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## GUIDE TO THE STUDY OF INTELLIGENCE

# Iran's Intelligence Establishment

by Carl Anthony Wege

### Introduction

Iran's 1979 revolution, one of the major events of the twentieth century led by Grand Ayatolla Ruhollah Mostafavi Moosavi Khomeini, established a new form of government — the *Vilayat-e Faqih* or “Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists.” Built on the Twelver (Ithna-Ashari) Shi'a claim that any government outside that of the hidden Imam was illegitimate,<sup>1</sup> the innovation of Khomeini's revolution was that Shi'a religious authorities began, for the first time in Iranian history, to govern directly through the *Vilayat-e Faqih*.<sup>2</sup>

Iran, or Persia as it was historically known, is a multiethnic country of 80 million people whose Farsi-speaking Persian (and Azeri) populations dominate the government and are geographically concentrated in the central Iranian plateau. Modern Iran incorporates additional ethnic groups, including Turks, Kurds, Lurs, and Arabs who constitute a significant portion of the population and mostly live

1. As Shi'as believe, the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al Mahdi, was hidden from the world by divine intervention in 874 AD and his return will usher in the day of Judgment. The Shi'a community also includes Zaydis, or fivers, who claim five true Imams and Seveners, or Ismailis, who now live primarily in an arc from Central Asia and Afghanistan to Western China. Iran's 16th century Safavid dynasty disguised tensions between historic Persian ideas of divine Kingship and Twelver Shi'a concepts of legitimate governance, solely through the hidden Imam, by asserting that the Shah and associated institutions derived their authority from Allah during the time of the Imam's hiding. The 17th century creation of the office of Mullabashi (chief mullah) precipitated ongoing contention between religious and secular power in Iran. See Roger M. Savory, “The Problem of Sovereignty in an Ithna Ashari (“Twelver”) Shi'i State,” in *Religion and Politics in the Middle East*. Michael Curtis ed., Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1981, p 135-7 and Heinz Halm, *Shi'ism*, New York: Comubia University Press, 1987, p 81.

2. Azar Tabari, “The Role of the Clergy in Modern Iranian Politics,” in *Religion And Politics In Iran*, Nikki R. Keddie ed., New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983, p 72.

around the periphery of that central plateau. This center-periphery division, generally along ethnic lines, is the most significant cultural feature characterizing modern Iran's national state.<sup>3</sup> The potential for these minorities living along the periphery of the country to be exploited by Iran's enemies is one of the major concerns of the country's security services.

The objectives of Iran's security services are not dissimilar from those of neighboring states. Many of the Arab dictatorships in the Middle East have been called *mukhābarāt* states to convey the idea that they are built on multiple security agencies whose primary purpose is to protect the regime from internal dissent. A multiplicity of agencies prevents any concentration of power that could precipitate an anti-regime coup. Iran, while not an Arab state, has engaged its many security agencies for the same objective. Politically Tehran's *Vilayat-e Faqih* government incorporates a complex intra-Iranian matrix of relationships between clerics, the *bonyad* (economic power centers), the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC, Pasdaran or Pasdan-e Inqilal-e Islami) and other Iranian security organs, which compete for influence in an ever-changing constellation of conflicting interactions. The various nodes of this matrix, all carefully watched by the security organs, make a successful coup unlikely.

### Iran's National Security Establishment

The apex of Iran's national security establishment is the *Supreme National Security Council (SNSC)* roughly similar in concept to the US National Security Council in that the organizational intent is to aggregate policymakers with the heads of the security organs and the armed forces. Iran's SNSC then brings together the heads of the regular military, foreign affairs and political leadership and includes the heads of the Ministry of Interior, the Minister of Intelligence and Security, and the chief of the Revolutionary Guards.

