his own operations in Iraq.<sup>29</sup> In a meeting with reporters on April 17, 2007, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Peter Pace, commented that not only were Iranian-made weapons and explosives being delivered by Quds Force members to Shi'a insurgents in Iraq, but also that shipments were being intercepted in Afghanistan bound for the Taliban.<sup>30</sup> The supplying of weapons

Islamic Revolutionary Guard vessels maneuver in Sea of Oman, April 2006



AP/Wide World Photo

Suspected Iranian small craft menaces USS Hopper and USS Port Royal near Strait of Hormuz, January 2008



U.S. Army Central Public Affairs

from the world bastion of Shi'a Islam to the ultraconservative Sunni Taliban fighters indicates Iran's willingness to turn a blind eye, at least momentarily, to sectarian differences in order to cause chaos and bloodshed throughout the region and to open the door for uncontested regional hegemony upon the departure of Western troops.

The Quds Force also runs a wide array of training camps for unconventional warfare and terrorist operations in various countries. These facilities cater to both foreign and indigenous recruits. The major training facilities in the Islamic Republic are located at Imam Ali University at the Sa'dabad Palace in Tehran (primarily ideological indoctrination); Manzariyah Training Center in Qom (foreign students recruited from religious seminaries); Tabriz (Iraqi Shi'a, Iraqi, and Kurdish Turks); and Mashhad (Afghans and Tajiks). Most domestic students are trained for service in the IRGC, while foreign students often receive specialized training in a number of areas. They are instructed in demolition and sabotage near the central Iranian city of Esfahan, airport infiltration

in Mashhad and Shiraz, and underwater warfare in Bandar Abbas. There are also al-Quds-operated camps in Sudan and Lebanon. Other such camps are believed to exist in other countries.<sup>31</sup>

### The Basij

If the Quds Force represents the elite, foreign-based, ideologically extreme arm of the IRGC, then the second enabling element of the Revolutionary Guard regarding the execution of its constitutional mandates, the *Basij Mustazafin* (Mobilization of the Oppressed), or Basij, is the opposite in all aspects except for ideological fervor. In some respects, the Basiji are infinitely more important to the regime's survival than are the soldiers of al-Quds.

Initially organized in response to the large number of casualties incurred during the Iran-Iraq war when the leaders of the Islamic Republic feared for the very existence of the fledgling revolution, the Basij continues to be comprised of volunteers from every part of Iranian society. Primarily young adults and children as young as

12 in the early years of the war, the Basij now includes both male and female teachers, doctors, students, school-aged children, engineers, businessmen, and lawyers. Most Basiji, however, are older men, often retired from military service.<sup>32</sup> Current estimates of the number of Iranians in the Basij forces are around 90,000 active uniformed personnel with a reserve strength of 300,000.<sup>33</sup> The total number of Pasdaran-trained citizens in the Basij available for mobilization is less certain, ranging from nearly 1,000,000 (according to Western analysts)<sup>34</sup> to as many as 11 million (as claimed by Basij commander General Mohammad Hejazi).<sup>35</sup>

Today, the Basij is primarily responsible for riot control and internal security, as well as policing the populace for infractions of the Islamic Republic's myriad morals laws, such as male-female fraternization and female dress codes; however, it is also organized to augment the IRGC,<sup>36</sup> and potentially the regular military.<sup>37</sup>

The Basij is trained, organized, and to some degree controlled by the Revolutionary Guard. The commander, General Hejazi, is an IRGC general. The Basij is broken into 740 regional battalions of about 300 to 350 personnel each.<sup>38</sup> There are at least 10 defined Revolutionary Guard administrative regions, further divided into more localized districts. Corresponding to the provincial makeup of the country, these units are able to operate and coordinate efforts with local Basij forces.<sup>39</sup> There are also units in nearly every government agency, factory, and university.<sup>40</sup>

Indoctrination of newly appointed Basiji takes place at the IRGC's Imam Ali's Companions Basij camp.<sup>41</sup> The Pasdaran also trains Basij members in basic military operations and warfighting techniques,<sup>42</sup> as well as riot control and internal security.<sup>43</sup> The extent and effectiveness of this training are not accurately measured, although joint training exercises have increasingly included Basij units. One exercise held simultaneously in cities and towns throughout the country in September 2005 included as many as 70 *Ashura* (designated for riot control) and *al-Zahra* (made up solely of women) units, alongside 500 Basij combat units. The exercise was centered on a scenario of widespread civil unrest.<sup>44</sup>

Three events occurred in 2005 that expanded and demonstrated the influence of the IRGC throughout Iran. The election of a former IRGC commander as president notwithstanding, the first significant event was

