

Iran's Evolving Way of War

How the IRGC Fights in Syria



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About Us

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Executive Summary

Iran is developing a new way of waging war beyond its borders using Syria as the laboratory. Combat units drawn from the conventional brigades and divisions of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) have been fighting on the front lines alongside Syrian and Iraqi militias and Lebanese Hezbollah since October 2015. The units appear to be deploying as cadres—bringing most of their officers, some of their non-commissioned officers (NCOs), and only a small number of enlisted ranks—and plugging into Iraqi, Syrian, and Hezbollah militia groups that serve as their foot soldiers.

Iranian officials have labored to conceal the extent of their involvement in the Syrian conflict, repeatedly insisting that they are only training, advising, and assisting Syrian forces. The announcements of Iranian casualties reported by Iranian media and social media tell another story. Careful analysis of the ranks and unit affiliations of Iranians reported as having been killed in Syria demonstrates that IRGC officers are leading soldiers in combat and not merely advising. Comparisons of the casualty data with the dates of major pro-regime operations in Syria make it possible to determine that most of these IRGC units were fighting in the major offensives around Aleppo between October 2015 and February 2016 facilitated by the start of Russian air operations.

The data shows, however, that Iranian officers are unlikely to have been commanding Iranian troops in Syria, as there have not been enough casualties reported among IRGC enlisted personnel to account for the number of officers killed based on normal casualty ratios. We hypothesize, therefore, that the IRGC has developed the ability to send a unit cadre to Syria, implant it among groups of militias, and successfully lead those militias in extremely hard fighting.

This capability is a natural evolution of the IRGC's own design: IRGC units are meant to receive reinforcements of Iran's mobilized reserves (the Basij) in times of war. Conducting operations of this variety on foreign soil with a conglomerate of militias and across linguistic barriers, however, is extremely difficult. If the IRGC has, indeed, mastered this ability, then it has positioned itself to use small numbers of conventional forces on foreign battlefields to produce effects disproportionate to their size. It would constitute a significant increase in Iran's ability to project conventional military power abroad.

Iran could use this method of expeditionary operations in other theaters, such as Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon, where there are already large groups of allies and proxy militias. This evolution in Iranian warfighting technique coupled with Iran's stated intention to purchase advanced fighter-bombers from Russia indicates that Iran may be seeking to field a conventional military capability. It could seek to use that capability to challenge the armed forces of regional states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel directly in proxy wars.

It is too soon to conclude that the IRGC intends to field this capability across all or most of its units. It is clear, however, that Western analysts must begin to rethink decades-old assessments of Iran's commitment to relying on the Qods Force and proxies to fight its battles abroad. We must open our minds to the possibility that post-sanctions Iran intends to become a significant regional military actor.

Introduction

Iranian combat operations in Syria reveal the regime's determination and ability to develop conventional military capabilities for use in expeditionary operations in the Middle East. The appearance on Syrian battlefields of combat units drawn from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) marks a sea-change in Iran's approach to generating and using military power in support of its regional allies and proxies. Whereas Tehran had previously relied almost exclusively on the covert and paramilitary Qods Force to create and help partners in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, IRGC combat formations are now augmenting the Qods Force and may even be supplanting it in Syria.

The precise extent and nature of IRGC Ground Forces' involvement in Syria is unclear. The commands, staffs, and some combat elements of several infantry and armored brigades and battalions have unquestionably fought in the front lines of pro-regime operations near Aleppo in northwestern Syria. Evidence for the presence of the full complements of the soldiers of these units is ambiguous—they may have been present, but it is more likely that the units deployed in cadre and relied on some combination of allied and proxy forces already in Syria and the Iranian mobilized militia known as the Basij.ⁱ

The involvement of many IRGC units in the Syrian fight is very clear, however, and signals a fundamental change in the nature of Iran's involvement in that conflict. Elements of at least six IRGC divisions have seen combat, while a total of 19 IRGC divisions, independent brigades, and specialized groups have taken casualties in Syria. IRGC Ground Forces are thus exercising the ability to deploy combat troops to a distant battlefield, fight a tough enemy, take casualties, and return, and they are exposing a large portion of their operational units to this experience.

The IRGC's participation in the war in Syria is transforming the organization, although the full extent of that transformation will not be clear for years. The energy of the IRGC's leadership since 2007 has largely focused on reorganizing and strengthening the Guards to defend Iran against American or Israeli decapitation airstrikes and internal unrest such as the 2009 protests. IRGC combat units have not functioned in an external combat role since the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988. The mobilization of IRGC forces to fight on a distant battlefield is injecting a new conception of what the IRGC combat forces can do and what contingencies they should prepare for. It could be a major inflection in the Guards' self-conception that may shape the IRGC's evolution. If current trends continue, regional states will have to re-evaluate the correlation of forces in the Middle East on the novel basis of an Iran with a limited but meaningful ability to project conventional ground combat power to distant battlefields.

ⁱ Armies designed to incorporate a large number of reservists or conscripts in wartime generally maintain their combat units in cadre during peacetime. Units in cadre usually have close to a full complement of officers and senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs), but only a small number of enlisted personnel.

Methodology

Iran's leadership has taken great care to play down the scope of its operations in Syria. Military officials continue to assert that the IRGC's presence on the ground is advisory and deny the presence of Iranian combat forces. The Islamic Republic cannot completely conceal the deaths of its soldiers on the front-lines, however. Iran's Shi'a-revolutionary ideology glorifies martyrdom, and announcements of casualties in Syria are major news stories in Iran. Careful analysis of these reports reveals the role the IRGC is playing on the battlefield. Photographs of funeral processions in Iran help identify the ranks and unit affiliations of fallen soldiers even when official media reports attempt to obfuscate them. Eulogies by military commanders, interviews with family members, and commemorative biographies contextualize and confirm these data points. This report combines these intelligence streams with reporting on Syrian regime operations to document the IRGC's deployment pattern in Syria.

The analysis below uses data collected from national and local Iranian news outlets and social media to examine the IRGC's deployment and activities in Syria since the start of the Russian air campaign and the pro-regime offensives in October 2015.ⁱⁱ The announcements of IRGC deaths in Syria provide a rich and complex stream of information regarding the ranks and unit affiliations of IRGC personnel. Collecting these announcements from all available sources facilitated deeper searches on the names of the dead to obtain additional information about their specializations, training, and activities prior to their deployments to Syria.

Assessment Lenses

This study examined the data through several lenses. First, we reviewed the unit affiliations of the IRGC personnel who died in Syria to search for patterns that might indicate whether those personnel were sent to Syria as individuals or as parts of units. We supplemented explicit reporting of unit affiliations with reports of where individuals came from and where they were buried, since it emerged that many IRGC officers were interred at cemeteries co-located with their units.ⁱⁱⁱ Second, we examined the ranks of the deceased when we could obtain them in order to assess the roles they were likely playing on the battlefield.¹ Third, we compared the IRGC casualty rates with known pro-regime operations in order to consider where the IRGC officers were likely to have been deployed.

ⁱⁱ We will use the term "pro-regime" forces throughout this paper to identify the motley coalition fighting on behalf, but not necessarily under the control, of Bashar al Assad. The Syrian Arab Army itself has been significantly degraded and does not always have a major presence on important battlefields such as Aleppo Province. Iranian proxy forces including Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'a militias, Afghan and Pakistani recruits from inside Iran, IRGC, and other troops provide the bulk of the manpower in these areas, as we shall see. "Pro-regime forces" therefore refers to the conglomerate of these proxies at any particular point.

ⁱⁱⁱ This report adopted a rigorous assessment structure to gauge unit affiliation for casualties. Uniform insignia, commemorative biographies, and media announcements were used to determine unit affiliation used in this analysis.

We considered the limited number of explicit statements in Iranian media about where the deaths occurred in making these assessments as well. Fourth, we considered descriptions of how the individuals died. We assumed that officers who died from bullet wounds, for example, were very likely in combat in some way, whereas those killed by mortar blasts, mines, or improvised explosive devices (IEDs) could have been on bases engaged in training, planning, or otherwise supporting operations. Fifth, we compared casualty rates in particular time periods among IRGC officers with those among the Afghan and Pakistani auxiliaries Iran sent to the battlefield in order to determine whether the IRGC personnel seemed likely to have been commanding those auxiliaries in combat.