Like all governments, Iran is adapting to the increasing importance of national information infrastructures. Tehran has established a variety of bodies to manage various security aspects of this emergent cyber domain. The evolving security organs have nodes spread across multiple institutions. Two “cyber war” centers for example exist in Tehran and operate under the tutelage of Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Offensively the Revolutionary Guards support a variety of Iranian “hacker” organizations like the *Iran Cyber Army* that are little more than unofficial affiliates of

3. “Iran's lurking enemy within,” *Asia Times*, January 8, 2006.

the Guards. These unofficial affiliates coordinate operations with Cyber Hezbollah and the Syrian Electronic Army generally targeting dissident groups as well as the information infrastructure of enemy countries.<sup>4</sup> There is a Basiji Cyber Council with minimal security responsibilities but more than a thousand personnel who create and post regime-friendly content across multiple public cyberspace venues.<sup>5</sup> Iran created a Cyber Defense Command (Gharargah-e Defa-e Saiberi) in 2010 under the Artesh (armed forces) Passive Defense Organization. This is a kind of Iranian civil defense program with responsibility to help defend the nation in time of war. The Cyber Defense Command, as part of that Passive Defense, was tasked with defending Iran's information infrastructure. A cyber police organization (FATA) began in 2011 to target Internet crime and suppress online dissent. Within a couple of years FATA had established a presence in all thirty-one provinces and fifty-six cities across Iran. FATA is distinct from the National Police Organization (NAJA), and one of FATA's primary objectives is to reduce or eliminate anonymous access to the Internet. In furthering that objective the FATA are promoting a new biometric ID card that Iranians would need to access the Internet. In 2012, a Supreme Council of Cyberspace (Shora-ye Ali-ye Fazo-ye Majazl) was decreed by Iran's second supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, to coordinate Iranian governmental agencies with security-related cyber responsibilities.<sup>6</sup>

Iran's Ministry of Interior plays a somewhat ancillary role in Tehran's security architecture controlling ordinary crime as well as suppressing political dissent. It includes Iran's Law Enforcement Forces (Niruha-ye Entezami-ye Jomhuri-ye Islami) created in 1991 to incorporate urban police, the rural gendarmerie and various revolutionary committees. This includes the national police force called the Islamic Republic Police Force (Niruyih Intizamiyih Jumhuriyih Islamiyih Iran or NAJA). A decade ago, a number of informal groups made up of personnel from multiple security organizations were aggregated into ad hoc security bodies that

4. Olivier Danino, "Cyber Capabilities of Israel and Iran: Clash Seen In A New Light" Institute for European Research February 26, 2013 <http://www.medeia.be/2013/02/les-capacites-cybernetiques-d-israel-et-de-liran-un-affrontement-vu-sous-un-nouvel-angle/>. The assassination of Mojtaba Ahmadi, commander of the IRGC cyber war centers in Tehran in 2013, indicates Iran's cyber war capacity is now taken seriously by regional powers.

5. The Basiji are defined as "Mobilization of the Oppressed" (Basij-e Mostaz'afin or Basiji) discussed later.

6. LTC Eric K. Shafa "Iran's Emergence as a Cyber Power," Strategic Studies Institute, August 20, 2014 <http://www.strategic-studiesinstitute.army.mil/index.cfm/articles/irans-emergence-as-cyber-power/2014/08/20n>.

operated during the Presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997 – 2004). These organizations were referred to as a Parallel Intelligence Apparatus (Nahadhayih ittia'tiyih muvazi). They were anchored in an "off the books" conspiracy between the Revolutionary Guards and the Judiciary. These ad hoc entities were usually described as plainclothes police who operated at the behest of political conservatives opposed to the reformist ideas of Khatami. They apparently acted with the approval of Supreme Leader Khamenei and established a limited system of secret prisons to detain reformist intellectuals.<sup>7</sup> With the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, these ad hoc secret police forces devolved back into their formal parent organizations. However, such ad hoc secret police forces could, no doubt, be reconstituted to work with the Islamic Republic Police Forces if conditions warranted.

