



The Political and Economic Power of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

This article was reviewed by Lorenz Garbe and Daniel Gerjets



Tobias Bauer

Tobias Bauer is President of the Initiative junger Transatlantiker e. V. Since 2022, he has been spokesperson for the state working group "International Affairs" of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen in Rhineland-Palatinate and delegate for the federal working group. He studies business education (B.Sc.) at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz.



Maximilian Schußmüller

Maximilian Schußmüller is a political scientist and freelance speaker and author. At EPIS, he initially headed the security policy department and currently works as a security policy advisor. In addition, he has been actively involved in the Young Forum of the German-Israeli Society and the Young Transatlantists Initiative for several years.

In the face of the extreme violence with which the Iranian regime is responding to the protests in the country, which have been ongoing since September 2022, a discourse has flared up on how to deal with the responsible actors. At the centre of the debate is the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Recently, the EU Parliament called on the European Union to ban the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation. Reactions from the Iranian regime accused the EU of subordination to the USA (Iran International, 2023). In addition to violent crackdowns on protesters, the IRGC also has long been associated with terrorism. The US Department of State identifies the Revolutionary Guard as central to the Iranian regime's international spread of violence. The organisation intensively supports Islamist groups and also resorts to terrorist means itself. For the period between 1985 and 2020, the agency lists 17 incidents in Europe alone in connection with the Revolutionary Guards. The USA has designated the IRGC together with its sub-unit the Al Quds Brigade as a foreign terrorist organisation in 2019 (US Department of State, 2020, pp.24-29). An important but rarely mentioned side effect of the ban debate is the power of the Revolutionary Guard in Iran. As it is one of the most powerful institutions in the state apparatus, a break with it can be tantamount to a break with the recognition of the legitimacy of the institution of the Islamic Republic. The following article examines the role of the IRGC as a political and economic actor within Iran.

et al., 2009, p. xi; Sinkaya, 2016, p. 1). In order to understand the power of the IRGC within the Iranian regime, it is necessary not to limit the term to the formal organisation alone. The Revolutionary Guard as a power factor encompasses more than the active cadres. Veterans in particular are an integral part of the network. In the RAND Corporation's *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, the IRGC is defined as: „[...] not only the formal institution of active military personnel but also the networks of IRGC veterans and former members whose ascension has been facilitated by the informality of Iranian political life.“ (Wehrey, et al., 2009, p. 12) The formal organisation is therefore in the focus, but people from within the immediate circle remain just as relevant. Therefore, in the following, if not explicitly indicated otherwise, the terms Revolutionary Guard and IRGC are used for the entire network.

A revolutionary army

The Revolutionary Guard as a formal organisation was founded in 1979 in the course of the Iranian Revolution on the orders of Ruhollah Khomeini. This step was taken with the explicit justification of creating a revolutionary counterweight to the regular military, which still dated from the time of the Shah's rule. In contrast to the regular army, the mission from the beginning also included fighting the internal opposition. Their role as defenders of the Islamic Revolution is also constitutionally stipulated (Wehrey, et al., 2009, p. 20-23). Khomeini attached great importance to the IRGC not interfering in political affairs, analogous to the army. Politicisation would undermine the fulfilment of their mission (Wehrey, et al., 2009, p. 78). Here we are presented with an obvious constitutional contradiction between revolutionary orientation on the one hand and a prescribed apolitical role on the

Who is the IRGC?

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard, part of the Armed Forces of Iran, is generally considered an influential player within the Islamic Republic of Iran (Negahban, 2017; Wehrey,

other. The organisation did not follow this original idea of Khomeini. At the latest with the presidency of the reformer Khatami, the Revolutionary Guards finally began to constitute itself as a political actor (Forozan, 2016, p. 87; Wehrey, et al., 2009, p. 17). From 1999 at the latest, actors from the ranks of the IRGC explicitly professed political partisanship. The idea that the military is obliged to be neutral, one commander told the radical newspaper Keyhan, is a misinterpretation of Ayatollah Khomeini's teachings (Samii, 1999). Within Iran's political landscape, the organisation and its network are clearly on the side of the hardline faction (Wehrey, et al., 2009, p. 16). Significant ideological influence on the IRGC was exerted by the cleric Ayatollah Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, whose teachings grant defenders of the Islamic Revolution almost unlimited powers (Safshekan & Sabet, 2010, p. 550-553). Anti-Semitism directed primarily against Israel and the goal of Islamic control over Jerusalem also play an important role in the ideology of the Revolutionary Guards. As early as during the Iran-Iraq war, this could be observed in the naming of operations; one of the first major operations was entitled "Tariq al-Quds", "Road to Jerusalem". A common propaganda slogan, also alluding to Shiite mythology, was: "The road to Jerusalem passes through Kerbala" (Ostovar, 2016, p. 75-79). Ideology and the revolutionary myth thus occupy a high position in the IRGC's self-image.

