

## **Bulwark Against Democracy: Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij**

Iran's 125,000-strong Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has emerged as one of the most powerful political and economic forces in Iran and, along with the Basij Resistance Force and the state intelligence services, is part of a network of deeply illiberal and nontransparent institutions that serves as a bulwark against democratic development. A self-described "people's army," the IRGC was created to ensure internal security, serve as a counterweight to the regular army, and protect the ideals of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Along with the religious police, it enforces adherence to the Islamic faith, and it has sole jurisdiction over patrols of Tehran.<sup>1</sup> The IRGC's special operations arm, the Quds Force, is responsible for spreading the IRGC's ideology beyond Iran's borders. It has reportedly provided training and roadside explosives to Iraqi Shiite militias for use against U.S. and British forces, and it allegedly supplied missiles to Hezbollah in Lebanon during that group's 2006 war with Israel.<sup>2</sup> The IRGC's intelligence unit operates in collaboration with Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), which is composed of 15,000 civilian staff members. In 2007, the U.S. State Department formally designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization. The IRGC's wide-ranging activities in domestic economic and political affairs, coupled with its considerable military capabilities, makes it an institution with exceptional power. It is used to repress political opposition and informally vet political candidates. Former IRGC commanders make up two-thirds of Iran's 21-member cabinet, and former officers hold 80 of the 290 seats in the parliament. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, also an IRGC veteran, has used his authority over the Corps to increase his own political and economic influence.<sup>3</sup> Current and former IRGC commanders have extended their economic reach considerably, with enterprises including an engineering arm that dominates the oil and gas industries, government construction projects, and a network of dental and eye clinics. Analysts estimate that the IRGC has ties to more than 100 companies, controlling an estimated \$12 to \$15 billion in the business, construction, and engineering sectors.<sup>4</sup> The Basij Resistance Force, founded by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979 and operating under the command of the IRGC, is a voluntary paramilitary organization tasked with both domestic security and defending the regime against international threats.<sup>5</sup> As of November 2008, the force claimed to number 13.6 million, or roughly 20 percent of Iran's population, though experts believe its true mobilization capacity is closer to one million.<sup>6</sup> Like the IRGC, the Basij are also believed to be involved in a range of state-run and other economic schemes.

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Bruno, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards," Council on Foreign Relations, October 25, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kim Murphy, "Iran's Guard Builds a Fiscal Empire," *Los Angeles Times*, August 26, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "Iran's Basij Force – The Mainstay of Domestic Security," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 2008.

<sup>6</sup> "Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2007.