Iran's post-revolutionary intelligence establishment developed on the foundation of both the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) sometimes called VAVAK (Vezerat-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar) and the Revolutionary Guard Corps. In keeping with the vision of the Vilayat-e Faqih every Minister of Intelligence since the revolution has been a religious authority rather than a technocrat.<sup>8</sup> The MOIS functions more as an Executive body than a traditional Ministry reporting directly to the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic (Ali Hosseini Khamenei).<sup>9</sup>

## Security Organizations

The strength of Iran's intelligence and security organizations is built on the twin pillars of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security and the Revolutionary Guard.

The Ministry of Intelligence and Security or VAVAK<sup>10</sup> was created in 1984 as the successor organi-

7. "Covert Terror: Iran's Parallel Intelligence Apparatus," Human Rights Documentation Center, New Haven, Connecticut, April 2009.

8. "Iran's Clerical Spymasters," *Asia Times*, July 21, 2007. Likewise there is what amounts to a 'commissar system' of clergy in every entity of governance who report directly to the Supreme Leader. It is also relevant that much of the leadership in MOIS have attended the Madrase-ye Haqqani theological school in Qom. See also Wilfred Buchta *Who Rules Iran*, Washington, DC: Washington Institute of Near East Policy and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2000, p 166. The Haqqani school itself was founded by the Hojjatieh, a semi-secret anti-Sunni society that technically rejects the Velayat-e Faqih of post-revolutionary Iran. See "Shi'ite Supremacists Emerge from Iran's Shadows," *AsiaTimes* September 9, 2005.

9. Khamenei appears to be coming to the end of his life, which will likely place the security organizations in the position of refereeing the transition to a new Supreme Leader.

10. The acronyms MOIS and VAVAK can be used interchange-

zation to SAVAMA.<sup>11</sup> One of the first actions of VAVAK was to institute a system of regional centers across Iran in the 1980s as the Khomeini government consolidated the Revolution.<sup>12</sup> Iran's intelligence services, maturing in the 1990s, established relationships with foreign services and most importantly with the Russian *Foreign Intelligence Service* (Sluzhba Vneshnei Razvedki or SVR). The SVR trained hundreds of Iranian intelligence personnel and were allowed to station Russian personnel on Iranian soil. In addition to the traditional intelligence skill sets, the SVR trained MOIS personnel in the old KGB methods of disinformation, which the MOIS calls *Nefaq* (an Arabic, not Farsi, word for "discord" or "hypocrisy").<sup>13</sup> The French *Centre for Research on Intelligence* estimates the MOIS staff numbers roughly 15,000 with several thousand deployed outside the country covertly or under cover of official Iranian organizations, including charities and cultural centers, in addition to the local embassy.<sup>14</sup> VAVAK officers who are assigned to a local Iranian Embassy typically serve three to five year terms.<sup>15</sup> In the early 21st century the major VAVAK training sites in Tehran and Qom were supported by recruitment at noted academic institutions such as Imam Mohammed Bagher University in Tehran. Structurally VAVAK was not dissimilar to many intelligence agencies; it contained about a dozen separate directorates although VAVAK had three with direct responsibility for terrorist operations.<sup>16</sup>

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ably as they refer to the same organization.

11. SAVAMA (Ministry of Intelligence and National Security or Sazman-e Ettela'at Va Amniyat-e Melli-e) was a transitional organization between the SAVAK secret police organization of the pre-revolutionary government of the Shah of Iran and the MOIS.

12. *Intelligence Newsletter*, No. 286, April 18, 1996.

13. "Special Report: Iranian Intelligence Regime Preservation," *Stratfor*, June 21, 2010, p 7.

14. "The Iranian Intelligence Services," 5 January 2010 Note For News No. 200, *French Centre for Research on Intelligence*, Paris [www.cf2r.org](http://www.cf2r.org).

15. Precision in this sort of thing is always problematic due to everything from definitional differences respecting what constitutes a Ministry employee to active disinformation efforts on the part of the Ministry.