Important subdivisions

An integral part of the IRGC structure is the Basiji militia. This usually poorly trained popular army plays a key role in fighting the domestic opposition. Like the Revolutionary Guard, it was founded in the course of the Islamic Revolution and cooperated with it from a very early stage. During the Iran-Iraq war,

its high level of sacrifice ensured propagandistically exploitable successes. Through student organisations and groups for workers, Basiji are strongly present in parts of Iranian society that are loyal to the regime. Since 2007, the militia has also been formally affiliated to the IRGC (Wehrey, et al., 2009, p. 25-29). The militia played a central role in the brutal crackdown on protests against the results of the 2009 presidential election (Thaler, et al., 2010, p. 46). To this day, the Basiji remains the force responsible for violently combating protesters on the streets. In the current unrest, too, it is the Basij that is cracking down on the protesters with violence (VOA, 2022). Another centrally relevant part of the IRGC is the Al-Quds Brigade. The very name Al-Quds, Arabic and Persian for Jerusalem, testifies once anew to the strongly anti-Israeli orientation. Under the leadership of Qassem Soleimani, who was killed by the USA at the beginning of 2020, the relevance of the division has greatly increased. It now controls the bulk of the Revolutionary Guard's foreign operations and is the primary tool for exerting Iranian influence in the neighbouring region (Ostovar, 2016, p. 6). They are closely linked to Iran's efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction (Wahdat-Hagh, 2003, p.311). Another important project dominated by the Quds Brigades is Iran's cooperation, known as the "Axis of Resistance", with non-state actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite militias in Iraq, the Huthis in Yemen and various regional volunteer corps. This pillar of Iranian foreign policy in the neighbouring region, based on asymmetrical structures, emerged in the mid-2000s as a reaction to the American invasion of Iraq. Israel also belongs to the circle of enemies of the "resistance". The most important state partner is the regime

of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Politically and ideologically, the project is subordinate to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khomeini (Steinberg, 2021, p. 7). Through the Quds Brigade, the IRGC has offices in Iranian embassies around the world and works closely with the Iranian foreign intelligence service MOIS (Wahdat-Hagh, 2003, p.311). This is particularly worrying as the use of diplomatic facilities as cover for sometimes terrorist operations against Iranian opposition members abroad and other targets classified as hostile is well documented (Pop & Silber, 2021, p.158, Levitt, 2018, pp. 10-14).

Is the IRGC a stakeholder in its own right?

Although the IRGC as an organisation is formally subordinate to the Supreme Leader,

there is extensive autonomy with regard to its practice. Early in its existence, the organisation managed to escape comprehensive control by the government and the clergy. In particular, the decisive authority over filling positions within the organisation lies with the leadership of the Revolutionary Guard itself (Katzman, 1993, pp. 393-395). Clerical representatives appointed by the Supreme Leader primarily serve the ideological control of the organisation and the avoidance of direct political confrontation. Operational independence in particular has been strengthened since 2007 through innovations in the command structure on the initiative of the then commander Mohammad Ali Jafari. In combination with its broad operational field, this form of autonomy of the Revolutionary Guard, in contrast to the regular armed forces, strengthens its abil-



Source: Anonymous (ca.1980s). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:31st_Ashura_Division_combat_engineering.jpg

ity to act as a political force (Forozan, 2016, p. 57; 68). Ostovar describes autonomy from the organisation's relationship to the Supreme Leader as follows:

„The organization's activities are inherently sanctioned by the leader and thus touched with the same essence of sacredness that he represents. So long as the leader does not publically disagree with the organization, its actions are essentially unimpeachable within the context of Iran's system.“ (Ostovar, 2016, p. 238)

