

American Foreign Policy Council

IRAN

QUICK FACTS

Population: Number 82,801,633
(July 2016 est.)

Area: 1,648,195 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Persian 61%, Azeri 16%, Kurd 10%, Lur 6%, Baloch 2%, Arab 2%, Turkmen and Turkic tribes 2%, other 1%

Religions: Muslim (official) 99.4% (Shia 90-95%, Sunni 5-10%), other (Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian) 0.3%, unspecified 0.4% (2011 est)

Government Type: Theocratic Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$387.6 billion (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook



OVERVIEW

Since its founding in February 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has consistently ranked as the world's most active state sponsor of terrorism, according to the estimates of the United States government. Iran's support for terrorism is both pervasive and ideological, encompassing a vast array of official and quasi-official institutions, individuals and policies. It finds its roots in the ideas of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Revolution, who espoused the need to "export" Iran's successful religious model the world over. More than two-and-a-half decades after Khomeini's death, that priority continues to animate Iran's leaders and guide their sponsorship of instability, both in Iran's immediate geographic neighborhood and far beyond.

Today, Iran's capabilities to do so are expanding significantly. Between 2003 and 2014, the Iranian regime's persistent pursuit of a nuclear capability engendered escalating pressure from the United States and international community in the form of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation. Over time, these measures took their toll, progressively isolating the Islamic Republic and severely impacting its economic fortunes. However, the successful conclusion of a nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 powers in July of 2015 has fundamentally altered this dynamic. As a result of that agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Iranian regime has received massive direct economic relief totaling upwards of \$100 billion.¹ The agreement has likewise commenced a protracted process of economic rehabilitation, with the Iranian regime engaging with—and benefiting from—an array of new trading partners. This has served to greatly expand the resources available to the Islamic Republic to support terror proxies in the region and beyond, and breathed new life into Tebran's longstanding efforts to reshape the global order in its own image.

Level of Islamist Activity

Severe

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The Iranian regime's support for international terrorism predates the establishment of the Islamic Republic itself. In the 1960s and 1970s, while in exile in Iraq and in France, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini formulated his ideas about the need for a radical Islamic transformation in his home country, Iran, and of subsequently "exporting" this system of government throughout the Middle East and beyond.² In keeping with this thinking, Khomeini's political manifesto, *Islamic Government*, extolled the virtues of "a victorious and triumphant Islamic political revolution" that would go on "to unite the Moslem nation, [and] to liberate [all] its lands."³

When the Ayatollah and his followers subsequently swept to power in Tehran in the spring of 1979, this principle became a cardinal regime priority. The preamble of the country's formative constitution, adopted in October 1979, outlines that the country's military would henceforth "be responsible not only for guarding and preserving the frontiers of the country, but also for fulfilling the ideological mission of jihad in God's way; that is, extending the sovereignty of God's law throughout the world."⁴ These words were backed by concrete regime action, with Khomeini consolidating the country's various radical religious militias into an ideological army known as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, or *Pasdaran*), tasked with promoting his revolutionary message abroad, with violence if necessary.

The three-plus decades since have seen a consistent regime commitment to international terrorism. In the early years of the Islamic Republic, Iran is known to have ordered, orchestrated or facilitated a series of terrorist attacks in the Middle East, among them the 1983 U.S. Embassy and Marine Barracks bombings in Beirut, Lebanon, as well as abortive *coup* attempts and bombings in Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait.⁵ These activities, and the rationale behind them, were reinforced by the outcome of the country's bloody eight-year war with Iraq, which strengthened the Iranian government's belief that radical proxies could serve as an attractive, low-cost substitute for direct military action. As a result, the principle of "exporting the revolution" remained a vibrant element of regime policy after the death of Khomeini in 1989. In the decade that followed, the Islamic Republic continued to bankroll assassinations and terrorist acts on foreign soil, aided the infiltration of countries in Europe, Africa and Latin America by radical Islamic groups, and assisted irregulars in various international conflict zones.⁶

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the Islamic Republic chose to dramatically strengthen its links to international terrorism, redoubling its support for Lebanon's Hezbollah militia and Palestinian rejectionist groups, expanding its footprint in the Palestinian territories, maintaining at least low-level links to the al-Qaeda network, and becoming heavily involved in the bankrolling of radical Shi'ite militias and activity to hinder the U.S.-led Coalition in post-Saddam Iraq.