Evaluating Rank Patterns

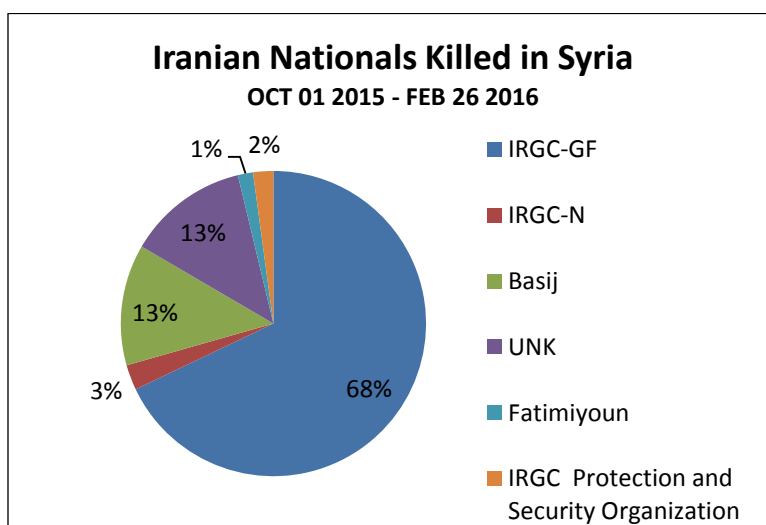
We relied on the considerable experience of American forces engaged in train, advise, and assist (TAA) missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as historical examples of other armies engaged in such missions, to shape our assessment of the likely rank structure of training teams. We considered in particular the prevalence of more senior officers (majors and above) who would likely form the bulk of an effort to train, advise, and assist pro-regime forces. We then examined the large number of lieutenants and captains who died beginning in October 2015 to assess the likelihood that IRGC forces had shifted into a combat role following the start of Russian airstrikes in Syria.

Previous combat experience is vital in training missions. Advisers without experience can offer only technical and theoretical expertise—something that is valuable to be sure, but that may not persuade battle-hardened local fighters to heed the adviser. IRGC units have not engaged in major combat for almost two decades. It is extremely unlikely, therefore, that an IRGC officer below the rank of colonel has any meaningful experience of large-scale fighting. We thus assessed that IRGC officers engaged in pure TAA missions would be predominantly colonels and general officers with some majors and lieutenant colonels to assist them and amplify their advice and assistance throughout the organization to which they were attached. This assessment is supported by the large number of colonels and brigadier generals killed in Syria.

The appearance of large numbers of lieutenants on the casualty rolls therefore requires explanation, since such young officers, usually in their early 20s, have little to offer seasoned fighters. We evaluated a large number of possible explanations for the presence of these officers on the battlefield. The most obvious explanation would have been that they were leading their troops in combat. Were that the case, we would have expected to see even larger numbers of privates and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) on the casualty rolls, since those enlisted personnel comprise the bulk of any regular combat unit and almost always suffer the preponderance of casualties in wartime. Our sources provided very few definite instances of NCOs dying in Syria and none at all of privates. We therefore turned to other possible explanations, which will be presented below.

Data Overview

Iranian media and other sources reported at least 187 casualties among Iranian nationals in Syria between October 1, 2015 and February 26, 2016.^{iv} This figure includes 127 members of the IRGC Ground Forces, five from IRGC naval infantry and support forces, four from the IRGC Protection and Security Organization (which provides personal security detachments for VIPs), 24 Basij paramilitary forces, three Iranian members of the Fatimiyoun Brigade (an Afghan militia recruited in Iran), and 24 individuals whose affiliation could not be assessed with high confidence (UNK)(see Figure 1).^v The Iranians whose ages were listed (relatively few) ranged from 22 to 64 years old and the ranks of the IRGC officers varied from brigadier general first class (equivalent of a U.S. major general) down to lieutenant and sergeant first class.² IRGC members were identified as belonging to over 19 divisions, brigades, and combat support groups active in Iran.

Figure 1

Source: AEI's Critical Threats Project

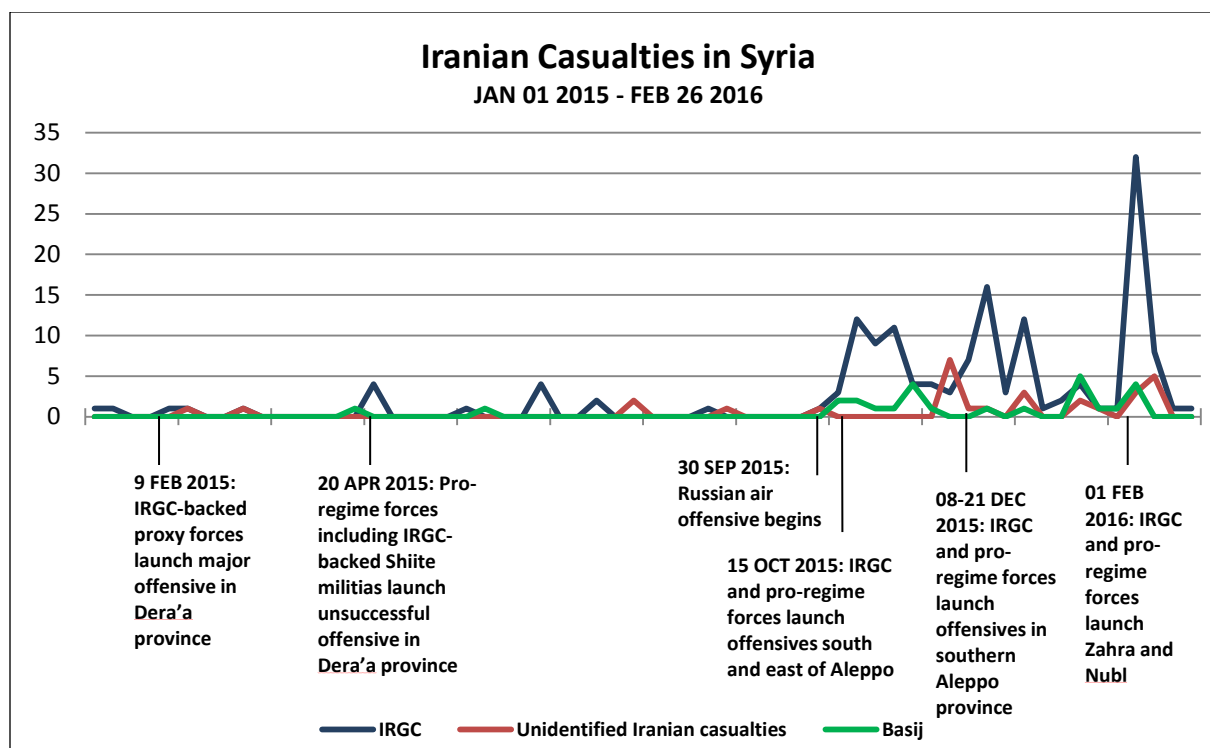
The time series in Figure 2 shows the casualty data for the IRGC, Basij, and other Iranian forces plotted weekly between January 1, 2015 and February 24, 2016. The data is cyclical with spikes in casualty numbers tending to correspond with major Syrian ground offensives. The weekly rate of casualties surges after October and continues at high levels until February as Iranian troops assumed

^{iv} An Iranian national is defined as an individual who is clearly identified as "Iranian" in Iranian press reports as opposed to the Afghans or Pakistanis that are recruited into Iranian proxy forces in Syria.

^v The definitions of and relationships among these various kinds of forces will be considered in detail below. Some of the individuals who could not be identified as belonging to any specific branch were likely IRGC Qods Force members and details about their clandestine activities were not released to the public.

an even greater role on the battlefield.^{vi} Breaking down the data by the IRGC unit affiliations of these casualties, moreover, indicates that during this period the IRGC institutionalized an extensive, integrated deployment pattern, rotating various units to the battlefield to supplement pro-regime forces at multiple echelons.

Figure 2



Source: AEP's Critical Threats Project

Background

The IRGC and the conglomerate of Iranian proxies fighting in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere is a sui generis fighting force that represents years of Iranian effort to create. Its complexities can easily

^{vi} The data does not permit precise information about exactly when most individuals died. Media outlets usually report that the fighter was killed “in the past few days” and sometimes do not offer any statement of when the casualty occurred. Such reports are frequent, however, and the rare occasions when precise dates of death are given usually show a close correlation between death-date and the announcement of the death. Casualty reports that provide the geographic areas in which the deaths occurred also support the assessment that most announcements are made within a few days of the loss. Iranian media also tends to note explicitly when it is reporting casualties that had occurred much earlier—when the bodies were found or returned to Iran weeks or months after the death, for example. We assess with high confidence, therefore, that the date of the announcement of a death is a reliable proxy for the date of the death itself. We use weekly or monthly rather than daily averages of death announcements to mitigate possible distortions in the data further.

obscure or distort analogies to other military organizations. We will therefore describe the basic structure and tasks of the IRGC and some of its key components before proceeding further with the presentation and analysis of the data.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps

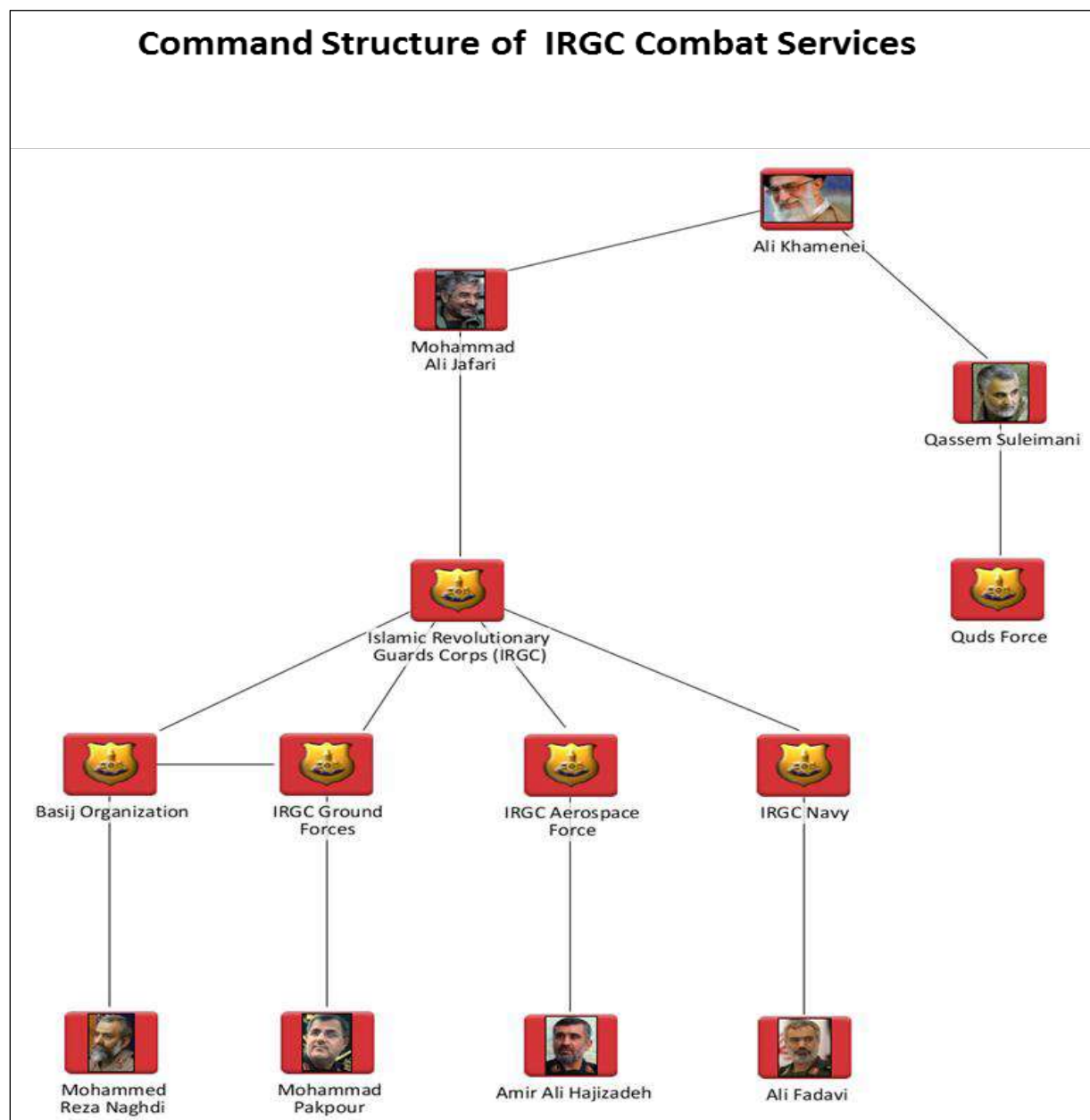
The IRGC is Iran's elite fighting force. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini ordered its formation in May 1979 primarily to secure the Islamic Revolution against internal and external threats, but also to export the revolution beyond Iran's borders.³ The task of exporting the revolution has generally fallen to the clandestine Qods Force, formally a subordinate body within the IRGC but in practice an independent organization. Its commander, Major General Qassem Soleimani, reports directly to the Supreme Leader, bypassing his nominal superior, IRGC Commander Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari (see Figure 3).⁴ The IRGC has naval (IRGC-N), air force (IRGC-AF), and ground force (IRGC-GF) components. These service divisions have historically adopted a defensive orientation focused on protecting Iranian territory and waters against invasion and suppressing internal dissent.⁵

The IRGC also controls the Basij paramilitary forces, which were created to provide mass mobilization manpower to help defend against the Iraqi invasion. Basij forces formed the "human waves" that IRGC commanders used to repel Saddam Hussein's forces during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The Basij today is organized into battalions and other formations to serve as a mobilization pool for the IRGC Ground Forces in times of national emergency.⁶ Basij forces also play critical roles in defending the regime against internal threats--they participated actively in the violent suppression of protests following the 2009 presidential elections, for example.⁷

Iran has a conventional military, known as the Artesh, with ground, air, and naval components. The Artesh is focused exclusively on defending Iranian territory, although its leaders have tried recently to carve out rhetorical space for the organization in defending and exporting the ideals of the Islamic Revolution as well. The Artesh has just announced, in fact, that it may send Special Forces units to both Iraq and Syria.⁸ The Artesh is larger than the conventional forces of the IRGC and has more numerous and often more advanced military hardware.⁹ But the IRGC has far more influence over Iranian national security policy and has been much more active both internally and externally since the revolution.

Both the IRGC and the Artesh are subordinate to several masters. They report to the Armed Forces General Staff, on which both organizations are represented, as well as to the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), on which the commanders of the IRGC and of the Artesh both sit. The Supreme Leader is the commander-in-chief for both forces, finally.

Figure 3



Note: Four of the IRGC's combat service commanders report directly to IRGC Commander Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari. Quds Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani, however, reports directly to the Supreme Leader.

The IRGC Ground Forces also oversee the Basij provincial forces. Jafari reports to the Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which coordinates national security policy for the country.

Source: AEP's Critical Threats Project

The Qods Force

Iran has deployed military force abroad to support its proxies under the direction of the Qods Force since the early years of the Islamic Republic. The Qods Force has evolved a sophisticated approach to creating proxy forces beyond its borders that are generally responsive to its commands but that establish and maintain considerable degrees of independence.¹⁰ Its support for and management of those proxies generally requires the presence of relatively few Qods Force officers and does not typically involve the deployment of members of the regular IRGC. This approach allows the proxies to establish themselves as credibly indigenous organizations that can play significant, sometimes dominant, roles in the political as well as security arenas of their countries. It also gives Iran a high degree of plausible deniability regarding the operations of those proxies. The downsides of this approach are that the proxies are not always responsive to Qods Force instructions and sometimes strike out on their own. The limited Qods Force presence can also constrain Iran's ability to train and organize the proxies to a high level of combat effectiveness. This approach has served Iran's interests superbly in Lebanon and well in Iraq, for example.¹¹ We will consider below some reasons why it failed in Syria after 2011.¹²

IRGC Ground Forces

IRGC Ground Force units were largely focused on population control and defense against ground invasions between 2007 and 2015, rather than on developing the capabilities to deploy and operate beyond Iran's borders.¹³ They restructured themselves in 2007 according to what they called the Mosaic Doctrine, which envisioned a "protracted and layered defense" in the event of an invasion.¹⁴ The Mosaic Doctrine reforms reorganized the IRGC's command and control structure into 32 separate commands—one for Tehran city and one for each of Iran's 31 provinces.¹⁵ The ultimate purpose of these reforms was to "strengthen unit cohesion at the local level and give commanders more latitude to respond to potential threats."¹⁶ They were meant to harden the IRGC's command and control structure against an air campaign aimed at decapitating the regime.¹⁷

The IRGC's ground forces are large by regional standards with estimates ranging between 100,000 - 125,000 men—larger than the regular Saudi army and about the same size as the Saudi National Guard—although these numbers should be taken only as approximations.¹⁸ These estimates also exclude the hundreds of thousands of Basij militia members who could be mustered in the event of an invasion. Russian analysts assert that the total size of the IRGC including Basijis who are part of organized auxiliary combat units is 480,000.¹⁹

The organization of the IRGC Ground Forces is complex.²⁰ They are organized into territorially-based commands corresponding with the provinces and even districts of the Iranian state, but they also maintain a structure of infantry and armored divisions (لشکر) and brigades (تیپ).²¹ The exact relationship between the territorial units and the traditionally-identified combat formations and units is unclear. The IRGC Ground Forces also include artillery and engineer units and an airborne brigade. The IRGC Ground Forces have recently announced efforts to form an air assault

(helicopter-borne) unit as well.²² These traditional combat formations and units form the basis of the IRGC's ability to project conventional military power beyond Iran's borders.

IRGC Special Forces

The IRGC Ground Forces have a significant Special Forces component, although not in a traditional Western sense. The closest approximation to American Special Forces in the IRGC Ground Forces is the Saber units. The Saber is an elite force that is highly trained in a number of specialized capabilities, including precision-shooting, mountain and maritime warfare, airborne operations, and demolition.²³ These units rotate to Iran's northwest and southeast provinces to conduct operations against Kurdish and Baloch separatists.²⁴ Some IRGC divisions and brigades have distinct Saber units subordinated to them.²⁵ The IRGC Navy has a limited number of maritime special operation units as well.