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Su-25s from Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps air force take part in maneuvers

AP/Wide World Photo (Sajjad Safari)



the much-publicized and debated creation of suicide squads in the Islamic Republic. The first organized groups trained and willing to conduct suicide missions for the regime, first publicized in 2004, had no connection to the government. However, they were ready to carry out missions on orders from the Supreme Leader, in addition to their respective local clergies.<sup>45</sup> By 2005, the Islamic Republic officially recognized both the effectiveness of such operations, as witnessed throughout the world, and the propaganda value of having dedicated suicide bombers ready to sacrifice themselves for the good of Iran. In July 2005, IRGC General Mohammed Reza Jaafari (recently appointed head of the Pasdaran) publicly announced the creation of the Lovers of Martyrdom Garrison (*Gharargahe Asheghane Shahadat*). Jaafari, the garrison's first commander, stated that recruiting was already under way and that there were to be as many as four martyrdom-seeking divisions in Tehran, with many more throughout the country.<sup>46</sup> The number of people who have actually committed to the Lovers of Martyrdom is unknown and so is the level of commitment.<sup>47</sup> In the meantime, just the potential for organized, strategically and operationally significant suicide attacks, whatever their numbers, adds risk to any military assessment of the Islamic Republic.

The second development of 2005 that added to the IRGC's influence occurred on the domestic front with the appointment of IRGC Brigadier General Ismail Ahmadi Moghaddam as chief of the nation's police force. This appointment, made at the behest of Ayatollah Khamenei, has effectively placed the entire law enforcement and security apparatus under Pasdaran control.<sup>48</sup>

The third event was the creation of the IRGC Center for Strategy. The Supreme Leader charged Brigadier General Jaafari, the same man who stood up the IRGC's suicide garrison, with creating an IRGC Center for Strategy, which is designed to bring together the top scientists and individuals in the IRGC to develop an updated military strategy and command structure for the Pasdaran. In carrying out their mission, members of the center could essentially give the IRGC access to all of the nation's resources and absolute control over the regular military in time of war.<sup>49</sup> It is clear that the primacy of the Pasdaran in all domestic security and law enforcement matters, as well as de facto own-

ership of the regular armed forces, makes it the key to the internal survival of the regime and the top enforcer of the despotic oppression inside Iran.

### Political and Economic Influence

Particularly since the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has enjoyed an unparalleled boost in political influence in Iran. This influence is not derived from any real, direct participation in the political arena, aside from each member's right to vote. Rather, the source of the Pasdaran's political clout can be summed up in one word: *alumni*. The Ninth Government, as it is known in Iran, reads like a roster of former IRGC soldiers and commanders, the most important recent addition being Ahmadinejad himself, whose former service and extreme conservative views are well known and will not be addressed here. The importance of his election, however, is his ability to choose his cabinet members (subject to *Majlis* [parliament] confirmation) as well as to influence the choice of appointments to other non-elected positions in the government.

The most visible noncabinet appointee in the Islamic Republic is Ali Larijani, the head of the Supreme National Security Council

(SNSC), Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, and a Pasdaran veteran.<sup>50</sup> With the progression and intent of Iran's nuclear power program occupying the center of the country's ongoing confrontation with the West, Larijani is in a position to influence the course of events in

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terms of negotiations and defending Iran's claimed right to develop nuclear power. His almost daily interaction with high-ranking officials from around the world to discuss the program inevitably leads many to see him as the face of Iran, one steeped in the ideology and zeal of a former commander of the Revolutionary Guard.

As head of the SNSC, Larijani's views of how to protect and run the government are not taken lightly. Under Article 176 of the Iranian constitution, the SNSC—comprised of leaders from every branch in the government, senior officers of the regular armed forces and Pasdaran, key ministers, the chief of the Supreme Command Council of the Armed Forces, two members appointed by

General Mohammad Ali Jafari, head of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, attends news conference



AP/Wide World Photo (Mehdi Ghassami)

the Supreme Leader, and experts in various fields—is responsible for:

- determining defense and national security policies within the framework of general policies determined by the leader
- coordinating activities in areas relating to politics, intelligence, social, cultural, and economic fields in regard to general defense and security policies
- exploiting the country's material and intellectual resources for facing internal and external threats.<sup>51</sup>

In effect, the SNSC, with input from the *faqih* and the president, determines the nation's defense and security policies.

The Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics is headed by an IRGC veteran and one of the founders of Hizballah, Mostafa Mohammad Najjar. The majority of the other cabinet-level officials have worked with the Pasdaran either as soldiers or in the intelligence establishment.<sup>52</sup> One newly appointed minister, Ezzatollah Zargami, is not only a former officer in the IRGC but also one of the students who stormed the American Embassy in 1979.<sup>53</sup> With the increasing pressure on the government with regard to its nuclear program, there began a housecleaning effort on the diplomatic front in mid-2006 to ensure Iran's ambassadors to other nations were in step with the policies of the Ninth Government. While the replacements for 60 to 70 ambassadors came from the foreign service ranks, Pasdaran spokesman Seyyid Ahmad Moheiddin Morshedi made it clear that the IRGC was ready to step in and fill those positions should the newly appointed personnel get out of line.<sup>54</sup> The Revolutionary Guard influence is alive and well in the Iranian government.

The IRGC also exerts an ever-increasing economic influence both domestically and internationally. Its biggest areas of involvement on the economic front are the transportation and oil industries. Khatam-ol-Anbia, an IRGC gas/oil infrastructure development company, won a contract for \$1.3 billion to build a gas pipeline.<sup>55</sup> Khatam-ol-Anbia also received a \$2.09-billion contract for the development of portions of the South Pars natural gas field. Not only do these projects serve as huge revenue sources for the IRGC, but they were also gained without competition in no-bid contracts.<sup>56</sup> The Pasdaran also bought out Oriental Kish, the country's

largest private oil company, for \$90 million.<sup>57</sup> Another company associated with the IRGC was awarded \$1.2 billion for a construction project on Tehran's metro system.<sup>58</sup> The wealth generated by the Pasdaran is incredible even for a major private institution, much less a military branch. Militaries around the world are in the business of spending money, not making it. The economic activity of the IRGC is one more example of the uniqueness of this institution.

### WMD and the Nuclear Program

It is widely presupposed that Iran has an extensive chemical and biological weapons program, although the types and numbers of these weapons are not known with any precision. The IRGC is also believed to control this program and its weapons stockpiles. The Pasdaran's *Shin-mim-re* (chemical, biological, and radiological) units routinely exercise, along with the regular military, defense against such weapons. Analysts have used this fact to support theories on the existence of Iran's offensive chemical and biological weapons. Speculation also surrounds Iran's nuclear program and whether the goal is the development of nuclear weapons.

While Iran claims that its nuclear program is focused on the development of an alternate energy source to oil, the West in general, and the United States in particular, believes the ultimate goal is the creation of nuclear weapons. There is significant evidence to support this assumption. What is not common belief, at least publicly, is that Iran is developing nuclear weapons under the auspices of a parallel nuclear program run by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In February 2004, Pakistani scientist A.Q. Khan openly admitted to selling plans for nuclear technology to Iran, including weapons production plans.<sup>59</sup> Khan's contact in Iran was Commander Mohammad Eslami, head of the IRGC nuclear research center.<sup>60</sup>

In 1983, the IRGC established a "strategic research and nuclear technology" center in Tehran. As many as 400 nuclear experts and engineers currently work at this facility.<sup>61</sup> Accounts by defectors, including former Ministry of Defense consultant and nuclear physicist Alireza Assar, provide proof that a nuclear weapons program exists and that it has been run by the Pasdaran since 1988. Assar was approached on two occasions in 1987 and 1988 by the commander in chief of the Revolutionary Guard, Mohsen Rezaei, and

asked to help develop "neutron triggers" to facilitate a nuclear explosion. Assar also gave the locations of the meetings and the names of other nuclear scientists involved.<sup>62</sup> The benefit to the IRGC of having a secret nuclear program is that the Pasdaran receives all the latest research and developments from the official civilian Atomic Energy Organization of Iran without having to share any of its own research.<sup>63</sup> The combination of sole ownership of ballistic missile technology and a fast-tracked nuclear development program makes the IRGC perhaps the most dangerous organization in Iran, if not the region.

By examining the preceding analysis alongside the strategic objectives established by President Bush in the National Security Strategy, it is evident that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps constitutes the key center of gravity in Iran. Indeed, using only open source material leaves ample room for mistakes when making this determination. The evidence presented above, while not necessarily as concrete as a commander would like, is an extensive sampling of the open source material available in English. There are even more sources in both print and on the Internet available in Farsi. The analysis of this material leaves little doubt as to the real power behind the clerical regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The center of gravity is without question the *Sepah-e Pasdaran*. **JFQ**

The author and editors thank Professor Fariborz Mokhtari of the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University for his review of an early draft of this article and his insightful recommendations for revision.

## NOTES

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