This support for terrorism, while ideologically driven, was and remains rooted in pragmatism. While Khomeini's Islamic Revolution was a distinctly Shi'a one, in the more-than-three decades since its establishment, the Islamic Republic has embraced a more universalist conception of its international role, aspiring to serve as the vanguard of Islamic revolution worldwide.⁷ The Iranian regime today funds a broad range of both Sunni and Shi'a groups throughout the greater Middle East and beyond. The critical determinant appears to be the degree to which these movements and organizations can reinforce Iran's leading role in the "Shi'a revival" now taking place in the Muslim world, and their shared animosity toward the West, most directly Israel and the United States.

The scope of Iran's support of violent Islamism is global in nature, and so is its reach. In the decade that followed the 9/11 attacks, it encompassed: ongoing support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and a reconstitution of the Shi'ite militia's strategic capabilities;⁸ extensive involvement in post-Saddam Iraq, first through the provision of arms and materiel to the country's various Shi'a militias and later through political and strategic support of various forces both inside and outside of the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki;⁹ the provision of significant military and operational assistance to the insurgency in Afghanistan, increasing the lethality of forces arrayed against the government of President Hamid Karzai and Coalition authorities

there;¹⁰ exerting influence in the Palestinian arena through financial aid and support to Palestinian rejectionist groups, chief among them Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad¹¹ and; bankrolling terrorist and subversive activities in various countries, including Egypt.¹²

The onset of the Arab Spring in early 2011 marked a turning point for Iranian activities—and for its regional standing. In the early stages of the “Spring,” Iranian officials sought to take credit for the anti-regime sentiment sweeping the region, depicting it as the belated product of the Ayatollah Khomeini’s successful Islamic revolution in 1979 and heralding an “Islamic awakening” in which Iran would inevitably play a leading role.¹³ Iran’s stance was not simply rhetorical; the Islamic Republic became a political supporter of various regional insurgent causes, from protests by Bahrain’s majority-Shi’ite population against the country’s ruling al-Khalifa family¹⁴ to the successful struggle by Yemen’s al-Houthi rebellion against the central government in Sana’a.¹⁵

Iran’s most conspicuous initiative, however, was to assume the role of a lifeline for the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Shortly after the eruption of anti-regime unrest in Syria in March 2011, Iran took on a major role in bolstering and strengthening Assad’s hold on power. It did so through extensive financial assistance, as well as the provision of forces to augment Syria’s military in its fight against the country’s disparate opposition elements. This has included the deployment of a large IRGC contingent to the Syrian battlefield, including hundreds of trained snipers who have helped to reinforce Syrian forces and increase their lethality against Syria’s opposition.¹⁶ Together with its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah, it has also played a key role in organizing pro-Assad militias among the country’s Alawite and Shi’a communities, as well as coordinating pro-regime foreign fighters from Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Afghanistan.¹⁷

Iran’s objectives in this effort are two-fold. Most immediately, Iran’s aid is intended to shore up the stability of the Assad regime, its most important regional partner. More broadly, however, Iran sees its involvement in Syria as a direct blow against the “Great Satan,” the United States. “Since Syria was and continues to be part of the Islamic resistance front and the Islamic Revolution, it provokes the anger of the Americans,” IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari explained on Iranian television in April of 2014.¹⁸