The IRGC has also designated certain divisions and brigades as "Special Forces," or *takavaran*. These units are organized like light infantry combat units and appear to be able to fight either as light infantry or as what the U.S. military would call "special mission units" like the 75th Ranger Regiment of the U.S. Army. Officers in these units generally seem to have the same qualifications as members of the Saber—airborne school, sometimes Iranian Ranger School, and so on. These *takavaran* units appear to operate interchangeably with other IRGC units of the same size in Syria, however, and so we will treat them as elite infantry units rather than attempting to equate them with Western Special Forces.²⁶

Iranian Military Support to Syria

The Islamic Republic has supported the Syrian regime, first of Hafez al Assad and then of his son, Bashar, since the early 1980s. That support has normally taken the form of money, equipment, and expertise, mainly delivered via the Qods Force. Iran's patronage of the Syrian regime can be traced to Tehran's regional strategy of deterrence against Israel and its Arab neighbors. Syria provides Iran with a valuable base from which to project influence and supply its proxies in the region, such as Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.^{vii} Iranian leaders constantly reiterate their belief that the survival of a friendly regime in Syria is essential for Iran's security.²⁷ Ali Akbar Velayati, long-time foreign affairs advisor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, told reporters that "Syria is the golden ring of resistance against Israel."²⁸ Supreme Leader Khamenei committed Iran to an expansive campaign to support Bashar al Assad after civil war broke out in March 2011 and has steadily deepened its involvement as conditions on the ground have deteriorated.²⁹

^{vii} HAMAS had relied on Damascus as its base of operations and headquarters for many years until the increasing sectarianization of the Syrian civil war persuaded its leaders that they had to separate themselves from Assad.

Limited Advisory Role, 2011-June 2014

Iran used various military resources to preserve the Syrian regime in the early years of the conflict. Qods Force operatives continued to assist Assad's forces, but the Iranian regime also sent officers of its Law Enforcement Forces (LEF--Iran's gendarmerie) in an advise-and-assist role.³⁰ Qods Force officers played a critical role in helping Assad form the National Defense Forces (NDF), a paramilitary organization similar to the Basij, and they also supported the deployment of Iraqi Shi'a militias to support Assad.³¹ Lebanese Hezbollah was involved in advising and training regime forces alongside Qods Force officers before entering a direct combat role in early 2013 with Iranian coordination.³² Iranian patronage proved critical in allowing Assad to maintain his grip over central and southern Syria during the initial years of the war.

The presence of non-Qods Force IRGC personnel was limited during these early years. Iran sent individuals whom it called "volunteers" to the fight.³³ The use of the term was likely intended to suggest that they were going to Syria on their own initiative and not as part of any organized program of military support.³⁴ The individuals were likely volunteers, but they were also part of a more deliberate effort. Many of them were reported to be retired IRGC Iran-Iraq War veterans, whose combat experience would likely have given them credibility with those whom they were advising.³⁵ These veterans are also highly-regarded and very influential within the IRGC. They formed a ready-made labor-pool for the IRGC's advisory mission and added luster to the idea of going to fight in Syria. They also allowed the regime to maintain greater plausible deniability about its support to Assad than would have been possible with the deployment of regular IRGC forces.

But senior, active duty IRGC Ground Forces commanders have also been present in the fight since at least the summer of 2012, when opposition forces kidnapped several of them.³⁶ These officers likely brought experience fighting counterinsurgents in Iran's border provinces, which would have been an important addition to Qods Force capabilities.³⁷ The Qods Force is highly skilled in asymmetric and irregular warfare, but mainly from the insurgent perspective. Its limited number of operatives are not as experienced in the counterinsurgency or conventional warfare techniques that Syrian regime forces most needed.³⁸ The IRGC may have hoped to remedy this deficiency with a small supplement of its own personnel. These senior commanders were likely providing operational and strategic support to their Syrian counterparts in operation rooms far from the frontlines, as they were not dying in significant numbers during the early years of the conflict.³⁹

Train, Advise, and Assist Mission, June 2014-September 2015

Iran escalated its involvement in Syria over the course of 2014 as Assad's fortunes on the battlefield waned. Reports from February 2014 suggested that anywhere from 60 to a few hundred Iranians drawn from both the Qods Force and the IRGC Ground Forces were in Syria.⁴⁰ The ISIS seizure of Mosul in June marked a major inflection in Iran's involvement in Syria, moreover. Thousands of Iraqi Shi'a militia members who were fighting on behalf of the Assad regime left to fight ISIS in their home country.⁴¹ Lebanese Hezbollah immediately responded with the mobilization and

deployment of roughly 1,000 fighters to Syria.⁴² Iran also moved to bolster pro-regime forces by expanding efforts begun in 2013 to recruit and train Afghans.⁴³ Iranian officers assumed a more active role in advising their Syrian counterparts, moreover, as conditions on the ground worsened. Several senior Iranian commanders, including an IRGC Ground Forces brigadier general, were killed near the frontlines in late 2014, suggesting that some Iranian advisors had shifted to operational control of regime forces in southern Syria and around Aleppo.⁴⁴

Assad's position had become even more tenuous by mid-2015. Pro-regime forces, low on morale and equipment, were unable to launch large-scale operations and instead ceded large sections of the country to the opposition. The crisis became so critical that the Syrian president was forced to acknowledge the manpower shortages facing his army during a July 2015 speech.⁴⁵ Senior IRGC members and Qods Force members continued to provide support for the Syrian regime. During the first nine months of 2015, one first lieutenant, one captain, three colonels, and three brigadier generals, were reported killed, at least one of whom was a Qods Force officer.⁴⁶

The Iranian effort in Syria through September 2015 resembled the kind of traditional train, advise, and assist (TAA) mission that the U.S. and its allies have undertaken in many countries. The high ranks and relatively small numbers of IRGC officer casualties in this period were consistent with that kind of mission. TAA missions generally rely heavily on more senior and experienced officers who have the skills and credibility to advise local unit commanders who have already been fighting for some time. Officers engaged in such missions are at risk both because the headquarters at which they live and serve periodically come under attack and because they often accompany the units they are assisting into combat. They take casualties, therefore, but generally not too many, since their job is not to fight or lead troops directly in combat, but rather to help commanders and staffs train and prepare troops and develop and execute plans.

Evidence suggests that Iran's TAA deployments tended to be very forward-leaning in this regard, however, sending IRGC personnel with small teams to the battlefield.⁴⁷ Reports from Syrian sources suggest, in fact, that the Iranians had taken control over the planning and conduct of operations by early 2015, sparking resentment among Syrian Arab Army officers and describing a pattern of activity consonant with the limited numbers and generally high-ranks of the Iranian casualties reported.⁴⁸ The pattern of casualties consistent with a TAA mission changed abruptly in October 2015, however, as pro-regime forces and IRGC elements began major and coherent counter-offensives.

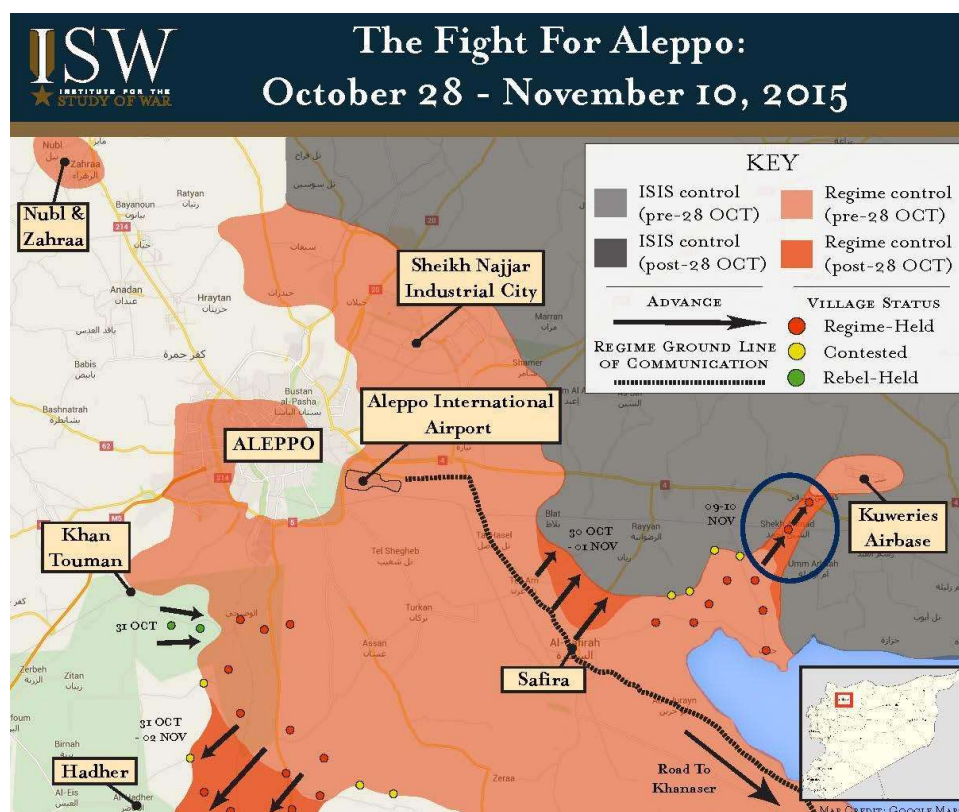
The IRGC in the Syrian Counter-Offensive, October 2015-February 2016

Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict transformed the battlefield situation and accompanied a major change in the nature of Iranian participation in the war. The start of the Russian air campaign was coordinated with both the Syrian regime and Iran. Qassem Soleimani himself was in Moscow at the end of July 2015 (about 10 days after the announcement of the nuclear deal), reportedly asking for Russian intervention and describing what the Russians could most usefully do.⁴⁹ Assuming that

he obtained Russian agreement to intervene at the meeting or shortly thereafter, the IRGC had about 10 weeks to get additional forces to their designated combat positions in time for the start of major counter-offensive operations.

