

IRAN'S RESERVE OF LAST RESORT:

Uncovering the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Order of Battle OVERWATCH PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



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Qassem Soleimani's death and the prospect of further US-Iranian military escalation raise the question of Iran's military capacity. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Ground Forces are Tehran's reserve of last resort for both internal and external security challenges. The Iranian regime goes to great lengths to obfuscate the IRGC's military strength and organization of its ground forces. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) recently published the groundbreaking report *Iran's Reserve of Last Resort: Uncovering the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Ground Forces Order of Battle*. In this episode of *Overwatch*, AEI Resident Scholar and CTP Director Fred Kagan and CTP Iran Team Lead Nicholas Carl discuss their recent report and the crucial role that the IRGC plays in the regime's survival and Iranian efforts to project power and export their revolution abroad.

Speaker 1: This is *Overwatch*, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War.

Fred Kagan:

I'm Fred Kagan. I'm the director of the Critical Press Project at the American Enterprise Institute.

Nicholas Carl:

My name is Nicholas Carl and I am the Iran team lead at the Critical Threats Project of the American Enterprise Institute.

Fred Kagan:

We'll be talking today about one of the key elements of the security forces that the Islamic Republic of Iran relies on to maintain its grip on power and also to export the revolution beyond its borders. That component is called the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp or IRGC, and specifically we will be talking about the ground forces of the IRGC, the organizations that are broken into divisions and brigades. This is an important topic because of the policy that the US administration is currently pursuing toward Iran.

The maximum pressure strategy that the Trump administration is pursuing raises two very important questions. The first is whether it is possible to cause the Iranian regime to collapse by putting it under sufficient economic pressure. The second is whether it is possible through economic pressure to force the regime to curtail its malign regional activities. The IRGC is central to both questions and that's why we have focused on it in a recent report, which you can find at criticalthreats.org.

When we think about whether it's possible to collapse the Islamic Republic through economic pressure, it's important to disentangle two different components. Certainly, the economy of Iran is very bad and deteriorating and there is a tendency in policy discussions to imagine that if the economy gets bad enough, then the regime will fall. But there's an assumption that underlies that kind of statement. In a normal government, when the economy gets bad enough, the government falls. That is to say whoever is in power in the current system loses power and someone else comes in.

In a democracy, that happens by elections. But in democracies most of the time, however bad the economy gets, the government itself or the regime itself doesn't actually fall. Just the government that happens to be in power and we're seeing that phenomenon in Iran. The government of President Rouhani is under a lot of pressure and if he were able to run for another term, which he's constitutionally forbidden to do, he would probably have a very hard winning in the current economic environment.

But if you want to think about whether a regime will fall, that is to say whether a system of government will fall, that's a problem of a whole other level. The way that that happens normally is that popular unrest becomes so overwhelming that the regime is forced to make choices about its willingness to crush its own people in order to keep itself in power and avoid changing the form of its government. And those decisions which we saw for example in 1979 when the Shah fell and in 1990 when the Soviet Union collapsed frequently revolve around a couple of different questions.

The first is whether the leadership will lose the will to kill as both the Shah and Gorbachev did. Another is whether the security forces will separate themselves from the ruler, which happened again in 1979 and to a lesser extent at the end of the Soviet union. And the last is whether individuals within the security services will start to peel away making them ineffective. Those are the kinds of questions that we need to answer if we're going to speak about whether economic trouble is likely to lead to regime collapse in Iran.

The IRGC is the regime's reserve of last resort. It is the most capable organization from the standpoint of planning and conducting and managing large scale combat operations and large scale operations to suppress the Iranian population. If unrest reached the point at which the regime had to order the IRGC ground forces to oppress its population, it would be at its last throw. And if that failed, there would not be any other force that it could call on. And so from the standpoint of understanding the likelihood of the regime surviving economic pressure, it's very important to understand the composition and capabilities of the IRGC.

And the IRGC has also been the regime's reserve of last resort in its activities abroad. As we reported in 2016, the IRGC deployed elements of its ground forces divisions and brigades to Syria in conjunction with the Russian air campaign to help Assad stabilize his front lines and then retake control of Aleppo and other areas in Syria. And so it is possible since the same force is essential both for ultimate regime survival and for the highest end activities the regime might need to conduct abroad.

That if enough pressure were brought to on Iran, on the domestic front and abroad, it would have to make choices that might lead to it either risking its own domestic security, which is unlikely, or curtailing the activities that it engages in around the region that the US finds rightly very problematic. Those are the reasons why we examined the IRGC in detail and have published an order of battle, which is a listing of the major combat units in the IRGC and their commanders and locations. And I was thrilled to be able to work with Nick on getting that out because it was very difficult, which is rather odd.

Because in a normal military organization, it's public information what the order of battle actually is. You can usually go to the US military websites and even Russian military websites and they'll tell you what the divisions and brigades are. But it was very difficult to do this for the IRGC. Nick, why don't you tell us a little about why it was so hard?

Nicholas Carl:

Absolutely. So the IRGC goes to great lengths, normally so, to hide its presence online so that it's incredibly difficult to actually discern exactly which units operate within the ground forces and also where they operate. The IRGC relies on epithets and other ambiguous phraseology to describe a both operational units, brigades and divisions, as well as territorial units that are scattered throughout Iran in each province as well as too in the capital Tehran. So there were a variety of challenges that we faced when building out this order of battle.

