

The Role of the Qods Force in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in 1979 had a great impact on the question of security in both the region and outside of the Middle East. The foreign policy of the new republic would show hostility and aggression as terrorism became its *modus operandi*. In order to safeguard the newly established regime and the revolution, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Pasdaran*) was established, of which its external branch was named the *Qods Force* (QF). By reviewing scholarly works and regime publications, the current article aims to study and analyze the foreign policy of the IRI and the role of the QF in it. As the IRI is today deemed to be a sponsor of terrorism, and as the tensions between the IRI and the United States have increased since the *Pasdaran* and its QF was designated a terrorist organization, the role of the QF in the foreign policy of the IRI is even more important. This article shows that even though terrorism through the QF is still the *modus operandi* of the IRI, the QF has through the years evolved and uses other methods in order to influence and cement the power of the IRI in the international arena. The article also concludes that it is highly unlikely for the IRI to be reformed as long as the current leadership and establishment continue to rule, and if the regime feels threatened, it will almost certainly use terrorism and violence in order to guarantee its survival.

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After the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in 1979, Islam became the de facto source of legitimacy for the newly born republic, affecting all parts of society.¹ The new regime's interpretation of Islam was allowed to guide their foreign policy, permitting measures such as threat and use of violence to bring forth their objectives.² Today, at the heart of Iran's foreign policy, lies the military organization *Pasdaran*³ and its *Qods*⁴ Force (QF) which is responsible for foreign operations.

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In recent years, the *Pasdaran* and the QF have gained more influence and power in Iran and its foreign policy. The QF is therefore not unsurprisingly deemed to be a national security threat for many countries in the region⁵, Western Europe⁶ as well as the American continent⁷. Because of this, the Trump administration in April 2019 designated the *Pasdaran* and thus the QF as a terrorist organization⁸, and on 3 January 2020, assassinated the commander of the QF, Qasem Soleimani.

As Iran continues to be an important player in the Middle East, at the same time aspiring for more influence in Western Europe (WE) and the American continent, in line with the foreign policy of the IRI, it is important to study and analyze the foreign policy of Iran and the role of the QF in it.

Pasdaran

Pasdaran was *de facto* established in late April 1979⁹, and *de jure* recognized on 5 May 1979, after a decree issued by Ruhollah Khomeini¹⁰. The founding members of the *Pasdaran* already knew each other from secret Islamic military camps in Lebanon and Syria, which were set up in order to train opponents of the Shah.¹¹

After the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran, loyalists to Khomeini organized themselves in revolutionary committees to manage security in different cities of the country. It was a need of organizing these committees in which the idea of the *Pasdaran* was born. Khomeini, fearful of the military still being loyal to the Shah, saw also an opportunity in the *Pasdaran* to create a parallel military organization loyal to him which also could defend the revolution from domestic and foreign threats. His distrust of the regular army grew even stronger when members of the army and a great number of civilians still loyal

to the Shah tried to kill Khomeini and overthrow¹² the Islamic republic in July 1980.¹³

Initially responsible for protecting the newly established IRI and the borders of the country, *Pasdaran* now became a counterbalance to the regular military. The *Pasdaran* has since then been held higher than the regular military. In a speech, the current supreme leader of the IRI, Ali Khamenei, stated that although other organs of the IRI eventually became revolutionary, the *Pasdaran* was created, established and built by the revolution itself.¹⁴

The aim of the Pasdaran

The role of the *Pasdaran* is stated in the constitution of the IRI, article 150: 'The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps [...] shall continue to exist in order to carry out its role as the protector of the revolution and its achievements.'¹⁵ The *Pasdaran* also has its own statute which confirms the above statements.¹⁶ The constitution of the IRI, article 110, point 6e, states that the supreme leader is the commander in chief of the *Pasdaran*.¹⁷

Pasdaran is today one of the most powerful institutions of the IRI with its tentacles reaching all organs of the country, not least its economy.¹⁸ Besides owning several large banks¹⁹, the *Pasdaran* also owns and controls a large engineering industry called the *Khatam Al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters*²⁰ with more than 25 000 staff, working with issues such as water, oil, gas and telecommunications. The *Pasdaran* likewise owns several media sources thus controlling a widespread propaganda machine.²¹

The construction and structure of the Pasdaran

Although some of the members of the *Pasdaran*, including its leadership, knew each other from Islamist camps before the fall of the Shah, some of them connected and gained strong bonds during the Iran-Iraq war, which also gave them vital military experience. After its establishment, the *Pasdaran* was initially run by Ayatollah Hassan Lahouti Eshkevari²², with the help of Behzad Nabavi²³, Ali Shamkhani²⁴ and Mohsen Rezaei.