Relief of Kuweires Airfield and Operations Southwest of Aleppo, October 15-November 13, 2016

Pro-regime operations in Aleppo Province began on September 30 with two weeks of Russian air attacks against opposition and ISIS targets throughout the province, presumably to attrit them and force them to go to ground. Pro-regime forces launched ground offensive operations south of Aleppo City on October 15. Iraqi Shi'a militias were heavily represented in those operations, and there were several reported sightings of Soleimani in that area.⁵⁰ Pro-regime forces simultaneously attacked northeast of Aleppo from their base near Safira in an effort to relieve the besieged Kuweires Airfield. The attackers advanced, but not without difficulty, and ISIS forces counter-attacked toward Safira at the end of October in an attempt to disrupt the operations. Pro-regime forces repelled that attack and continued their advances, assisted by heavy Russian air support, until they relieved Kuweires on November 10.



Source: Christopher Kozak, "Pro-Regime Forces Relieve Besieged Airbase in Symbolic Victory," Institute for the Study of War, November 10, 2015. Available: <http://understandingwar.org/background/pro-regime-forces-relieve-besieged-airbase-symbolic-victory>.

Iranian deaths escalated significantly in mid-October, corresponding with reports that an additional 1,500 Iranian troops had been deployed to Syria.⁵¹ Iranian officials began to acknowledge publicly that they were escalating their troop presence in Syria at about the same time. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif announced that Iran had “changed the nature of its presence” in Syria, although he insisted that this presence was only advisory.⁵² The increased death toll shows, however, that an increasing number of these troops were routinely engaged in direct fire-engagements with the enemy.

The casualty data indicates that the IRGC continued to maintain a notable presence of IRGC Saber personnel as well as Basijis likely drawn from Imam Hossein battalions (the more combat-ready elements of the Basij) in the first few weeks of the fight around Aleppo. It seems clear, however, that the IRGC committed actual combat forces to the frontlines, judging from the appearance of several junior officers in the casualty lists: four 1st lieutenants, four 2nd lieutenants, and one 3rd lieutenant, as well as two sergeants first class, a warrant officer, two captains, and a major.⁵³ Only one colonel appears on the casualty rolls in the last half of October.⁵⁴

The casualty lists from this period are also noteworthy because of the appearance of individuals from identified IRGC divisions and brigades with much more regularity than earlier lists had shown. Four of the lieutenants who were killed hailed from the 8th Najaf-e Ashraf Armored Division based in Esfahan.⁵⁵ The 33rd al Mahdi Airborne Brigade from Fars Province lost a 2nd lieutenant and a warrant officer.⁵⁶ Multiple deaths from a single unit in a short period of time suggest that an element of that unit was deployed to the frontlines. This pattern of multiple losses from a single unit in a very short period was a new phenomenon, as casualties had previously been distributed individually among various units. This pattern appears to reveal a change from a more ad hoc approach of selecting individuals from across Iran as part of training teams that had characterized the support mission before the Russian air offensive began.

The casualties are nevertheless spread among a number of brigades rather than concentrated in two or three. It is possible, therefore, that the IRGC managed to get elements from several brigades to the frontlines, but probably not whole battalion cadres.^{viii} The limited time to prepare and deploy forces may have caused this piecemeal allocation of forces. It is also possible that the IRGC command was still feeling its way into the fight, considering the best way to contribute on the one hand, while also trying to determine what level of unit deployment it could get away with and still maintain the façade of a purely advisory mission.

The data does not support firm conclusions about where in Aleppo Province the IRGC forces were concentrated or even if they were concentrated during these first weeks of fighting. When the location of death is given at all, it is simply “in the suburbs of Aleppo,” without any further specification.⁵⁷ It is tempting to locate them on the southern front, where Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias were positioned and where a few casualties were specifically located in

^{viii} We will consider below precisely what kind of combat formations the IRGC ultimately sent.

Iranian reporting.⁵⁸ They also could have been supporting offensives to relieve Kuweiris airbase. It is likely that IRGC elements participated in both operations, at least to some extent. In any case, casualties surged over this period until the relief of Kuweiris on November 10 and the seizures of al Eis and Hadher towns on November 12 and 13.

Iranian casualties in October and November belonged to a mix of IRGC special forces units and general purpose units, including the 8th Najaf-e Ashraf Armored Division, the 7th Vali-ye Asr Division, the 33rd al Mahdi Airborne Brigade as well as the 21st Imam Reza Independent Armored Brigade. Two of the casualties were from an artillery unit from Esfahan Province (whence the 8th Najaf-e Ashraf Division hails) and a combat engineering unit from Hamedan.⁵⁹ Two more artillerymen were reported killed on November 17th, one from Fars Province and one from Kermanshah, suggesting that the IRGC had sent forward individuals from various specialized combat units rather than sending teams from one or two units.⁶⁰

Iranian news outlets meanwhile initiated an extensive campaign to rally public support behind the regime's escalating involvement in Syria. Reporters began to describe the pro-regime forces' efforts around Aleppo as "Operation Muharram" in an attempt to link Iran's activities in Syria with the martyrdom of the third Shi'a Imam in the 7th century battle of Karbala.⁶¹ Iranian newspapers flooded their pages with stories of heroic battles in Syria, funerals of brave martyrs, and statements from friends and family members praising troops killed in Syria. Reporters were also more open in discussing the military backgrounds of those killed in Syria, although they remained reluctant to identify unit affiliations openly. What was once a sensitive topic in the Iranian press had become a major propaganda effort by the regime to glorify its involvement in the Syrian conflict.

IRGC casualties were much lighter during the second half of November, when pro-regime forces were in a consolidation phase east of Aleppo. This period also saw reports from various anonymous regional, U.S., and European officials that the IRGC was withdrawing troops from Syria.⁶² The reports offered various possible reasons, including strains on the IRGC's resources, heavy casualties, and inaccurate rumors that Soleimani himself had been badly injured or even killed near Aleppo in late November. It is more likely that the IRGC was rotating and repositioning its units, however, for casualties began to pick up again in early December, this time with a new pattern.

Operations South and East of Aleppo, December 2015-January 2016

The second phase of operations began after a roughly two-week respite in early December and focused on expanding the areas controlled by pro-regime forces south of Aleppo. This phase had the more limited aim of seizing Khan Touman, one of the last remaining strongholds in the countryside south of Aleppo city. The IRGC reported 33 deaths among officers ranging from 2nd lieutenant to brigadier general in December. This time, the casualties were concentrated in three units: the 7th Vali-ye Asr, 14th Imam Hossein, and 25th Karbala divisions. Casualty reporting data and other materials identify elements from the 2nd Imam Mojtaba Brigade of the 7th Vali-ye Asr Division fighting in this offensive.⁶³ Troops from the Imam Mojtaba Brigade in Syria were reportedly

operating under the brigade's commander, Colonel Mehdi Rafighdust.⁶⁴ An image of the soldiers from the brigade leaving Syria published on December 31 and the fact that its last casualty was reported on December 24 indicates that that brigade left Syria sometime at the end of December.⁶⁵ And on January 13, Colonel Mehdi Rafighdust was giving a speech in Khuzestan praising the service of the casualties from the brigade.⁶⁶

Pro-regime operations continued in January with advances toward al Bab and efforts to close the pocket east of Safira, but it appears that the IRGC combat formations did not play as active a role as they had in previous operations. There were, in any event, relatively few IRGC casualties: only eight from the IRGC Ground Forces and one from the IRGC Navy. In addition to pro-regime forces' efforts toward al Bab and Safira, other pro-regime forces conducted significant offensive operations in Latakia Province as well. The IRGC Ground Forces elements do not appear to have participated actively in these operations, quite possibly because they were recuperating and rotating units. The Afghan militias, by contrast, took heavy casualties that month—16 in all.⁶⁷ The time-differential between Afghan militia casualties and IRGC casualties strongly suggests that IRGC-Ground Forces personnel were not commanding or advising the Afghan militias and that they were probably in different areas of the battlefield.