Broadly construed, Iran’s regional efforts have been singularly successful. The Iranian regime can now be said to control four regional capitals in the Middle East. The first is Damascus, where Iranian (as well as Russian) support has been instrumental to keeping the Assad regime in power to date. The second is Baghdad, where Iran simultaneously wields extensive influence among the country’s political elites and supports an extensive network of powerful Shi’a militias. The third is Lebanon where—in addition to the pervasive influence of Hezbollah—Michel Aoun, a long-time politi-

cal ally of Tehran, was elected to the Presidency in October of 2016.¹⁹ The fourth is Sana'a, where Iranian-supported rebels have effectively taken over the national government since the spring of 2015.²⁰

The financial scope of these activities is enormous. In the past, U.S. officials have estimated that the Islamic Republic boasts “a nine-digit line item in its budget for support to terrorist organizations.”²¹ More recently, in the summer of 2015, in the aftermath of the conclusion of the JCPOA, the Congressional Research Service estimated that the Islamic Republic was spending between \$3.5 billion to \$16 billion annually on support for terrorism and insurgency worldwide.²² That estimate encompassed:

- Extensive aid to the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad (estimated at some \$6 billion annually);
- Material and economic assistance to the Shi'a Houthi rebels in Yemen;
- Support for various Shi'a militias in Iraq;
- The entire operating budget of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorist organization;
- Renewed aid (previously estimated at between \$20-25 million monthly) to the Hamas terrorist group; and
- Between \$100 and \$200 million annually in financial support for Lebanon's Hezbollah militia.

Notably, however, this figure now has the potential to expand significantly. White House officials have admitted that at least some of Iran's JCPOA-related economic windfall is likely to go to terrorist groups and extremist causes.²³ Indeed, given the scope of sanctions relief inherent in the JCPOA, the investment of even a fraction of those funds in this fashion could double or even triple the Islamic Republic's current spending on terror sponsorship.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

While “exporting the revolution” was and remains a persistent regime objective, involvement and investment on the part of the Iranian population in this pursuit is far from universal. There is little empirical data to suggest that ordinary Iranians share the depth of their regime's commitment to the exportation of radical Islam. To the contrary, terrorism funding in Iran remains an elite—rather than popular—undertaking, directed through state institutions rather than non-governmental organizations, and overseen at an official, not a grassroots, level.

At times, Iran's involvement in the support of radical groups abroad has served as a significant bone of contention between the Iranian regime and its population. In

the wake of Hezbollah's summer 2006 war with Israel, for example, Iran's extensive financial support for Lebanon's Shi'ites became a domestic flashpoint, with ordinary Iranians publicly questioning—and condemning—their government's skewed strategic priorities.²⁴

Support for radical Islamic causes is eroded by Iran's complex ethno/religious composition. Although the country is overwhelmingly (98 percent) Muslim and predominantly (89 percent) Shi'a, as of 2013 ethnic Persians were estimated to hold only a modest majority (61 percent) in Iran's population of almost 80 million. The remainder is Azeri (16 percent), Kurdish (10 percent), Baloch (2 percent), Arab (2 percent), and a range of other minorities,²⁵ many of which are systematically discriminated against by the Islamic Republic and feel little or limited allegiance to it. The base of support for Islamic radicalism—and other governmental priorities—in Iranian society is further weakened by the regime's persecution of religious minorities, which, according to the U.S. State Department, has created “a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shi'a religious groups” in the Islamic Republic.²⁶

Social and economic malaise has historically served to dilute identification with regime ideals and principles. The Islamic Republic was severely impacted by the 2008-2009 global economic crisis, and thereafter was burdened by unsustainable federal spending and ruinous fiscal policies adopted by the government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. These trends—coupled with growing pressure applied by the West over the Islamic Republic's nuclear program—resulted in worsening economic conditions (such as rising inflation and unemployment) as well as a variety of social ills, from widespread drug addiction to rampant prostitution to high levels of poverty.²⁷

Discontent over the country's political direction and socio-economic conditions found its expression in dramatic fashion in the summer of 2009, in the largest episode of unrest in the Islamic Republic's thirty-year history. The mass protests were catalyzed by the appearance of blatant institutional fraud in the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the country's June 2009 presidential election. In the weeks after the election, opposition to the Iranian regime gathered momentum, growing to encompass significant cracks in the previously-sound ideological consensus among Iran's clerical elites regarding the institutions and policies of Khomeini's Islamic Republic.