The *Pasdaran* command since its creation can be divided into two parts: the early temporary command, which was established in direct connection to the creation of *Pasdaran*, and the permanent command, which was established after that the *Pasdaran* had fully struc-

tured and organized themselves. Starting with the first part, the first commander of the *Pasdaran* was Javad Mansouri 1979-80. After him, there was a short lap before the permanent command of the *Pasdaran* was implemented. Since then, the *Pasdaran* have had five commanders; Abbas Agha Zamani (1980), Morteza Rezaei (1980-81), Mohsen Rezaei (1981-97), Yahya Rahim Safavi (1997-07), Mohammad Ali Jafari (2007-19) and Hossein Salami who is the incumbent commander.

The emblem of the *Pasdaran* consists of a fist holding a rifle in front of a globe. Above the rifle is a verse of the Qur'an, *Al-Anfal 8:60*, which translated to English states: 'Prepare Against them What Force You Can'.

The structure and force of the *Pasdaran* remains unknown, but it is believed that the organization has more than 120 000 members with sections in at least all large cities of Iran.²⁵ *Pasdaran* consists of several branches; *Pasdaran* Army forces, *Pasdaran* Navy forces, *Pasdaran* Aerospace forces, the QF, the *Basij*, the organization for intelligence, the counterintelligence organization as well as the security organization. The organizational chart of the *Pasdaran* and its leadership is presented in figure 1.

The navy of the regular military is responsible for the Gulf of Oman and beyond, while the *Pasdaran* navy forces has control over operations in the Persian Gulf. Both navies have, however, overlapping responsibilities in the vital *Strait of Hormuz*. As the air forces of the regular military controls the combat aircrafts of the IRI, the *Pasdaran* aerospace forces mostly focuses on the IRI's missile program. While the regular army secures and guards the borders of Iran, the *Pasdaran* ground forces mainly focus on questions of internal security and to organize paramilitary organizations and the *Basij* to combat unrest in the country.²⁶

The *Basij*, officially in Farsi named *Sazeman-e Basij-e Mostazafin* (the Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed) is a Khomeini-loyalist militia founded after the victory of the Islamic Revolution with voluntary members as young as 15 years old, who launched massive human-wave assaults against the Iraqis in the Iran-Iraq war.²⁷

The organization for intelligence gathers both domestic and foreign intelligence. The counterintelligence organization is responsible for counterespionage and safeguarding the *Pasdaran* from infiltration. The security organization has no intelligence gathering responsibilities and works with security issues like close protection.

The Qods Force of the Pasdaran

The QF was established in 1990 as a development of the Office of Islamic Liberation Movements in the *Pasdaran*. The Office was established shortly after the Islamic revolution and was headed by the prominent cleric Hossein Ali Montazeri²⁸. One of the main objectives of the Office was to coordinate Iran's support for different Islamic organizations like the *Hezbollah*.

The first commander of the QF was Ahmad Vahidi²⁹. However, the longest serving commander of the QF was Qasem Soleimani, who ascended as the head of the QF in 1998. On 3 January 2020, Soleimani was assassinated by US forces in Iraq and replaced by Esmail Gha'ani. The importance of the QF can be understood by the fact that the commander of the QF reports directly to the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, bypassing the regular chain of command which other branches of the *Pasdaran* must follow, i.e. report to the commander of the *Pasdaran* who in turn report to the supreme leader.³⁰

Since its establishment, the QF has been conducting covert operations outside of Iran like terrorism, espionage, sabotage and destabilization of countries deemed to be enemies of the IRI.³¹ The estimated strength of the QF is unknown and is by Iran experts and analysts put at between 5 000 and 15 000 operatives.³²

Foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Although Iran has been wrapped in a domestic struggle for power between the moderates and the conservatives for many years, the use of terrorism in its foreign policy has been nurtured under presidents of both camps.³³ While the IRI denies any role in terror attacks it is blamed for and especially the many assassinations it is accused of against Iranian opponents in exile, Wege argues that 'Tehran does little to conceal its role in these assassinations'.³⁴ The reason for this may be that Iran does not see its actions as terrorism but rather as resistance.

Article 152 of the constitution states that 'the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran shall be based on the [...] defence of the rights of all Muslims [...]'.³⁵ Although this statement is not further discussed in the different articles of the constitution, the preamble argues that the '[...] Constitution paves the way for the perpetuation of this Revolution in and outside the country [...] it tries to prepare the ground for the creation of a single world Ommat^[36] [...]'.³⁶

It is the above declarations in conjunction with Khomeini's statements on the question of the revolution, which supports the IRI mission of exporting the Islamic revolution.³⁷ The current foreign minister of the IRI, Mohammad Javad Zarif, endorses the constitution arguing that 'Iran seeks to enhance its regional and global stature; to promote its ideals';³⁸ How much this is an expression for exporting the revolution is thus unclear.