Note: Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani (foreground) on the frontlines in Syria with at least two other Iranians. The Iranian in the middle is communicating in Persian-Farsi likely with other IRGC elements further ahead on the battlefield. This video was reportedly taken on December 19 near Aleppo.

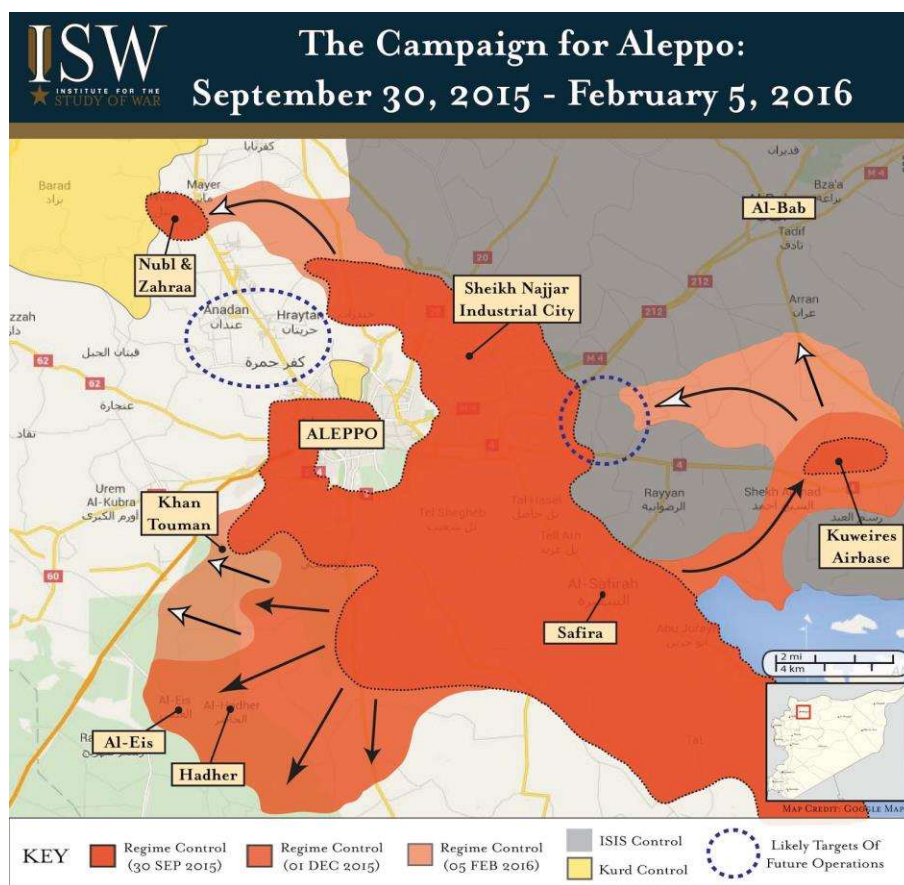
Source: "holydefense," Instagram post, December 21, 2015. Available in Persian:
https://www.instagram.com/p/_cnEjjPJiF/?taken-by=holydefense

Relief of Zahra and Nubl, February 2016

The third phase of operations began on February 1 with the start of a major offensive operation to break the rebel siege of Nubl and Zahra. Shia communities in those towns were adjacent to

Kurdish-held territory, and their relief created contiguous zones of regime and Kurdish control that severed the opposition's direct line of communication from Aleppo City north to Turkey. It set conditions, in fact, for the complete encirclement of Aleppo City, although the operation culminated, apparently as planned, without cutting the line of communication from Aleppo City west to Idlib Province and thence to Turkey.⁶⁸ Fighting in the February operation was very intense and the IRGC took heavy casualties.

Iranian media announced the deaths of 40 IRGC members in the first two weeks of February including five brigadier generals, five colonels, one lieutenant colonel, one major, one or two captains, and five lieutenants.⁶⁹ Iranian news outlets claimed that the great majority of these casualties occurred during the liberation of Zahra and Nubl. The casualties were again heavily concentrated in a small number of units: The 2nd Imam Sajjad Brigade based in Fars Province lost 10; the 1st Hazrat-e Hojjat Brigade from Khuzestan lost at least five; the 17th Ali bin Abi Taleb Division out of Qom lost six; and the 21st Imam Reza Independent Armored Brigade lost two, one of whom was its commander, a brigadier general.⁷⁰



Source: Christopher Kozak, "Assad Regime Gains in Aleppo Alter Balance of Power in Northern Syria," Institute for the Study of War, February 5, 2016. Available: <http://understandingwar.org/background/assad-regime-gains-aleppo-alter-balance-power-northern-syria>

As before, IRGC casualties dropped off dramatically once the major combat operations in Aleppo stopped, with only two announcements of IRGC deaths in the second half of February. And, as before, deaths among the Afghan and Pakistani militias picked up as IRGC casualties dropped: 17 members of those militias were reported killed in the five days between February 14 and February 18.⁷¹

In late February, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and media sources again announced that the IRGC was withdrawing all of its combat troops from Syria.⁷² It is possible that these reports are true. The “cessation of hostilities” may limit (or signal the pro-regime forces’ intention to limit) operations in Aleppo Province despite the fact that the Russians and the pro-regime coalition define all of the opposition forces in that province as fair game for continued attacks even during the ceasefire due to the presence of Syrian al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra. It is at least equally possible, however, that this “withdrawal,” like the last one, is simply part of a rotation of units that will see additional IRGC combat forces return to Syria to support the next major pro-regime offensive. IRGC casualty reports have begun to reappear in mid-March as the pro-regime forces launch operations against ISIS-held Palmyra.⁷³

The IRGC’s Evolving Model for Expeditionary Operations

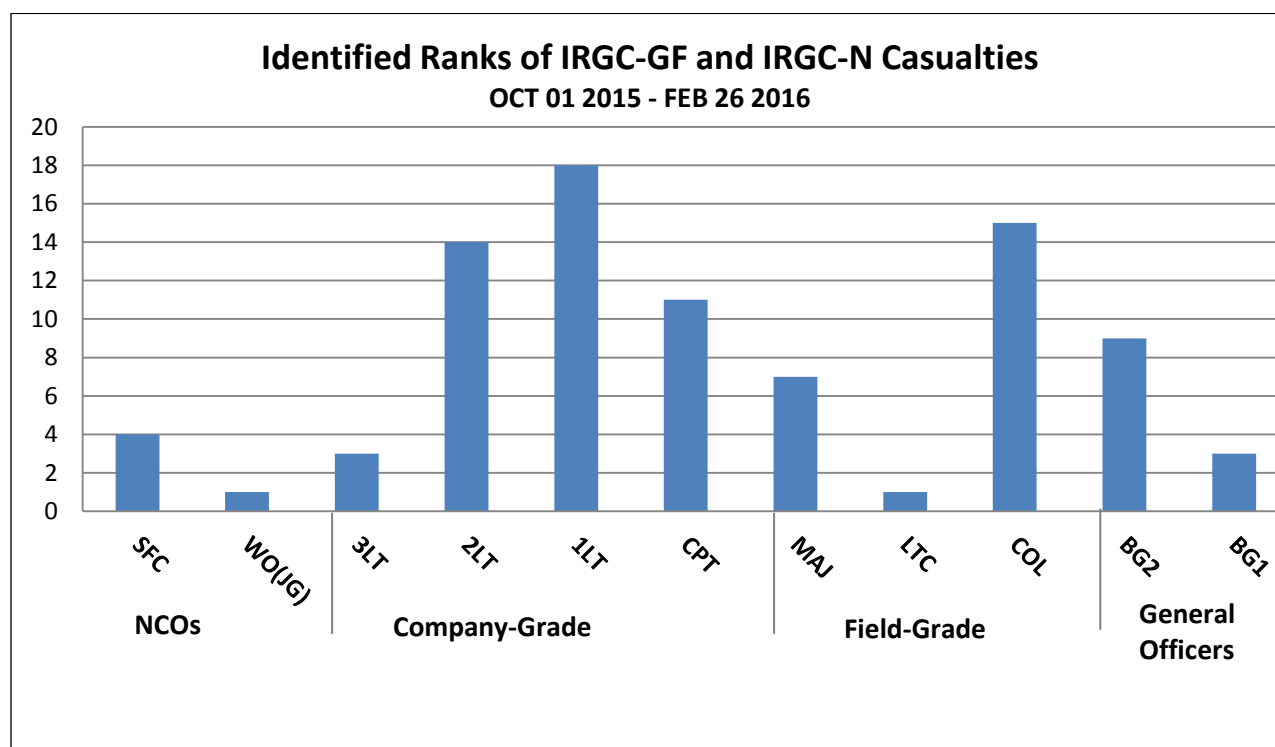
The observed pattern of ranks and unit affiliations among IRGC casualties offers partial insight into the changing nature of Iranian military support to the Assad regime. We hypothesize that the IRGC has developed a new model of expeditionary deployment. All or most of the officer complement of an IRGC brigade or battalion, along with a limited cadre of enlisted personnel and Basij members, link up on or near the battlefield with some combination of the various militias already present and lead them into battle. The IRGC units appear to remain in theater for a couple of months and then redeploy to Iran, sometimes to be replaced by fresh units. The IRGC seems to keep two or three such units in Syria at any given time. This hypothesis or some other is necessary to explain the pattern of ranks and unit affiliations among the reported IRGC casualties.