The Iranian regime responded with a major campaign to dominate the domestic media, intimidate regime opponents, and purge ideological dissent. These efforts included: tightening of already-strict controls over the Internet;²⁸ targeting of opposition leaders, both secular and religious;²⁹ and intimidation of Iranian opposition activists living abroad.³⁰ This crackdown, and the lack of action by the West to support democratic forces within the Islamic Republic, resulted in the marginalization of Iran's opposition forces. Despite sporadic signs of life,³¹ the Green Movement has

become a marginal actor, largely irrelevant in Iranian politics. This was confirmed in the run-up to the country's June 2013 presidential election; pro-democracy activists remained largely dormant until just days before the June 14th poll. When they did finally emerge, it was not in the form of a political game-changer, but as a bit player, focusing their internal deliberations on whether or not to boycott the election entirely.

Reformist opposition to clerical rule has been further weakened by the Iranian regime's nuclear rapprochement with the West. While growing economic malaise in 2011-2013 as a result of widening Western sanctions did have an adverse political effect on regime stability and prosperity, the election of Hassan Rouhani, a bureaucrat, to the Iranian presidency in June of 2013, and his subsequent initiation of nuclear negotiations with the international community, has effectively neutered political alternatives to the ruling regime. The results of those negotiations, which are widely perceived within Iran as having been advantageous to the country, has strengthened support for the current regime and further diminished movement toward meaning political change in Tehran.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Iran's support for Islamism is channeled through an elaborate infrastructure of institutions and governmental bodies tasked with the promotion of radical Islamic thought and action. These include:

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, or Pasdaran)

At home, the IRGC, in addition to its professional military duties, has become the guardian of the regime's ballistic missile and weapons of mass destruction programs.³² The agenda of Iran's ideological army, however, is global in scope, and so is its reach. Over the past three-and-a-half decades, the IRGC has emerged as the shock troops of Iran's Islamic Revolution, training terrorist organizations both within Iran and in specialized training camps in places like Lebanon and Sudan, as well as providing assistance to radical movements and terrorist proxies throughout the Middle East, Africa, Europe and Asia via specialized paramilitary units.³³ The most notorious of these is the Quds Force, a crack military battalion formed in 1990 and dedicated to carrying out "extra-regional operations of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps"—namely, terrorism and insurgency in the name of the Islamic Republic.³⁴ Since the 2003 ouster of Saddam Hussein, this unit has played a leading role in Iraq as part of what analysts have characterized as an "open-ended, resilient, and well-funded" covert effort on the part of the Iranian regime to extend its influence into the former Ba'athist state.³⁵ More recently, the IRGC has become a principal player in the Iranian government's ongoing assistance to Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad.³⁶

The IRGC also boasts a dedicated intelligence service, the Protection and Intelligence Department, or *Hefazat va Ettelaat-e Sepah-e Pasdaran*. Founded in 1980, it encompasses three main functions: intelligence in support of IRGC military operations; political operations at home and abroad; and support to the foreign terrorist operations of the Quds Force.³⁷

Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS)

Controlled directly by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the MOIS is used by Iran's ruling clergy to quash domestic opposition and carry out espionage against suspect members of the Iranian government.³⁸ Abroad, the MOIS plays a key role in planning and carrying out terrorist operations on foreign soil, using Iranian embassies and diplomatic missions as cover.³⁹ MOIS operatives are also known to operate abroad under unofficial identities—for example, as employees of Iran Air, Iran's official airline.⁴⁰ The MOIS conducts a variety of activities in support of the operations of Tehran's terrorist surrogates, ranging from financing actual operations to intelligence collection on potential targets. The Ministry also carries out independent operations, primarily against dissidents of the current regime in Tehran living in foreign countries, at the direction of senior Iranian officials.⁴¹