The first of which was identifying which operational IRGC units are still active since the Iran-Iraq War. And also where are those still active units actually are in Iran. Iranian media reporting is oftentimes extremely ambiguous

and these units have a minimal internet presence. However, we were able to parse together itemized bits of information over many years and begin to build out a larger picture of where these units are, not only provincially but down to the exact city, town, and in some cases the exact facilities.

IRGC commanders very frequently speak at local and regional events and are very vocal in Persian media. From there we can begin to discern exactly where these commanders typically operate and we can then rely on satellite imagery and comments and markups listed by users on a variety of social media mapping platforms such as Wikimapia and Open Street Maps to pin down exactly which facilities are likely to house IRGC operational units. IRGC units from space oftentimes have a variety of indicators that we can look for to assess whether there is actually a military force stationed there.

Among those indicators are parade grounds, warehouses, housing units, a fence perimeter around a facility, and of course the presence of military vehicles such as tanks and armored personnel carriers.

Fred Kagan:

We have a list therefore of high IRGC divisions and brigades and with their commanders and their locations. But as you said, it was very hard to find because the regime doesn't report on them very much and so one might ask whether these units really matter, whether these positions, whether it is being a division commander or a brigade commander is important in the IRGC. Do we have anything that might tell us whether these are actually important organizations?

Nicholas Carl:

Absolutely. All of the current IRGC commanders and its senior leadership have all served in these brigades and divisions when they fought in the Iran-Iraq War in the '80s. These units are still significant because their commanders currently are likely to be the next generation of IRGC commanders and officers. Therefore, by examining these divisions and brigades, how they operate and where they operate is critical in understanding exactly what the next class of senior regime security leaders looks like and how they are all connected with one another.

Examining how these units deployed abroad to Syria, which ones did and how they fought is also a paramount to our understanding of how the IRGC employs its operational units and commanders to advance some of its most paramount strategic interests in key theaters abroad.

Fred Kagan:

And we did do a number of studies looking at how the IRGC deployed forces to Syria and concluded that it's rather complicated compared to the way most militaries do. They don't seem to have deployed entire divisions or entire brigades. They do seem to have deployed instead what we call unit cadres, which consisted usually of commanding officers and senior staff, maybe a small number of noncommissioned officers. But, the units, the divisions and brigades that deployed to Syria seem to function primarily as coordinating headquarters for the foot soldiers that were already there.

And you can read our reports about that also at criticalthreats.org. Can you talk a little bit therefore about the role that IRGC division and brigade headquarters might play in internal security affairs in Iran?

Nicholas Carl:

So the IRGC operational headquarters serve two main purposes. The first of which, as you noted, is ensuring Iran's internal stability. The IRGC does have a security mandate internally and will deploy when the regime perceives the need to exercise extremely high of force to suppress its population. The IRGC operational bases rely on the Basij organization, which is a paramilitary organization under the IRGC ground forces. Within the Basij,

there are high end military units, which the IRGC operational bases draw upon for manpower and then subsequently use in their operations internally to, as I said, suppress its population in the event of anti-regime protests or internal instability.

The second key role of the operational basis, however, is also coordinating the role of these Basijis and Iran's proxy network abroad. The key role that the IRGC ground forces served in, for example, the battle of Aleppo was deploying these cadre units on the outskirts of the city to serve as a sort of organizing and planning entity to then stage operations against the Syrian opposition.

Fred Kagan:

So you mentioned the commanders and the individuals who have deployed with these units and that is one of the most important aspects and most interesting aspects of the research that I think we've found are the human networks that you can see when you look at who served with whom and who served under whom and who was in the same division. And that of course builds on work that we published some years ago. Can you tell us a little bit about that biographical work that we are doing?

Nicholas Carl:

Absolutely. So in 2013, Will Fulton, one of our former Iran analysts, published a groundbreaking report wherein he dissected the human networks that exist at the highest echelons of the IRGC and Iran's security apparatus. He noted that there exists a fraternity of individuals that have maintained extremely close ties dating back all the way to their days fighting in the trenches against Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the '80s. They have maintained this brotherhood since and risen up together throughout the highest ranks of the IRGC and have stuck together in times of political uncertainty and internal stability.

They have maintained a cohesive political block and have exerted their influence to oppose political adversaries. Although this report came out in 2013, many of Will Fulton's assessments remain extremely true today and the command network that he identified remains at the commanding heights of the IRGC. Understanding how the human networks will evolve over time is paramount to our understanding of which voices will be the loudest in the room as the regime tries to chart forward its strategy against the US and in response to the US maximum pressure strategy.

Fred Kagan:

You're continuing this research and we will be publishing more reports building on the work that we've done with this order of battle, which gives us a basic structure and baseline of the organization within which we will be able to understand more about these human networks. And that research which we will be publishing in the coming months should give us a better sense of who the key decision makers are likely to be over the next five and 10 years for the IRGC. That question, who will the decision makers be, will become more and more important, the more the pressure on the regime grows or alternatively, if the pressure on the regime is eased.

So I'm very excited about the continuation of this project that you'll be meeting and everyone in the audience should stay tuned.

Speaker 1:

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