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Regional foreign policy of the Islamic Republic

Although not Iran's creation, Iran had a decisive role in the emergence of the Lebanese *Hezbollah* which since the victory of the Islamic revolution has received significant financial and logistical resources as well as weapons from the *Pasdaran*. The *Hezbollah* is without doubt one of IRI's most important achievements in its foreign policy. *Hezbollah* was not only a tool for the IRI to spread the Islamic revolution, but also a tool to use terrorism against enemy-states.³⁹ The former commander of the QF, Qasem Soleimani, has stated that Iran has been present in Lebanon in supporting the *Hezbollah*, and that he himself was in Lebanon during the 2006 war between Israel and *Hezbollah*.⁴⁰

One antagonist to Iran is Saudi Arabia which the IRI has tried to influence. Probably, at least to some degree, as a reaction to this, the Shia cleric Nimr Al-Nimr was executed by Saudi Arabia in January 2016, further infecting the tensions between the two states. It should, however, be noted that Al-Nimr did not have much sympathy for the IRI and vice versa as he was from the *Shirazi school* of the Shia faith descending from Ayatollah Mohammad Mahdi Shirazi⁴¹. As the political thought of the *Shirazi school* did not align well with the political system of the IRI, clerics of the *Shirazi school* did not fall out well with the leadership of the regime.⁴² However, Al-Nimr could be used by the IRI as propaganda against the Saudis. Another way the IRI tries to encounter Saudi Arabia, is through supporting the *Houthis* in Yemen in combating the Yemeni government which is highly supported by Saudi Arabia.⁴³

A second country which the IRI has strained relations with is Bahrain. As the majority of the population in Bahrain are Shia Muslims, and Iran house Bahraini activists fighting the Al-Khalifa family ruling the country, Iran has often been accused of agitating the Shias against the Bahraini government. Although Iran denies any activities in supporting the Shias in Bahrain, Bahrain claims otherwise and has in reaction toward the actions of Iran, cracked down on the Shia community and revoked the citizenship of the Bahraini Shia cleric Isa Qassim.⁴⁴

The conflicts between IRI and Bahrain, however, date back to the victory of the Islamic revolution and the unsuccessful 1981 coup by the now defunct Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB). The IFLB was founded in the 1970s and had the overthrow of the Al-Khalifa regime as its main objective. In 1980 the IFLB declared loyalty to Ruhollah Khomeini, and in 1981 they tried to topple the Al-Khalifa regime. The IFBL was connected to the IRI and its members also received training by the *Pasdaran*.⁴⁵

Iran is furthermore highly active in Syria with the QF to fight the opposition to Assad. Also, the Lebanese *Hezbollah*, on orders from Iran, is active in Syria fighting for Assad.⁴⁶ Interestingly, Iranian officials and members of the QF, initially, repeatedly denied any involvement in Syria.⁴⁷ Today, however, the IRI admits that they have a military presence in Syria via the QF⁴⁸, as hundreds of Iranian members of the QF have been confirmed killed, among them the high profiled *Pasdaran* commander General Hossein Hamadani⁴⁹.

Iran and the QF are also active in Afghanistan. After the invasion of Afghanistan, the IRI have gained more influence in the country – notably among its Shia population, which is highly supported by the QF in discussing influence and propaganda.⁵⁰ It is thus not only through supporting subversions which the IRI tries to export its revolution and ideology. Diplomacy and negotiations are increasingly becoming part of the modus operandi of the *Pasdaran* and the QF.

As long as Saddam Hussein was in power in Iraq, Iran tried to destabilize the government of Saddam through its support to the Shia population of Iraq which makes the majority of the population of the country. After the fall of Saddam at the hands of the Americans, Iran gained more strength and is probably the most influential country in Iraq today. The Shia community in Iraq is also more supported by Iran than ever before.⁵¹ The QF continue to be active in Iraq in both supporting the Shia community as well as, according to the US, undermining Iraqi governments not acting on the wishes of Tehran.⁵² Iran does not deny the fact that it has a military presence in Iraq via the QF, but claims they are only there to fight terrorism.⁵³

Islamic Republic's foreign policy in relation to Western Europe and America

Even though the relation between the IRI and the US have been strained since the attack on the American embassy in Tehran by Khomeini loy-

alists in 1979, the IRI has had widespread diplomatic and commercial relations with the European Union (EU) and especially Western Europe (WE).⁵⁴ The good relations with WE has, however, not stopped the IRI from conducting or attempting to conduct terrorist operations in those countries, including Canada, either against the interest of the host country or against Iranian dissidents living in those countries.⁵⁵

Most WE countries have witnessed the killing of Iranian dissidents. More than 200 Iranian dissidents across the world, deemed by the IRI as threats to its existence, have over the years been killed or seriously injured in assassinations by operatives of the IRI employed either by the QF or the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence.⁵⁶

In the post-Khomeini era, the foreign policy of the IRI has evolved as Iran now tries to gain more power and influence in different countries through its supporters, different organizations affiliated with the IRI, cultural organizations as well as mosques.⁵⁷ The National Iranian-American Council in the US is a good example of an organization functioning as a base of interest for the IRI.⁵⁸ The creation of the British based Iranian owned *Press TV*⁵⁹ is another sign of the policy change seen in the foreign policy of the IRI with emphasis on influence.