Within the leadership of the IRGC, there is a close network that has existed since the 1980s. Of central importance for the composition of this network is a network of personal relationships that developed in the course of the Iran-Iraq war. Central to this network were and are, among others, the persons Mohammad Ali Jafari, Esmail Qaani and Qassem Soleimani (Fulton, 2013, p. 7-10; 37). The events of the Iran-Iraq war under the propaganda slogan of "sacred defence" were also of decisive importance for the formation of the ideological identity of the Revolutionary Guards. Even today, this term is important for the organisation's self-image and external presentation as a religiously legitimised actor (Wehrey, et al., 2009, p. 23-24). The known factual situation thus points to a high degree of autonomy of the IRGC vis-à-vis Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, despite its nominal subordination. It is conceivable that the close-knit leadership elite acts on its own initiative within the framework of anticipatory obedience.

Closely tied to the political establishment

Within the formal political apparatus, members of the IRGC can be found in local ad-

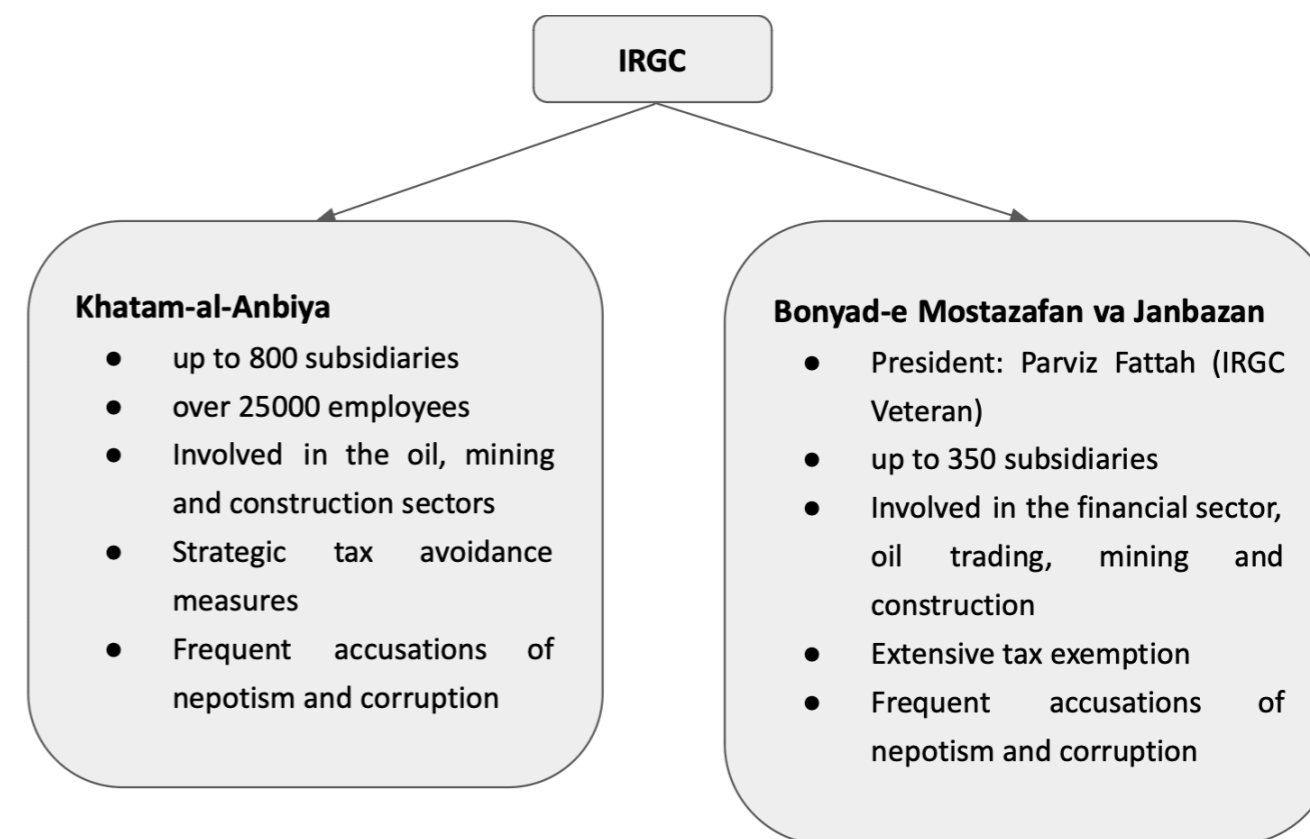
ministrations, in parliament and as part of the government in cabinet posts. (Wehrey, et al., 2009, p. xi). The previous peak of direct representation in presidential cabinets is found in the Ahmadinejad era with 18 cadres out of a total of 45 cabinet members during the first term and 19 out of 42 during the second term. In the periods examined below, six out of 34 and 12 out of 35 cabinet members from the ranks of the Revolutionary Guards, respectively, were part of the elected government (Boroujerdi & Rahimkhani, 2018, p. 165). Under President Raisi, the IRGC continues to have a strong presence. Cabinet member Mosen Rezai and Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi are wanted by Interpol for their involvement in the IRGC-linked terrorist attack on the AMIA Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires in 1994 (Taleblu, 2021). As a close confidant of Qassem Soleimani, the current foreign minister Amir-Abdollahian, who is also responsible for the nuclear negotiations, must also be counted among the network around the IRGC (Sadeghi, 2021). It is clear that the IRGC is also deeply involved in the institutions of Iran's elected government and can count people in decisive positions among its cadres and sympathisers.