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Iran's Foreign Ministry serves as an important enabler of the Iranian regime's international terrorist presence. Agents of the IRGC and MOIS often operate out of Iranian missions abroad, where they are stationed under diplomatic cover, complete with blanket diplomatic immunity. These agents—and through them Iranian foreign proxies—use the Ministry's auspices to untraceably obtain financing, weapons and intelligence from Tehran (for example, via diplomatic pouch).⁴²

Cultural Affairs Ministry. Supplementing the role of the Foreign Affairs Ministry in exporting terrorism is Iran's Ministry of Culture and Guidance. Tasked with overseeing the cultural sections of Iranian foreign missions, as well as free-standing Iranian cultural centers, it facilitates IRGC infiltration of—and terrorist recruitment within—local Muslim populations in foreign nations.⁴³ The Ministry is particularly influential among majority Muslim countries like the former Soviet Republics, many of which share substantial cultural, religious and ideological bonds with Tehran. Between 1982 and 1992, the official in charge of the Ministry—and of its role in support of Iranian terror abroad—was Mohammed Khatami, Iran's subsequent “reformist” president.

Basij. Formed during the early days of the Islamic Republic and trained by the Pasdaran, this militia represents the Iranian regime's premier tool of domestic terror. During the eight years of the Iran-Iraq war, the organization's cadres were the Islamic Republic's cannon fodder, selected to clear minefields and launch “human wave” attacks against Iraqi forces.⁴⁴ With the end of the conflict with Iraq, the role of the Basij was reoriented, and the organization became the watchdog of Iranian society. Today, it is

used by the ayatollahs to quell domestic anti-regime protests and eradicate “un-Islamic” behavior. Their role ranges from enforcing modest dress to gathering intelligence on university students, which is handed over to the regime’s undercover police.⁴⁵ The Basij played a significant role in suppressing domestic dissent through violence and intimidation in the aftermath of the fraudulent reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the Iranian presidency in June of 2009.⁴⁶

There are reported to be as many as 10 million registered Basij members, though not all are on active service.⁴⁷ The Basij also plays an important supporting role in Iran’s state sponsorship of terror. It is known to be active in training anti-Israeli forces, including carrying out maneuvers designed to ready Hezbollah and assorted Palestinian militants for guerrilla warfare. One such exercise, in the fall of 2000, reportedly involved some 90,000 men and 20,000 women.⁴⁸

Domestic paramilitaries (guruh-I fishar)

Supplementing the role of the Basij are the numerous vigilante or “pressure” groups that are harnessed by the Iranian government. Though officially independent, these gangs actually operate under the patronage of government officials, the IRGC or the MOIS, and target internal opposition to the clerical regime.⁴⁹ The most famous is the Ansar-i Hezbollah, which was responsible for fomenting the July 1999 crisis at Tehran University that led to the bloody governmental crackdown on student opposition forces.

Bonyads

These sprawling socio-religious foundations, which are overseen only by Iran’s Supreme Leader, serve as conduits for the Islamic Republic’s cause of choice. Arguably the most important is the Bonyad-e Mostazafan (Foundation of the Oppressed), a sprawling network of an estimated 1,200 firms created in 1979 with seed money from the Shah’s coffers.⁵⁰ Another is the Bonyad-e Shahid (Martyrs’ Foundation), an enormous conglomerate of industrial, agricultural, construction and commercial companies with some 350 offices and tens of thousands of employees.⁵¹ The sums controlled by these organs are enormous: more than 30 percent of Iran’s national GDP, and as much as two-thirds of the country’s non-oil GDP.⁵² And while many of their functions are legitimate, they are also used by Iran’s religious leaders to funnel money to their pet causes, from financing domestic repression to arming radical groups abroad.