In discussing the US, the IRI through the QF is highly active in the country. Also, the *Hezbollah* is active in the US as well as Canada, as was seen in 2002 when American and Canadian law enforcements in different operations exposed criminality directly linked to *Hezbollah* operatives.⁶⁰ Likewise, in Latin America the QF and Iran are highly active. Over the years, Iran has highly increased its presence in Latin America and doubled its embassies, with the one in Nicaragua being the largest with more than 150 employees.⁶¹

The Qods Force and the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic

The *Pasdaran* and its QF is deemed to have a vital and central role in the foreign policy of the IRI.⁶² On one hand, the *Pasdaran* is in control of the IRI's unconventional warfare, thus having an important role in the open and subtle threats made by the IRI towards other countries⁶³; on the other hand, operatives and proxies of the *Pasdaran* throughout the world, via the QF, engage in covert operations and acts of terrorism. In using proxies in its operations, Ward states: 'Carrying on the tradition of the "hidden hand" attacks in the Gulf and the use of sympathetic militant groups to export the revolution during the 1980s, the Guard and its QF have kept Iran actively involved in terrorism.'⁶⁴ The

use of proxies in different covert operations is admitted by the *Pasdaran*, which in a book published by the *Pasdaran* themselves states that the use of pro-revolutionary proxies outside of Iran is part of the doctrine of the *Pasdaran*.⁶⁵

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The Qods Force in the region

Since the 1980s Iran has initially through the Office of Islamic Liberation Movements and later via the QF controlled *Hezbollah* in Lebanon as well as different Shia militias in Iraq and other countries in the region to implement its foreign policy which is also admitted by the former commander of the QF.⁶⁶

As the IRI opposes the existence of Israel, it has always combatted and been an opponent of peace between Palestine and Israel, thus the foreign policy of the country has been focused in undermining any efforts to achieve peace, as seen in the support of the *Pasdaran* and its QF to Hamas and Islamic Jihad.⁶⁷ The *Pasdaran* has also used its control over the IRI's missile program to threaten Israel. The commander of the *Pasdaran* Aerospace Forces, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, has in an interview stated that 'The reason we [The *Pasdaran*] designed our missiles with a range of 2000 km is to be able to hit our enemy the Zionist regime from a safe distance'.⁶⁸

Both in Afghanistan and Iraq, after the fall of the Taliban and Saddam respectively, Iran's foreign policy has been focused on gaining influence in the two countries. While in Afghanistan the IRI acts through diplomacy and propaganda, the QF is highly active in Iraq to gain more power and influence by supporting Shia militias. Iraq is of such importance for Iran that the former commander of the QF, Soleimani, himself, has been in Iraq directing diverse military operations.⁶⁹ Most of these operations have been conducted against ISIS, but the Americans have also been targeted. In the beginning of 2007, QF operatives dressed as American troops attacked the *Provisional Joint Coordination Center* in Karbala, killing five American soldiers and kidnapping four who later were found murdered.⁷⁰

Today, the QF is most active in implementing the foreign policy of the IRI in Syria, in defending Bashar Al-Assad.⁷¹ The survival of Assad is of great importance for the IRI, which cannot afford to lose an ally in the region. Syria is also of strategic importance for the IRI. The former deputy commander of the *Pasdaran* and now the current commander of the *Pasdaran*, Hossein Salami, said in an interview that Syria is im-

portant in order to have a continuous interconnection between Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. Salami stated that losing Syria would mean that Iran's connection to Lebanon and Palestine would be lost, and Iran would not be able to fight the enemies of Islam, being the Israelis.⁷²

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Another way the QF tries to influence the region and at the same time strengthen its own position, is by persuading the diplomatic core of the IRI to appoint QF officials as diplomats and not least ambassadors. Since Iraq is of significant importance for the IRI and in particular the QF which is highly active in the country, the current Iranian ambassador to Iraq is a former senior QF official – Brigadier General Iraj Mesdaghi. The first commander of the *Pasdaran*, Javad Mansouri, stated in an interview that many Iranian diplomats in the region are members of the QF. In a controversial statement, Mansouri also exposed Abbas Araghchi to be a member of the QF.⁷³ Araghchi is a career diplomat and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator. This clearly illuminates that the *Pasdaran* and its QF do not only use irregular warfare in order to influence and strength its power, but diplomatic channels as well.