16. A Directorate of Overseas Affairs was responsible for MOIS branches abroad with special emphasis on operations against the Peoples Mujahidin Organization. (The Peoples Mujahidin Organization is a Marxist organization founded in 1965 and dedicated to the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. Although considered a terrorist organization by the United States it has nonetheless provided apparently accurate information on Iran's nuclear program.) A Directorate of Foreign Intelligence and Liberation Movements participated in typical foreign espionage operations. A Directorate for Security ostensibly engaged in internal security but was primarily responsible for overseas assassinations of regime opponents. (*Intelligence Newsletter*, No. 286, April 18, 1996.) ("MOIS Structure," February 28, 2006 [www.iranterror.com/content/view/176/66](http://www.iranterror.com/content/view/176/66).)

The organizational matrix of VAVAK also incorporated entities with focus on: Analysis and Strategy, Homeland Security (protecting state institutions), National Security (responsible for monitoring overseas opposition movements), Counterintelligence, and Foreign Intelligence (with analytical departments and geographic regional divisions).<sup>17</sup> Domestically MOIS has responsibility to monitor Iran's ethnic minorities, particularly on the periphery of the country, and externally MOIS is tasked to neutralize Iranian expatriate dissident organizations.<sup>18</sup> A competition of sorts has developed between MOIS and the Revolutionary Guard with the Guards slowly becoming the more dominant organization.

The second pillar of Iran's intelligence and security organizations then is the Revolutionary Guard, which first attained the status of an independent Ministry in 1982 and has evolved into a Praetorian Guard constituting the backbone of the Islamic Republic.<sup>19</sup> In 2005 the *Oghab 2* (Eagle 2) organization, headed by Ahmad Wahidi, was created under the Revolutionary Guards to defend Iran's nuclear program. The organization, while under the Guard, appears to report to the MOIS Counterintelligence Directorate and has several thousand employees tasked with protecting various aspects of the nuclear program.<sup>20</sup> This kind of lateral reporting line where a subsidiary agency of one organization reports to a subsidiary agency of

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17. "The Iranian Intelligence Services," 5 January 2010 Note For News No. 200, *French Centre for Research on Intelligence*, Paris [www.cf2r.org](http://www.cf2r.org).

18. "Special Report: Iranian Intelligence Regime Preservation" *Stratfor* June 21, 2010, 7. Several distinct MOIS bodies recruit candidates for operations in the Gulf, Yemen and Sudan, Lebanon and Palestine, North Africa, Europe, South Asia and the Far East, North America, and Latin America. See "Insight: Iran-MOIS/IRGC structure and operations," *Global Intelligence Files*, Wikileaks, March 17, 2010, [https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/g6/g6828\\_insight-iran-mois-irgc-structure-and-operations-.html](https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/g6/g6828_insight-iran-mois-irgc-structure-and-operations-.html).

19. The IRGC is now essentially a state within a state responsible for Iran's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs as well as maintaining a military structure that parallels the regular armed forces (Artesh). Like the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) the IRGC now also controls large swaths of Iran's economy. A lesser-known responsibility of the IRGC is to manage a suspected biological weapons program including the *Revolutionary Guards Baqiyatollah Research Center* and the *Qeshm Island Persian Gulf Marine Biotechnology Research Centre*. See "Revolutionary Guards Baqiyatollah Research Center" *Iran Watch* January 26, 2004 <http://www.iranwatch.org/iranian-entities/revolutionary-guards-baqiyatollah-research-center> See also "Mapping Iran's Biological Warfare Complex" *The Biological Warfare Blog: Black Six*, <http://bio-defencewarfareanalyst.blogspot.com/2014/05/mapping-irans-biological-warfare-complex.html>. May 12, 2014.

20. "Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security: A Profile," Library of Congress under an Interagency Agreement with the Combating Terrorism Technical Support Office's Irregular Warfare Support Program, December 2012, p 34.



another organization occurs with some regularity in Iran's security enterprise. The operational scope of Oghab<sup>2</sup> is fairly wide given the need to protect senior scientists and engineers, industrial equipment across the nuclear program and now the cyber domain of information networks supporting the program.

The Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, now commanded by Hossein Hamadani, incorporates its own security apparatus with responsibilities for both intelligence gathering and covert actions outside Iran.<sup>21</sup> Following the near uprising over Iran's fraudulent elections in 2009, the Khamenei government reorganized a number of security organizations including several associated with the IRGC. Khamenei decreed creation of a new organization, called the Intelligence Organization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Since the only immediate source of qualified intelligence officers would be from the management of sister organizations, there is a certain amount of "hat changing" mitigating the significance of the new agency. The IRGC Intelligence Organization is now headed by Hojjatoleslam Hossein Taeb with Hojjatoleslam Gholamhossein Ramezani as his counterintelligence chief.<sup>22</sup> Taeb's organization is headquartered at Qasr-e Firouzeh in Kamali near Tehran. Taeb's IRGC Intelligence Organization also commands the Internal Security Directorate at MOIS and the security apparatus of the Basiji. It has authority over Khamenei's Department 101, which acts as a special intelligence unit within MOIS and is tasked with coordinating some intelligence activities between MOIS and the IRGC Intelligence Organization.<sup>23</sup> Taeb's role here illustrates a characteristic of Iran's intelligence architecture, with reporting lines sometimes laterally crossing agency jurisdiction. This obscures the observer's view of the functional relationships between Iranian intelligence bodies and thereby enhances their security. It also facilitates those bodies watching each other, mitigating the risk of a coup against the state.

Separately the larger Quds Special Operations Forces numbering several thousand serves in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Bosnia, Sudan and elsewhere. The infrastructure the Guard creates for these operations can last for years. A decade ago, for example, Quds

21. Wilfred Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000, p 69. The Quds Force was commanded by Qassem Suleimani from 1998 until 2014.

22. Taeb studied jurisprudence in Qom and Mashhad and was on the faculty at Imam Hossein University. He also briefly served as espionage chief in MOIS.

23. "Iran exile group: Khamenei tightens intelligence grip," *Reuters*, November 12, 2009.

Ramazan (Ramadan) Corps (subdivided into Nasr, Zafar, and Fajr commands) operated against US and coalition forces in Iraq, but now that infrastructure can be enhanced to fight the Islamic State that has emerged under Caliph Ibrahim and which threatens both Iran and its interests in Shi'a dominated Iraq.<sup>24</sup>

Iran's national ambition to dominate the Middle East has also led the IRGC Quds Special Operations Forces to cooperate with a variety of Sunni extremist organizations that further that ambition. Part of this cooperation involves utilizing an IRGC-controlled system of terrorist training camps within Iran to train and influence proxy organizations that can be deployed in Iran's cause. This system of camps was fashioned quite early in the Islamic Republic and has trained both Sunni and Shi'a fighters who support Iran's foreign policy goals and continues to this day. Regular groups of Sunni Hamas activists from the Gaza strip, for example, continue to cycle through the Iranian camp system.<sup>25</sup> Iran's camp system was configured to support different terrorist organizations and has been developed to focus on differentiated skill sets. In Qom, for example, the Fatah Ghani Hussein camp was used primarily by Turkish Islamists, while in Qasvim the Abyek camp was used for terrorist training in political assassination. Thousands of trainees have now passed through this system with about ten percent selected for more extensive training.<sup>26</sup> Virtually all of these foreign terrorist trainees should be considered as potential proxy actors for the IRGC. These camps are considerably more substantial than the Western image of terrorist training camps, such as those that had been maintained by various Palestinian factions in Lebanon or what had been available in Libya or Syria thirty years ago. Externally the Revolutionary Guard tries to exploit Yemen's rebel Houthi clan, and runs networks in Venezuela and Bolivia as well as throughout sub-Saharan Africa where it typically relies on Hezbollah to influence the local expatriate Lebanese

24. Bill Roggio, "Iran's Ramazan Corps and the ratlines into Iraq," *The Long War Journal* December 5, 2007 [www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/12/irans\\_ramazan\\_corps.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/12/irans_ramazan_corps.php).