The pattern in which IRGC casualties divide among ranks and units between October 2015 and February 2016 does not make immediate sense. The concentration of losses in a small number of units suggests that units rather than individuals were being deployed. The large number of very junior officers killed during bursts of intense combat operations suggests that those officers were leading soldiers in close fighting. One explanation could be that the IRGC deployed several general purpose battalions to Syria in October and rotated fresh battalions through the theater until at least mid-February. The data does not corroborate this explanation, however.

If whole battalions were deployed and fighting, then the bulk of the casualties would have been among privates and non-commissioned officers (NCOs). IRGC officers pride themselves on leading from the front, to be sure, which could explain a higher-than-normal proportion of officer casualties. But officers accounted for 80 of 132 casualties among the IRGC Ground Forces and

IRGC Navy between October 2015 and February 2016, or 60 percent (Figure 4). We have identified four sergeants first class and one junior warrant officer among the remaining dead, and it is possible that many of the other 47 casualties were also enlisted personnel. But no normal fighting force with a full complement of all ranks takes 60 percent of its casualties among its officers, however much they lead from the front.

Figure 4



Note: The assessed ranks of 85 of the 127 IRGC Ground Forces (IRGC-GF) and five IRGC Navy (IRGC-N) casualties are plotted above. The ranks of the remaining 47 IRGC-GF and IRGC-N casualties could not be assessed with high confidence.^{ix}

Source: AEP's Critical Threats Project

^{ix} We assess with high confidence that many of the casualties whose ranks could not be ascertained were likely company-grade and non-commissioned officers for several reasons. First, senior officers are more likely to be identified by rank in media announcements. Second, commemorative pictures usually only include the head and shoulders of the deceased, which facilitates identifying officer rank insignia that are displayed on epaulettes. Enlisted ranks in the IRGC are denoted by shoulder-sleeve insignia that would not be visible in these pictures, however. This sampling bias means that there are likely far more junior officers among the reported casualties than can be assessed, adding weight to the idea that battalion-level cadres were deployed to serve as command-and-control elements for a diverse set of pro-regime fighters on the ground. That so many of them were killed suggests that they were leading those troops in combat. Indeed, many of these individuals were reportedly killed in direct-fire engagements presumably on the frontlines, rather than by artillery fire or mine-blasts as described in earlier casualty disclosures from before the October offensive. High-ranking officers represented in the data were likely participating in the train, advise, and assist effort for regime forces.

The design of the IRGC as a fighting force may offer another part of the explanation. Elements of the IRGC Ground Forces were built to serve as a cadre around which the Iranian nation would be mobilized, primarily via the Basij.⁷⁴ Some IRGC formations are kept at partial strength in peacetime with the expectation that Basij mobilization will fill them out when they go to war.⁷⁵ The Basij is organized to support this cadre-and-reserve model, as part of it is formed into Imam Hossein battalions that are commanded and directed by IRGC officers.⁷⁶ Casualty reporting reveals that some of the IRGC officers lost in Syria were, in fact, commanding Imam Hossein battalions.⁷⁷

The data does not support the conclusion that the mobilized Imam Hossein battalions were serving as the primary combat forces for the IRGC officers in Syria, however. Were that the case, we would expect to see large numbers of Basij casualties, whereas there are only 24. It is possible that we are simply not seeing reports of deaths and burials of enlisted personnel because of their low rank, but that explanation is unlikely. Iran's revolutionary culture and the regime's constant emphasis on the virtues of martyrs make every death in combat an occasion to be both mourned and celebrated. Both revolutionary and religious values militate strongly against discriminating between the sacrifices of the dead based on rank. More senior officers certainly command more attention and coverage in the press when they die, but junior lieutenants' death announcements and funerals are also regularly reported. Failing to report the deaths and funerals of enlisted personnel would look like class discrimination. It is possible, but extremely unlikely, that the deaths of hundreds of IRGC enlisted personnel and/or Basijis have gone unmentioned.^x

By far the likeliest explanation, therefore, is that the IRGC has deployed officers and a limited enlisted cadre to plug into the amalgam of Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'a militias, and Syrian National Defense Forces, which together have provided the bulk of the foot-soldiers. The IRGC appears to be rotating these cadres through Syria on tours of roughly two months at a time.

Divining the purpose of such a pattern of operations can only be conjectural, but it offers several obvious advantages. Developing and executing complex offensive operations with a conglomeration of militias from different countries all operating under their own chains of command is extremely challenging. U.S. forces found it hard enough to accomplish this task with professional NATO militaries in Iraq and Afghanistan. Implanting IRGC command, staff, and cadre into such an amalgam of militias would give it a much greater semblance of cohesion and could even give it unity of command, assuming that the militias were prepared to accept the command of the IRGC officers.

The professionalism of the IRGC officers would offer another important advantage that militia forces probably lack, namely the education and training to design and execute operations above the tactical level. Iraqi Shi'a militias and Syrian National Defense Forces have fought hard over many years—but they have not generally designed the operations in which they participated. Iraqi militias have generally fallen in on plans designed by Iraqi Security Forces with the assistance of American

^x If IRGC officer casualties comprised 20% of all IRGC/Basij casualties, which would still be a very high proportion, then some 360 Basij deaths would have gone unreported and unremarked-upon in post-deployment speeches and commemorations.

and other international advisers. On the rare occasions when those militias tried to go it alone—such as in Tikrit in March 2015 --they failed and required rescuing by more professional forces.⁷⁸ The National Defense Forces have been foot soldiers and sometimes cannon fodder, but have never been in charge of the fighting.

Lebanese Hezbollah does have experience planning and fighting its own wars, as it did with considerable success against Israel on multiple occasions and most recently in 2006. But those operations were defensive in nature and conducted on Hezbollah's home ground. Nothing in that organization's experience would have prepared it to design and conduct large-scale clearing operations against dug-in irregular forces on foreign soil. The IRGC does not have recent experience in such operations either, of course, but it does benefit from multiple advanced officer training schools and a general staff academy that studies many aspects of modern warfare. The IRGC is obsessed with the study of the Iran-Iraq War, moreover, in which its officers routinely planned and executed very large-scale conventional military operations. Its senior-most officers such as Jafari and IRGC Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi participated in both the planning and the conduct of such operations.⁷⁹ It is very likely that IRGC officers would bring the distinct set of capabilities to the battlefield required to explain the on-the-ground success of pro-regime counter-offensive operations.

The Russian air offensive, on the other hand, is insufficient to explain that success. Attempts to offset numerical, technical, or skill deficiencies of ground forces with airpower have repeatedly failed in Syria and elsewhere. The Syrian regime's own attempts to use tools of both precise and area bombardment to smooth the way for its troops did not prevent rebels from repelling regime offensives in 2014 and 2015. And the Russians have brought mass more than precision to the air campaign, rhetoric notwithstanding. Most of the Russian attacks have been conducted with "dumb" bombs rather than precision munitions.⁸⁰

The real evidence that the Russians did not simply bomb the opposition into retreat, however, lies in the extreme lethality of on-the-ground fighting. IRGC casualties alone tell the story of a tough battle against a determined enemy that remained combat-capable and highly lethal despite Russian air attack. Video and other anecdotes from Iranian, Syrian, and even Russian sources corroborate that fact.⁸¹ Russian air support was essential, but not sufficient. Something must have changed on the ground to explain the remarkably smooth and decisive operations in this period that contrast so sharply with previous regime offensives. We assess that Iranian brigade and battalion cadres were the key difference.

Expeditionary Operations with the Axis of Resistance Coalition

The method of deploying IRGC unit cadres to combat hypothesized above is much more difficult to execute in most respects than deploying entire units would have been. It is easier only from the standpoint of logistics—moving the few hundred officers and select NCOs and enlisted personnel of the cadre units requires less airlift, ground transportation, and supply than moving the thousands

of troops in a brigade. But implanting part of a unit's command, staff, and cadre in an amalgam of local forces with which it has never trained and whom it does not know is an extraordinarily complex and risky undertaking. It is nearly certain to generate more casualties than deploying an entire unit would. We must consider, therefore, why the IRGC would choose this method of operations.