Another example is the former commander of the QF, Soleimani, and how he has been part of extra-territorial negotiations and thus been acting as a *pseudo minister of foreign affairs*. Soleimani had a prominent role in negotiating between different fractions in both Iraq and Syria, and he advised the Shiite establishment in Iraq on how to negotiate with the US and the UK.⁷⁴ Soleimani had also a significant role in convincing the Russians to engage in Syria and deploy their militaries in the country in support of Assad.⁷⁵ The role of Soleimani as Iran's pseudo minister of foreign affairs is much more different than the role of Mohammad Javad Zarif as the *de jure* Iranian minister of foreign affairs. The *Pasdaran* and the commander of the QF answer directly to the supreme leader, which is why he is not required to have any presidential nor parliamentary endorsement. Soleimani has thus had free hands in acting on direct orders and on behalf of the supreme leader without being exposed for internal political conflicts and disputes.

The Qods Force in the Western Europe and the American continent

In the 1980s and the 1990s, the world witnessed hundreds of assassinations and assassination attempts against Iranian dissidents, particularly in Western Europe. Even though most of these assassinations

remain unsolved, they have by different governments, intelligence services and organizations been attributed to the IRI.⁷⁶ There are, however, few known assassinations of Iranian dissidents since May 1996. It is unclear why these assassinations have decreased, but the reason is probably twofold; on one hand it is difficult to conduct a covert operation in another country, and on the other hand, instead of conducting assassinations, which in turn would heavily affect the relationship of the IRI with the countries the assassinations are taking place in, the IRI both through its Ministry of Intelligence as well as the QF have instead been engaging in widespread espionage against Iranian dissidents and other targets of interest as have been reported by several countries.⁷⁷

The QF has also, fully in accordance with the foreign policy of the IRI, gained large influences in Latin America and is highly active in the area. The fact that *Hezbollah* has also been increasing their presence in these countries has concerned both the Americans and the Israelis, which believe that their interests in these countries may be threatened.⁷⁸

Islamic Republic's use of terrorism

As the French in the 1980s sold fighter jets to Iraq and gave a safe haven to opponents of the IRI, Iran engaged in several acts of terrorism against France. French government personnel were attacked, French citizens were kidnapped and held hostages in Lebanon and several bomb attacks at the hands of the *Hezbollah* shook Paris.⁷⁹ Even though Iran denies any role in these terrorist attacks, a court in France in the 1990s convicted Fouad Ali Saleh to life in prison because of his role in the bombings in Paris. Saleh, a Tunisian born in France, had studied in Iran and been recruited by the Lebanese *Hezbollah* to conduct the attacks in Paris.⁸⁰ Some bomb attacks in France remain unsolved, but both the police and the French intelligence point out *Hezbollah* and Iran as responsible for these attacks.⁸¹ Although Iran's footprints are seen in these attacks carried out by the *Hezbollah*, there is no clear evidence of which role, if any, the QF has had. However, since *Hezbollah* is the 'primary terrorist proxy' of the QF, it is highly likely that the QF was very much involved in these attacks.⁸²

In 1994, operatives of the QF and members of the Lebanese *Hezbollah* bombed a Jewish community center in Argentina, the *Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association*, AMIA. Two years earlier the Israeli embassy

in Argentina was bombed, allegedly by the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and QF operatives.⁸³ Even though Iran denies any role in the AMIA bombing, not only has the Argentine prosecutor Alberto Nisman⁸⁴ connected Iran and the QF to the bombing⁸⁵, but the Argentinians have also provided sufficient evidence to issue a warrant through Interpol for the arrest of five Iranians and one Lebanese national. Among the five Iranian nationals are the former commander of the *Pasdaran*, Mohsen Rezaei⁸⁶, former commander of the QF Ahmad Vahidi⁸⁷, and former minister of intelligence, Ali Fallahian⁸⁸.

Another act of terrorism in which Iran has been convicted for in a court is the Khobar tower bombing in Saudi Arabia in 1996, where more than 500 individuals were killed and injured. In 2006, a court in the US found Iran responsible for the attacks, despite Iran's claim to the contrary.⁸⁹ According to the US Department of State it was the *Pasdaran* – and thus the QF – that was responsible for placing the bomb.⁹⁰

Ever since the establishment of the IRI, more than 160 Iranian opponents of the IRI have been killed by the regime.⁹¹ In discussing these assassinations, it is often difficult to know which organization that has planned and executed the assassination: The Ministry of Intelligence, the QF or both. There is, however, no doubt that at least one of these two organizations carry out orders of assassinations against Iranian dissidents.⁹²

The most high-profile assassination of Iranians in exile which the QF conducted was in Berlin in 1992, when four Iranians opposed to the IRI were killed in what came to be known as the Mykonos assassination. Mykonos was the restaurant the opponents had gathered in for a meeting when they were fired upon. The operation had been planned by a veteran member of the *Pasdaran* living in Germany and then conducted by both Lebanese and Iranian operatives of the QF.⁹³ The German Supreme Court in Berlin, on 10 April 1997, stated that the highest officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran had ordered the terrorist attacks. The verdict not only sentenced two terrorists to life in prison, but also stated that 'the political leaders of Iran gave the order, for the sole purpose of staying in power' and that 'the order givers and string pullers were Iranian state functionaries'.⁹⁴