An economic powerhouse

To fully understand the multidimensional nature of the IRGC, its linkages with the Iranian economy must also be considered. Since 2005, the network around the IRGC has managed to rise to the economic elite of Iran. It is estimated that the IRGC's corporate network is worth up to around \$100 billion. To a large extent, the relationship to the Revolutionary Guard is deliberately concealed in order to avoid controversy within Iran on the one hand and to be able to undermine existing international sanctions on the other. This often makes

attribution difficult. The vacuum existing under the existing sanctions regime initially enabled the economic expansion of the IRGC, but is increasingly becoming a serious problem for the organisation, especially after the US withdrawal from the JCPOA (Bazoobandi, 2019, pp. 4-9). The most important entities underpinning the broad economic power of the Revolutionary Guard are the Khatam-ol-Anbiya conglomerate and the Foundation Bonyad-e Mostazafan va Janbazan. As early as after the Iran-Iraq war, then President Rafsanjani encouraged the IRGC to increase its budget through economic activities. Before that, Rafsanjani had initiated cuts in the defence budget. The economic activities were to serve as an additional independent source of funds for the organisation (Forozan, 2016, p. 143). Especially during Ahmadinejad's presidency, the Revolutionary Guard was able to gain control of numerous formerly public companies, such as telecommunications, in the course of increasing privatisation. Although also controversial in Iran, these takeovers by

the IRGC occurred under the blessing of Ali Khamenei. Also not uncontroversial in Iran are the IRGC's numerous tax avoidance measures (Bazoobandi, 2019, p.3). Especially during Ahmadinejad's presidency, the Revolutionary Guard was able to gain control of numerous formerly public companies, such as telecommunications, in the course of increasing privatisation. Although also controversial in Iran, these takeovers by the IRGC occurred under the blessing of Ali Khamenei (Bazoobandi, 2019, p.3). In doing so, the IRGC took advantage of its close involvement in Ahmadinejad's cabinet. This approach arguably built on existing contacts. Even before his presidency, Ahmadinejad had given Khatam al-Anbiya no-bid contracts (Forozan, 2016, pp.147-148). Through close contacts with various media and the operation of numerous newspapers, magazines and websites, The Revolutionary Guard also has a widely ramified propaganda network in Iran (Wehrey, et al., 2009, pp. 48-53).



Khatam al-Anbiya, the most important conglomerate

The Khatam al-Anbiya is of particular importance as a driving force of development and industrial projects. With over 800 affiliated companies and 25000 engineers and employees, the company is now considered the main engineering arm of the IRGC and represents one of the largest contractors for industrial and development projects in Iran. It also occupies a central position in the oil and natural resources industry (Rizivi, 2012, p.591). Khatam al-Anbiya is also active abroad, reportedly responsible for the construction of a missile launching pad in Venezuela (Weinthal, 2011). Khatam al-Anbiya makes it obvious how IRGC companies benefit from their proximity to state institutions. Especially the direct awarding of contracts without tendering is well documented and meets with criticism in Iran. In addition to the aforementioned contracts awarded by Ahmadinejad, Khatam al-Anbiya has also received numerous contracts worth billions of dollars from the Iranian oil ministry without prior tendering. As MEED reported, in 2010 Khatam al-Anbiya even managed to oust foreign competitors Shell and Repsol from a