25. "Iran's al-Quds octopus spreads its arms," *Jerusalem Post* October 27, 2008.

26. "Iran builds up network of terror schools," *Electronic Telegraph*, July 8, 1996. Additional camps have included the Nahavand camp in Hamadan for Lebanon's Hizballah, and the Imam Ali camp in east Tehran, which is the largest camp and used by Saudi opposition groups. Iranian exile groups have also named Bahonar Barracks, Mostafa Kohomeini Barracks, Ghayoor Asli Barracks, Imam Sadegh Camp, Korreit Camp, Lavizan and Abyek training centers, etc. See "Terrorist Training by The Quds Force and the VEVAK," February 28, 2006, [www.iranterror.com](http://www.iranterror.com).

Community.<sup>27</sup> This gives the IRGC an international network, separate from that of VAVAK, for operations and to project Iran's power.

Ancillary organizations under the command of the Revolutionary Guard and used to protect the Khomeini regime from domestic dissent includes the Mobilization of the Oppressed (Basij-e Mostaz'afin or Basiji) militias. The Basiji militia were placed under command of the IRGC after 2008 are generally poorly educated and uniformly drawn from rural areas.<sup>28</sup> A similar organization, the Helpers of God (Ansar e-Hezbollah), sometimes cooperates with the Basiji. These became the blunt instrument of suppression used on the streets in large numbers and physically beat anti-government protesters in Iran's urban centers.<sup>29</sup>

### Conclusions

Internally both VAVAK and the IRGC are most active on the periphery of Iran's national borders. VAVAK and the IRGC, for example, have developed a deep understanding of Salafi terrorist networks that have engaged in Afghanistan and Pakistan over the last two decades.<sup>30</sup> Likewise both have extensive networks in Iraq and Syria, where the flames of civil war are burning hot enough to threaten Khomeini's house. VAVAK also operates a large station in Amman, Jordan, which, along with Dubai, is becoming the Vienna of the Near East.

The Revolutionary Guard and VAVAK now appear to be sharing parallel intelligence and security functions, with the Revolutionary Guard shouldering a greater share of responsibility. These parallel responsibilities allow the Khomeini regime to create a lattice tying these agencies together while using each organization to check the other, lessening the chance of a successful coup against the Vilayat-e Faqih. This veil of unknowing obscures the organizational structure and function of Iran's intelligence agencies from out-

side observers, shielding the regime's enforcers with a cloak of anonymity.

In the long run, it is post-18th century European Enlightenment-style modernity itself which is the real threat to Iran and other Islamist governments. The ability to isolate a creative and educated population from the larger world and new ideas inevitably crashes on the shoals of reality. Economic and social globalization is not moving toward a worldwide Islamic Revolution. It is moving decisively away from it. Khomeini's majestic vision of an unfolding Shi'a Revolution has now deteriorated into the merely profane. Iran's security organs can protect the Vilayat-e Faqih for a while. They cannot however halt a progressively unifying world. ✎

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27. "Iran's Special Services Under Fire," January 9, 2012 Note For News No. 284, French Centre for Research on Intelligence, Paris, [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

28. The three main branches of the Basiji include the Ashoura and al-Zahra Brigades, which function as glorified neighborhood watches, the Imam Hossein Brigade, which can handle more serious matters as most of its members are war veterans, and the Imam Ali Brigades, which can also be used for more serious security threats. See Ali Alfoneh "The Basij Resistance Force," *Iran Primer*, U.S. Institute of Peace, undated, <http://iran-primer.usip.org/resource/basij-resistance-force>.

29. This Basiji along with the Ansar e-Hezbollah ultimately crushed opponents of the 2009 election results.

30. "The Iranian Intelligence Services and the War on Terror" in *The Jamestown Foundation's Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 2 (10), May 19, 2004.