Acts of terrorism where the IRI is suspected, but no verdicts have been passed, are the many bombings of US embassies in the ME⁹⁵ and hundreds of assassinations and assassination attempts against Iranian dissidents all around the world.⁹⁶

In 2011 the US accused the IRI and the QF for planning to assassinate the Ambassador of Saudi Arabia in the US.⁹⁷ According to US officials, it was after that a QF operative living in the US contacted whom he believed was a member of a Latin American drug cartel (but in fact was an undercover informant for the Drug Enforcement Agency) to negotiate payment for killing the Saudi Arabian Ambassador in the US when the plot was revealed.⁹⁸ The IRI denied any involvement in plans to assassinate the Saudi ambassador.⁹⁹

Terrorist operations on foreign soil in discussing Europe and the American continent, sponsored by the IRI, have been diminishing. Iran, however, still supports acts of terrorism in at least Europe. An example is seen in Germany, where a Pakistani national was convicted for espionage for the QF with the aim of killing prominent German nationals linked to Israel.¹⁰⁰

Discussion

The IRI today mainly focuses on propaganda, lobby organizations and espionage to control and influence Iranian dissidents as well as other countries.¹⁰¹ Recently, Mahmoud Alavi, the IRI's minister of intelligence, stated in an aired interview that the IRI has followers all over the world and that these individuals are loyal to the Islamic revolution and work without pay as a lobby for the IRI.¹⁰²

It is important to point out that even though there is no proof of the IRI for the last decades to be involved in any assassinations or assassination attempts in the US and the WE, it is not because of the lack of will. In late March 2017, 31-year old Mustufa Haidar Syed-Naqfi from Pakistan was convicted by a court in Berlin for spying for Iran and the QF. The court stated that Syed-Naqfi had gathered information on prominent individuals with connection to Israel, which would be targeted by the QF.¹⁰³ That the IRI has turned to propaganda and espionage therefore does not mean that the notion of terrorism has been abandoned.

In discussing the US, the IRI through QF has mainly been active against American interests in the ME and in Latin America. Since 2003 when US forces invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam, Iran has grown stronger. Saddam was an archenemy of the IRI after the eight-year long war between the two countries. In overthrowing Saddam, the Bush administration did the IRI a favor and contributed to the growing strength of the IRI, which today has an active foreign policy in the re-

gion. The supreme leader of Iran has stated that the QF has an important part in creating *Hezbollah* cells all around the world¹⁰⁴, and with Saddam gone, the IRI can now much more easily and more effectively act upon this wish. The IRI does not hide the fact that the QF is highly active in the region.¹⁰⁵

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Although more than 30 years have passed since the above statement of the supreme leader of Iran, Iran's foreign policy in supporting *Hezbollah* and different Islamic militias in the world intensely shows that this statement is valid even today.

The IRI considers Israel and Saudi Arabia its foremost enemies in the region¹⁰⁶, which is reflected in the foreign policy of the IRI that supports different organizations, among them terrorist organizations, with the goal of destabilizing these countries and other countries deemed to be an antagonist to the Islamic regime in Iran.¹⁰⁷ In doing so, the foreign policy of the IRI is highly nonsectarian and in full accordance with the article 152 of the IRI's constitution and its preamble. This is, for example, seen in the IRI's support to the Sunni *Islamic Jihad Movement of Palestine* and *Hamas*. The IRI's affiliations with *Al Qaeda*, not least after the invasion of Afghanistan in which high-ranking members of *Al Qaeda* fled to Iran, is another example of Iran's nonsectarian support for terrorism.¹⁰⁸

It can be summarized that Iran's actions in the region are to gain influence and export its revolution and ideology abroad. In this quest, the IRI uses terrorism or propaganda. The former is not done directly by Iranian operatives, but rather by local militias trained or supported by the QF. In discussing the use of propaganda, the IRI are only able to do that in countries in which its operatives can move somewhat freely (Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria). In these countries, the use of violence and force are only used when encountered with antagonism.