Notably, even as Iran remains complicit in the pervasive sponsorship of international terrorism, it is itself the target of violent activity by two separate and distinct groups. The first is the *Mujahideen e-Khalq* (MeK or MKO), also known as the People’s Mujahideen Organization of Iran, or PMOI. The MeK is the most prominent and well-organized opposition group to the ruling Iranian government in existence today.⁵³ A guerrilla group of radical Marxist-Islamist ideology, the MeK was established in the 1960s in opposition to the government of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.⁵⁴ Follow-

ing the overthrow of the Shah, however, the MeK found itself shut out of the Iranian regime's power structures. By the early 1980s, the organization moved into opposition, and became an active target of the Iranian security forces. As a result, it relocated to neighboring Iraq, which subsequently became its principal source of financial and political support, as well as the organization's major base of operations in its periodic attacks against the Iranian regime.⁵⁵ According to the U.S. Department of State, the MeK also assumed a domestic role, assisting the Iraqi government in "suppressing the Shia and Kurdish uprisings in northern and southern Iraq" in 1991 and thereafter playing a part in Iraq's internal security services.⁵⁶ In exchange, the regime of Saddam Hussein became the source of all of the MeK's military assistance, and the bulk of its economic revenue—a situation that would endure until the overthrow of the Iraqi regime by Coalition forces in the spring of 2003.⁵⁷ During the 1990s, this support was estimated to be some \$7 million monthly.⁵⁸ The extent of this support was made public in January 2004, when the Iraqi daily *Al-Mada* published a list of 270 beneficiaries of oil allocations from the regime of Saddam Hussein.⁵⁹ That list revealed that the MeK had been a major recipient of oil vouchers from the Iraqi government.⁶⁰ All told, the MeK is believed to have received more than 38 million barrels of oil from the Iraqi government in the four years before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq—theoretically generating profits of more than \$16 million.⁶¹

The organization maintains a sizeable base of supporters and members in Europe, most directly in France, where the organization's political head, Maryam Rajavi, is believed to reside. Members of the MeK are also resident in Iraq, where several thousand were held for years at Camp Ashraf in Iraq's Diyala province pursuant to a 2004 grant of "protected persons" status by the U.S. military⁶² and a subsequent arrangement struck between the U.S.-led Coalition and the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. In the fall of 2012, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton formally removed the MeK from the U.S. government's FTO list, reversing the designation made by President Bill Clinton in 1997.⁶³

Iran has consistently sought to persecute the MeK and individuals thought to be affiliated with it, including through the arrest and detention of family members of those resident in Camp Ashraf.⁶⁴ With the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq at the end of 2012, this pressure steadily increased, with Iranian officials actively lobbying the Iraqi government to oust the group from the country. As of the Spring of 2016, Iranian officials claimed that the remainder of the group would be expelled from Iraq "soon."⁶⁵ Politically, meanwhile, the conclusion of the JCPOA between Iran and the P5+1 powers has translated into a more *laissez faire* attitude toward the group on the part of the U.S. government—and incentivized the Iranian regime to undertake greater efforts to dismantle it.

The second, smaller group is the Free Life Party of Kurdistan, or PJAK. Led by Iranian-born German national Abdul Rahman Haji Ahmadi, PJAK is a violent Kurdish nationalist group that has carried out attacks on Iran from strongholds in neighbor-

ing Iraq since its formation in 2004. PJAK, which maintains an affiliation with Turkey's larger Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), claims to seek "democratic change" and characterizes its actions as a "defense" against Iranian state repression of its Kurdish minority.⁶⁶

Iranian regime forces clashed repeatedly with members of PJAK between 2008 and 2011, successfully arresting and killing numerous group members as part of ongoing counterterrorism operations.⁶⁷ A major counterterrorism campaign against the group by Iranian security forces followed in the fall of 2011, culminating in a ceasefire between the two parties.⁶⁸ This ceasefire held until 2013, when clashes between the group and Tehran began anew,⁶⁹ and have continued sporadically until the present day.

ENDNOTES

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