stake in gas production in South Pars (MEED, 2010). Deputy Director Abdolreza Abedzadeh denied being favoured by the government in an interview. Decisions were based on the work delivered and partly also a desire on the part of the government to shorten long award processes. However, when asked if revenues from Khatam's construction projects are also used to fund defence initiatives, he admitted, "It helps. It helps with the development funding that the government provides to the armed forces." (Wehrey, et al., 2009, pp. 63-64). As MEED reports, in 2010 Khatam al-Anbiya even managed to oust foreign competitors Shell and Repsol from a stake in gas production in South Pars (MEED, 2010). In addition to nepotism, it is also documented that the IRGC put competitors out of business in the past by more drastic means. In 2004, the Revolutionary Guard forced the closure of Khomeini International Airport in Tehran, which had opened only days earlier, through a military occupation. The IRGC accused one of the Turkish consortia contracted to operate the airport of being a security risk due to alleged business contacts with Israel (Forozan, 2016, p. 146). The contracts with the Turkish company were then terminated and Iranian

companies with ties to the IRGC took over the operation of the airport without any new tender (Bazoobandi, 2019, p.6). It seems obvious, therefore, that the IRGC is willing to use its military as well as political position to its economic advantage.

Arms trade and political-economic synergies

One aspect in which the synergies between its political and economic activities become particularly clear is the IRGC's exploitation of its involvement in civil aviation for clearly political-military purposes as well as arms trade and smuggling. Of particular importance is the airline Mahan Air, which is closely linked to the Revolutionary Guard through its chairman Hamid Arabnejad Khanooki (US Department of State, 2020, pp.35-36). In the course of the protests against Syrian leader Assad since 2011, Iran supported him in order to be able to maintain its influence over the country and its access to the Mediterranean coast. As early as 2011, Iranian airlines - such as Mahan Air - were repeatedly accused of transferring personnel and military support in the form of weapons to Syria on behalf of the IRGC by US officials (Ostovar, 2016, p. 208). In October 2011, the US Treasury sanctioned Mahan Air as part of the Al Quds Brigades terror infrastructure network to circumvent aviation security measures. In addition to shipments to Syria, the agency also pointed to shipments to Lebanon's Hezbollah. According to the Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, the use of the airline for military purposes illuminates how the IRGC exploited its infiltration of the civilian economy for political gain (2011). Yas Air has also been linked to the delivery of heavy weapons. According to the report, both airlines are pursuing a strategy of using cargo and passenger flights to

transport weapons - declared as humanitarian goods - to crisis areas. According to a 2012 report by U.S. authorities, Turkish authorities discovered these smuggling activities during an inspection of a flight operated by the Iranian airline Yas Air. One particular flight to Syria had "spare car parts" on its manifest, but instead had weapons and large quantities of ammunition and an assortment of mortar shells on board (Ostovar, 2016, p. 208). According to the US Department of State, Mahan Air and companies around it continue to serve military purposes for the Revolutionary Guard to date (2020, pp.35-36). There is also evidence, albeit not very reliable, that the use of civil aviation for such purposes may also possibly include the state airline Iran Air. In the wake of the power struggle at the end of Rohani's presidency in 2021, then Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, in a leaked interview, also accused the IRGC and Quds Brigades commander Soleimani of using Iran Air to transport military material and personnel to Syria without the government's consent (Fassihi, 2021). There seems indeed an internal struggle and further action in Syria regarding Assad and the Islamic State. From 2014 February onwards, contrary to the more restrained course indicated by President Rohani, the IRGC narratives clearly continued to determine the course in Syria. The troop presence under Qassem Soleimani was greatly increased throughout the year (Akbarzadeh & Conduit, 2016, pp 144-145).