The main aim of the IRI is to guarantee regime survival. Islam and the constitution of the IRI are what legitimize the regime -- any harm to these, the idea of the state, would mean a direct threat to regime survival. The IRI can therefore not step back from its Islamic character and identity. In discussing the idea of the state, the notion of export of the Islamic revolution becomes more clear and vivid.¹⁰⁹ Recently, the representative of Khamenei in the *Pasdaran*, Ali Saeidi Shahroudi, stated that the Islamic revolution must be used in order to spread Islam to the world.¹¹⁰ Also, Khamenei's representative in the QF, Ali Shirazi, has recently stated that the export of the revolution to other countries is

the beginning of a new era in international affairs.¹¹¹ In February 2017, a senior advisor to the supreme leader, Ali Akbar Velayati¹¹², stated in a speech that the Palestinian intifada is one of the clearest measures with respect to Iran's export of the revolution.¹¹³

The *Pasdaran* and its QF have been an essential part of the IRI's tool to not only export the revolution, but also engage in covert operations and acts of terrorism in order to fight the enemies of the IRI. However, the IRI has to some degree changed its foreign policy from only focusing on terrorism, to now trying to influence different countries in other ways, which is also clearly stated by the IRI's current minister of foreign affairs that discusses economy, culture and technology as tools of influence.¹¹⁴ This, to some parts, explains why the IRI has changed its modus operandi to espionage, propaganda and lobbying in order to gain influence. The unique role of Qasem Soleimani acting as a pseudo minister of foreign affairs and engaging in diplomatic talks, is yet a sign of the above.

In discussing the support for the IRI, the physical base of the regime, it is important to divide the supporters into two parts; the people residing in Iran, and the Muslim people of the world, foremost the Shias. For the IRI, the trust and faith of both groups are vital. The Iranian people is of importance in order to safeguard the regime. Not being able to control the people either by using violence or force, as seen after the presidential election of 2009, or by keeping its legitimacy, may contribute to the fall of the IRI. Regarding Muslims from other countries, their support is vital for the IRI since they are used by the regime in different covert operations through organizations like the Lebanese *Hezbollah*, the Saudi *Hezbollah*, the *Kataib Hezbollah* in Iraq etc.¹¹⁵ To trust these groups, the IRI must ensure that they are supported financially, logistically and militarily. Without their support and loyalty, the IRI will not be able to influence other countries.

Implications for the future

When Khomeini after 14 years in exile returned to Iran, the Canadian-American journalist Peter Jennings, who sat with Khomeini in the Air France plane flying to Iran, asked Khomeini how he felt now that he was to see Iran again. Khomeini answered 'nothing'. Khomeini's translator and close aid, Ghotbzadeh, himself being highly surprised by Khomeini's answer, asked Khomeini, 'nothing?', to which Khomeini again answered, 'I don't feel a thing'.¹¹⁶ This filmed interview was, of

course, never aired in Iran, but is today widely spread in the country and notably in social media.¹¹⁷ Although this statement of Khomeini is today mocked and discussed by Iranians to be a clear sign that Khomeini never cared about Iran, the reality is more complex. Khomeini's answer was fully in conjunction with his Islamic ideology and I would argue that it also laid the ground for the concept of a borderless Islamic world. For Khomeini, Islam and Islamism, an internationalist ideology, was the important issue. This is significant to understand in order to grasp Khomeini's ideology, the ideology of the IRI today and its future actions.

In the region, the IRI considers itself a great and large power. Iran's ambitions of controlling the ME are highly alive, not least since the fall of Saddam. The fact that the Saudis tried to cooperate with the Israelis to harm the IRI is a clear sign of the concern which these countries have over Iran's ambitions in the region.¹¹⁸ The foreign policy of the IRI will continue to be aggressive and hostile in the region. The role of the *Pasdaran* and especially its QF will, in all likelihood, also continue to grow, as Iran continues to aspire for more influence in the region. In this matter, the role of terrorism and the use of violence will be highly vivid. As the *Pasdaran* is one the most important institutional expressions of the state, and as the ME, at least now, continues to be unstable, the physical base of the state demands actions from the *Pasdaran*, as is seen in the case of Syria.

Looking at the WE and the American continent, the IRI will probably mostly focus its acts of terrorism in Latin America and Eastern Europe. Only to a minor degree will the IRI focus on terrorism in WE, and then possibly target Israelis and Israeli interests¹¹⁹, as well as important Iranian dissidents. American interests will most likely be targeted by the IRI in the ME and Latin America.

