



# THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

## Quick Facts

Population: 84,923,314 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 1,648,195 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Persian, Azeri, Kurd, Lur, Baloch, Arab, Turkmen and Turkic tribes

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

Government Type: Theocratic Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$430.7 billion (2017 est.)

*Map and Quick Facts Courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2020)*

## INTRODUCTION

*Since its founding in February of 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 four three 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 have expanded significantly. In the decade between 2003 and 2013, 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 fundamentally altered this dynamic, providing the Islamic Republic with massive economic relief, totaling upward of \$100 billion,<sup>1</sup> and laying the groundwork for a surge in post-sanctions trade with a range of international partners. The Iranian regime, in turn, used this dividend to strengthen its strategic capabilities; in the wake of the JCPOA's passage the Islamic Republic significantly increased its defense budget, with the country's defense expenditures rising from 4.3 percent of GDP (\$19.5 billion) in 2015 to 6.1 percent of GDP (\$27.3 billion) in 2018.<sup>2</sup> The fruits of the JCPOA also 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 Tehran's longstanding efforts to reshape the global order in its own image.*

*The advent of the Trump administration ushered in a new, more robust U.S. approach toward Iran. Following its withdrawal, in May 2018, from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, the Trump administration has reimposed a range of primary and secondary sanctions on the Iranian regime. This “maximum pressure” campaign has had a pronounced effect on Iran’s economic fortunes, precipitating an exodus of international commerce from the Islamic Republic and causing a massive devaluation of Iran’s national currency, the rial.<sup>3</sup> The advent, in early 2020, of the coronavirus pandemic has had a further deleterious effect on the Iranian economy, and on political stability within the Islamic Republic.<sup>4</sup> As of yet, however, these factors have not caused a significant, sustained change in Iran’s regional behavior, its nuclear ambitions, or its persistent sponsorship of terrorism, both in its immediate neighborhood and more globally.*

## 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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.”<sup>7</sup> 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 four-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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 activities aimed at hindering 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 forty-one years 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.<sup>10</sup> 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" 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;<sup>11</sup> 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;<sup>12</sup> 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;<sup>13</sup> exerting influence in the Palestinian arena through financial aid and support to Palestinian rejectionist groups, chief among them Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad<sup>14</sup> and; bankrolling terrorist and subversive activities in various countries, including Egypt.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> 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 family<sup>17</sup> to the successful struggle by Yemen's al-Houthi rebellion against the central government in Sana'a.<sup>18</sup>

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. Over time, this effort led to the creation of what has been termed the "Shi'ite Liberation Army" (SLA), a cadre of as many as 200,000 Shi'a irregulars drawn from Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan, Iraq and elsewhere, trained and equipped by the IRGC, and deployed to foreign theaters.<sup>19</sup> Through this effort, Iranian-sponsored Shi'ite militants eclipsed the Sunni militancy in Iraq and Syria in both size and scope.; as of April 2018, the SLA's presence in the country was estimated at around 80,000<sup>20</sup>, or twice the size of the foreign fighter contingent believed to have been mobilized up to that point by the Islamic State terrorist group.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> That view has remained constant in the years since. Additionally, Iranian leaders view the Islamic State and its exclusionary, aggressive Sunni interpretation of the Islamic faith, as something approaching an existential threat to the Islamic Republic, and accordingly marshalled massive resources to eliminate the group.<sup>23</sup>

Broadly construed, Iran's regional efforts have been massively 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. The second is Baghdad, where Iran continues to wield extensive influence among the country's political elites while simultaneously supporting an extensive network of powerful Shi'a militias, collectively known as the *Hashd al-Shaabi*.

The third is Lebanon, where the group’s principal terrorist proxy, Hezbollah, maintains a commanding grip on national politics. The fourth is Sana’a, Yemen, where since the spring of 2015, Iranian-supported rebels have succeeded in taking over the national government, precipitating a pitched civil war that – five years on – has created what is considered by many to be the world’s worst humanitarian catastrophe.

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.”<sup>24</sup> 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 and \$16 billion annually on support for terrorism and insurgency worldwide.<sup>25</sup>

This funding remains pervasive. In August 2018, Brian Hook, the Trump administration’s Special Representative for Iran, estimated that “Iran provides Lebanese Hezbollah about \$700 million per year,” and that the Iranian regime had spent “at least \$16 billion on supporting its proxies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen” to that point.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, Hook stressed, “Iran has historically provided over \$100 million per year to Palestinian groups, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.”<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, Trump administration efforts are focused in large part on curtailing the funds available to the Iranian regime to engage in terror sponsorship—albeit without significant results so far.

## 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.<sup>28</sup> More recently, the Iranian regime’s foreign adventurism – and its support for radical proxies – has emerged as prominent anti-regime narrative in the persistent protests that have taken place throughout the Islamic Republic since late 2017.

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, experts estimate that Iran’s current population of more than eighty-five million is made up of some forty-two million Persians, an estimated twenty-seven million Azerbaijanis, and roughly eight million Kurds, five million Arabs, two million Turkmen, and one-and-a-half million Baluch.<sup>29</sup> Many of these minorities 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.<sup>30</sup>

Social and economic malaise has historically served to dilute identification with regime ideals and principles, something that was encapsulated in the mass uprising (colloquially known as the “Green Movement”) that emerged in Iran in mid-2009. Back then, the protests were successfully quashed by the Iranian regime, but the underlying factors that propelled the uprising – including unemployment, poverty and widespread regime corruption – remain potent drivers of domestic politics. This has been evident since

late 2017, which has seen Iran convulsed by persistent protests that have presented its leaders with the greatest challenge to their legitimacy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The initial period that followed the passage of the JCPOA in 2015 was greeted with considerable euphoria by ordinary Iranians, who were hopeful that the agreement would be accompanied by an economic “peace dividend” of sorts.<sup>31</sup> This, however, did not materialize, notwithstanding a surge in trade and investment into the Islamic Republic. The Iranian regime chose not to parlay the economic benefits of JCPOA-enabled trade into meaningful, sustained investments in infrastructure and prosperity within the Islamic Republic.