A comparable use of airlines can also be observed in the support of Russia's war against Ukraine by the Iranian regime through the supply of weapons. As reported by sources in the Open Source Intelligence Community, airlines with links to the Revolutionary Guard are involved in arms shipments to Russia. The focus is on the cargo airlines Pouya Air and

Airlines allegedly used for arms trafficking and smuggling

- Mahan Air
- Yas Air
- Pouya Air
- Qeshm Fars Air
- Saha Airlines
- Iran Air

Qeshm Fars Air, both of which have been active in the service of the IRGC in the past, according to the US, and again the passenger airline Mahan Air. In particular, the frequency of Pouya Air and Qeshm Fars Air from Iran to Russia have increased significantly following the invasion of Ukraine, suggesting a use for transporting Iranian-produced military equipment (Gerjon, 2022). Ukraine names Iran Air, Mahan Air, Pouya Air, Saha Airlines as responsible for the arms shipments. There are also reports of weapons being transported by sea. Vessels of the Iranian Industrial Company, which also belongs to the IRGC, are said to be responsible (Center of National Resistance of Ukraine, 2022). In addition to arms deliveries, according to US officials, IRGC personnel were also allegedly deployed to the occupied Crimean peninsula for training purposes. The Institute for the Study of War points out that the exact purpose of the mission remains unknown (ISW, 2022).

The Mostazafan va Janbazan Foundation

For the extensive economic empire of the Revolutionary Guards, in addition to corporate conglomerates, the Bonyad Foundations play a special role for the IRGC as extralegal economic networks. Particularly important here is the Bonyad-e Mostazafan va Janbazan (eng.: Foundation of the Oppressed and Disabled). It was established in 1979 on the orders of Ruhollah Khomeini as part of the seizure of the properties of the Pahlavi monarchy (Rassam & Vakil, 2020, p. 15). The current president of the foundation, Parviz Fattah, is a former IRGC officer with good relations to the slain General Qassem Soleimani and was previously part of Ahmadinejad's cabinet as energy minister (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2020). Bonyad-e Mostazafan

is deeply integrated into the Iranian economy through an enormous number of subsidiaries and branches. According to estimates by Iran Watch, the number of companies is as high as 350. Economic activities of the foundation are exempt from tax according to a decree issued by Ali Kahmenei in 1993 (Iran Watch, 2021). According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, the companies owned by Bonyad-e Mostazafan include numerous financial, mining and oil firms, the most notable being Behran Oil (2020). The foundation also includes large companies in the agricultural and food industries and construction firms with major contracts, including the construction of terminal one of Imam Khomeini International Airport. Bonyad-e Mostazafan has also accepted contract work abroad in the past. Currently, the foundation maintains economic relations with countries in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, as well as Russia and other former Soviet Union states (Wehrey, et al., 2009, p. 58). By its own account, the total value of Bonyad-e Mostazafan's holdings was said to have been \$1.3 million in 2016, with net profits of \$64 million that same year (Rassam & Vakil, 2020, p. 15). Directly striking in the context of the Bonyad Mostazafan is the tax exemption, as it fits in with the IRGC's previously mentioned attempts to avoid taxation in cases of private sector economic activity.

The question of the ban, a complex issue with pitfalls

As has been shown, the IRGC has had a long evolution, during which it has become an actor that dominates the entire Iranian state as well as large parts of the Iranian economy. A 2020 analysis by the Hoover Institution justifiably refers to this network around the IRGC as the "Iranian Deep State" (Rassam

& Vakil, 2020). In its economic activity, the Revolutionary Guard benefits greatly from its infiltration of state institutions, which enables it to engage in tax evasion and nepotism. The IRGC's influence in politics and the economy gives it the power to use both aspects to its ends. This synergy has been particularly evident in the case of the use of civil aviation for military purposes and arms smuggling. The IRGC's power is based on its military professionalism, its broad economic power and its proximity to Ali Kahmenei. The assumption made at the beginning that a break with the IRGC on the part of Western states, e.g. by banning it as a terrorist organisation, could appear as a

"The IRGC's influence in politics and the economy gives it the power to use both aspects to its ends."

break with the institution of the Islamic Republic as a whole, seems very plausible against this background. This aspect must be kept in mind by Western decision-makers, but should not be misunderstood as a counter-argument against action on the IRGC. The activities from the ranks of the group demand a clear response from policy makers. Banning the Revolutionary Guard would significantly complicate its work against the Iranian opposition and other possible targets in the West, as the security authorities would have a much better handle, and diplomatic missions and other institutions could no longer be used as cover for IRGC activities.

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