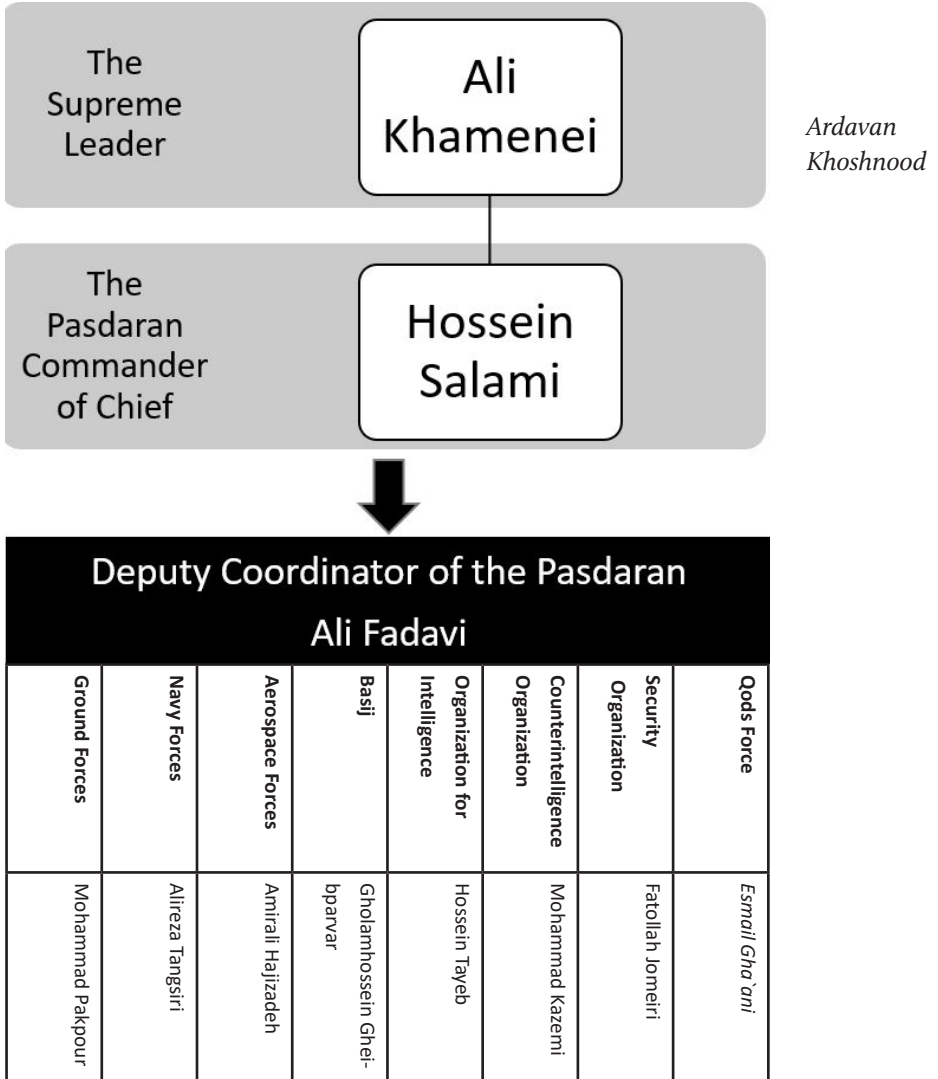
One factor, however, should be remembered, and that is if the IRI feels threatened, it will not take any considerations of diplomatic relations nor cost of life, and will use terrorism to save itself. The blockage or disruption of the *Strait of Hormuz*, which is a matter of national security for the US¹²⁰, is without doubt a strategy the IRI will use if threatened. Hostage taking of ships in the Persian Gulf as well as foreigners in Iran will be other strategies that have been and will be used.

For Khomeini, as for the current supreme leader, Khamenei, violence and threats were and are the way to counter antagonism to the IRI.¹²¹ As long as Khamenei is the supreme leader of the country, the foreign

policy of the IRI will probably not change for the better. Khamenei has led Iran for more than two decades and is the symbol of resistance for many in the Islamic world. Khamenei has developed the foreign policy of the country in accordance with the constitution of the IRI, thus it cannot easily be abandoned, not least because of the obligations the IRI has to its physical base and the importance of remaining loyal to its idea of the state. To discuss changes in the foreign policy of the IRI from a perspective of a conservative president or moderate president in Iran is therefore wrong, since the president on one hand acts on orders from the supreme leader, and on the other hand is himself fully loyal to the principles of the Islamic revolution and the ideology of the IRI. Over the years, Iran has had both conservative and moderate presidents without any significant differences in their respective foreign policies and their use of the QF in order to implement the foreign policy of the country. There is no doubt that the foreign policy of the IRI to some degree has softened in the post-Khomeini era, however, the IRI continues to dominate the international arena with its support to terrorism, espionage and other ways to destabilize countries deemed to be enemies of the revolution.

As long as Khamenei continues to rule Iran, and as long as the establishment of the country consists of individuals themselves being part of the revolution and loyal to the IRI, no vital changes in the foreign policy of the IRI will be seen, and Iran will continue its hostile foreign policy. Professor Misagh Parsa in his recent book on Democracy in Iran, states ‘Taken together, these variables help determine whether the likely route to democratization will proceed through reform or revolution. The variables suggest that it is highly unlikely for Iran to democratize through reform [...]’.¹²² If this statement by professor Parsa is valid, and the people of Iran would come to the same conclusion, the use of terrorism both inside Iran and outside by operatives of the Ministry of Intelligence, the *Pasdaran* and the QF respectively, will be a great threat in both discussing human rights and questions concerning national and international security.

Figure 1. The structure of the Pasdaran and its leadership.



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