To the contrary, conditions within the Islamic Republic have continued to deteriorate. According to the World Bank, as of December 2019 unemployment within the country stood at 10.6 percent.<sup>32</sup> It is also endemic in nature, and in the past has been estimated to reach as high as 60 percent in some cities.<sup>33</sup> Youth unemployment is particularly widespread, measuring nearly 26 percent by the end of 2019,<sup>34</sup> with nearly half of all university graduates now unemployed.<sup>35</sup> Poverty within the Islamic Republic remains pervasive as well, with some 40 percent of the country’s population classified as destitute even before the coronavirus hit.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the Islamic Parliament Research Center (IPRC) recently estimated that between 2.8 million and 6.4 million people are expected to be added to the unemployment numbers as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and government policies surrounding it.<sup>37</sup>

Yet, rather than focus on the country’s deleterious domestic conditions, Iran’s leaders systematically prioritized guns over butter. In recent years, Iran has significantly expanded its foreign activism in places like Bahrain, Yemen and (most conspicuously) Syria, and done so at considerable cost to the regime. In 2018, for instance, the Islamic Republic’s ongoing campaign in Syria was estimated to be costing the country between \$15-\$20 billion annually – roughly equivalent to Iran’s total national healthcare budget of \$16.3 billion.<sup>38</sup> In all, since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011 it is now estimated that the Iranian regime has invested about \$30 billion into preserving President Bashar al-Assad’s regime.<sup>39</sup>

This combination of domestic neglect and foreign adventurism has generated a massive domestic backlash within Iran. Prominent among the slogans in the current cycle of protests within the Islamic Republic have been calls of “Leave Syria, think about us!” and “Death to Hezbollah!”<sup>40</sup> – chants that reflect a fundamental dissatisfaction with, and rejection of, the prevailing priorities of the Iranian regime.

## 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.<sup>41</sup> Founded at the start of the Islamic Revolution, the Guards were envisioned from the outset as the expeditionary arm of Khomeini’s version of radical political Islam. The agenda of Iran’s ideological army, however, is global in scope,<sup>42</sup> and so is its reach. Over the past four 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.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> The head of the Qods Force, until his death at the hands of the United States in January 2020, was Iran’s most prominent military leader, Major-General Qassem Soleimani.

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.<sup>45</sup>

The IRGC is far more than simply a military force, however. It also represents one of Iran's most powerful political and economic actors. IRGC-controlled and -affiliated entities now permeate every sector of the formal Iranian economy,<sup>46</sup> and are known to wield extensive influence over the country's gray- and black- market activities (including smuggling, illicit financial transfers and proliferation).

#### *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.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> MOIS operatives are also known to operate abroad under unofficial identities—for example, as employees of Iran Air, Iran's official airline.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup>

#### *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).<sup>51</sup>

#### *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.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup> More recently, amid growing protests in and around Tehran and other urban centers beginning in December 2017, the *Basij* has played an instrumental role in regime repression, including by carrying out mass arrests of demonstrators.<sup>56</sup>

There are reported to be as many as 10 million registered *Basij* members, though not all are on active service.<sup>57</sup> 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.

#### *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.<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup> As recently as 2018, Iranian *bonyads* were believed to make up approximately 30% of Iran's GDP, consisting of more than 120 foundations<sup>61</sup> and accounting for as much as two-thirds of the country's non-oil GDP.<sup>62</sup> 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, however, even as Iran remains complicit in the pervasive sponsorship of international terrorism, it is itself the target of violent activity from a number of quarters.

Most pronounced has been the threat to Iran posed in recent years by the Islamic State. Following its ascent to regional prominence in mid-2014, ISIS targeted Shi'a Muslim communities throughout the Middle East, and made Iran a key target of its animus. The organization repeatedly attempted to breach Iran's common border with Iraq, and identified the Iranian regime as a principal adversary in its communiqués and writings. ISIS likewise proved adept at exploiting Iran's latent ethnic cleavages, and in the past found fertile soil for recruitment among disenfranchised communities, such as Iran's Kurds, who are repressed and/or marginalized by the state.<sup>63</sup> Since then, however, the destruction of the physical ISIS *caliphate* in Iraq and Syria in early 2019 has led to a significant diminution in the threat posed by the group to the integrity and security of the Islamic Republic.

Nevertheless, Iran continues to face sporadic pockets of insurgency tied to the country's various restive ethnic minorities. For instance, in Sistan-Baluchistan, which borders Pakistan, a low-grade insurgency has been simmering since the middle of the last decade. There, attacks carried out by militant Sunni Baluch groups like *Jundullah* and *Jaish ul-Adl* against regime targets have persisted despite a 2014 understanding between Iran and Pakistan<sup>64</sup> under which both countries committed to stepped-up counterterrorism cooperation along their common border.

Similarly, Iran's eastern province of Khuzestan is the site of significant separatist activity on the part

of the country's Arab minority. The region has a long history of social activism dating back to the 1920s, but in recent years the situation has become more heated, in part as a result of the activities of an insurgent group known as the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA).

Most prominent of all, however, has been the resistance in Iran's majority Kurdish regions of West Azerbaijan, Kordestan and Kermanshah, where the Free Life Party of Kurdistan, or PJAK, operates. 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 neighboring 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.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup> 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.<sup>67</sup> This ceasefire held until 2013, when clashes between the group and Tehran began anew,<sup>68</sup> and have continued sporadically until the present day.

## ENDNOTES

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