Permanent combat units have many advantages over ad hoc formations. Their members are trained to a single doctrine. They know each other, usually for years. They practice their skills at all levels from basic marksmanship to tactical maneuver together. They know how other members of the unit will react in given circumstances. They trust one another. These are some of the many reasons why professional militaries are more combat-effective than conscript forces, and why most of the world's major armies have moved to a professional construct despite its greater cost per soldier.

IRGC personnel implanting themselves into conglomerates of Iraqi militias, Syrian National Defense Forces, and even Lebanese Hezbollah fighters have none of these advantages. The militias and the NDF likely have little doctrine in any technical sense, and Hezbollah doctrine is likely different from that of IRGC Ground Forces. The individuals involved are unlikely to know each other, trust each other, or ever to have trained together. Friction and confusion in such an amalgamation is much higher than in a permanent unit—and those two factors lead to casualties on the battlefield. This method of expeditionary operations also restricts the IRGC to theaters in which available ground troops in the form of such militias or Hezbollah are already present. At present only Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and possibly Gaza fall into that category.^{xi} The IRGC could not reasonably expect to use this model in Afghanistan, for example, despite the growing numbers of Afghan troops it has brought to Syria and the long relationship it has with Hazara (Shi'a) population in Afghanistan.^{xii}

The applicability of this model to Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen is not accidental, however, for Iranian allies and proxies in those areas form a coherent group that Iran's leadership calls the "Axis of Resistance." The concept of "resistance" is a central pillar of Iranian strategic thought. It is also vital to Lebanese Hezbollah's self-definition.⁸² It generally refers to resistance against Israel and its Western allies, although it can also suggest resistance against any neo-colonial powers (as Iran sees them) supporting a world order that the regime sees as unjust and exploitative.⁸³ The "Axis of

^{xi} There is no measurable likelihood that the IRGC would try to send forces to Gaza, still less that the Israeli Defense Forces would ever allow it to happen. Gaza is included only for completeness, since HAMAS, in principle, has ground forces into which IRGC cadres could theoretically be implanted. We do not now have any basis to assess that the IRGC has plans to send such cadre forces to any theater other than Syria, moreover.

^{xii} The Afghans fighting in Syria are largely drawn from refugees and migrant workers in Iran, rather than from on-the-ground militias in Afghanistan. The Hazara community in Afghanistan has not yet remobilized the militia forces it had used in the wars with the Soviets and during the warlord and Taliban periods there. Those militias respond to Hazara political leaders (warlords) in Afghanistan, moreover, who are not reliable Iranian proxies. The IRGC would likely require considerable time and effort to create conditions in Afghanistan to support the kind of expeditionary-cadre deployment it is using in Syria.

Resistance” is more than a theoretical construct, however. Iranian officials have acknowledged an extensive and expanding campaign to support its state and non-state allies within this framework. Iranian support relies on replicating the Lebanese Hezbollah model of a well-trained and –equipped popular militia that has political power and provides services to the local population in order to cement their support for it.⁸⁴ IRGC officials often equate such militias to the Basij, which they also see as a combat-effective popular militia enjoying widespread support.⁸⁵ IRGC Brigadier General Hossein Hamedani was sent to Syria earlier in the war, in fact, to help Assad create “popular resistance forces” on this model.⁸⁶ The implantation of elements from the IRGC Ground Forces into such structures in Syria is thus less surprising when we consider that the IRGC Ground Forces were built to operate in precisely that manner with the Basij in Iran.

The expeditionary model we have hypothesized reflects the next natural evolution of Iran’s military activities within the “Axis of Resistance.” It would allow the IRGC selectively to weight its regional efforts by deploying relatively low numbers of its own troops to provide exponential increases in the combat capabilities of its proxies at critical moments. The low numbers and covert nature of the deployment of those IRGC troops are presumably meant to maintain plausible deniability and allow Tehran to manage conflict escalation while still giving its allies and proxies major military advantages over their adversaries. The strategic advantages of such an approach may well outweigh its tactical disadvantages in the calculations of the IRGC and the Iranian regime writ large.

The IRGC’s Expeditionary Forces

The significance of the cadre-expeditionary model hypothesized above depends in part on how many IRGC units have been used in this manner. If only a small number of elite units deploy to fight with rather than train and advise militias, that would suggest that the IRGC command is not currently planning to develop this capability on a large scale. The more units from regular IRGC formations that participate in this expeditionary effort, however, the more it would appear that the IRGC is preparing to field a significant expeditionary capability of this variety. The data does not yet support firm assessments about this issue, but it does suggest that the IRGC is contemplating more than a small and elite capacity.

Unit Breakdown

Iranian media has identified the casualties reported since October 2015 as belonging to over 19 IRGC Ground Forces divisions, independent brigades, and combat support groups (Table 1). The casualties reported from the 8th Najaf Ashraf Armored Division and the 21st Independent Armored Brigade are particularly noteworthy. Their knowledge of armored tactics and Soviet-era equipment was likely invaluable to pro-regime forces, such as the SAA 4th Mechanized Division, which participated in the offensives south of Aleppo alongside Hezbollah fighters.⁸⁷ Indeed, the Iranian tank park for the 8th Najaf Ashraf includes the same systems that Syrian armored forces use.⁸⁸ The

specialized troops from the combat support groups would be part of a normal TAA package to help improve the functioning of critical combat enablers on the battlefield.

The IRGC Ground Forces also deployed members of their elite Saber units to the battlefield; at least 10 Saber members were killed in Syria between October 2015 and February 2016 from at least five different Saber units. The IRGC also drew upon its elite IRGC Navy special forces (S.N.S.F) to dispatch to Syria, probably in order to supplement the limited manpower offered by Saber deployments. It is possible that these elite units provided combat support for embedded pro-regime formations, although it is equally likely that they operated independently to stage high-risk operations against rebel forces.

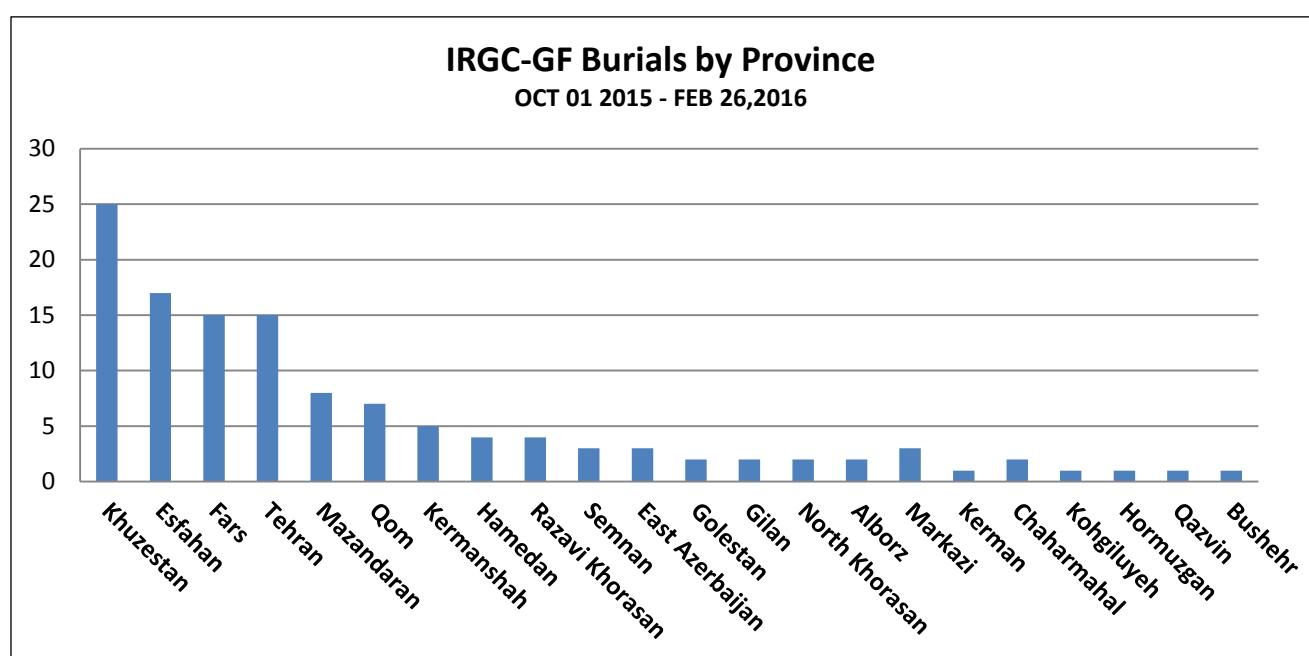
Table 1

IRGC-GF Combat Divisions	Province
10th Seyyed al Shohada Division	Alborz
14th Imam Hossein Division	Esfahan
16th Qods Division	Gilan
25th Karbala Division	Mazandaran
17th Ali bin Abi Taleb Division	Qom
7th Vali-ye Asr Division	Khuzestan
8th Najaf Ashraf Armored Division	Esfahan
19th Fajr Division ⁸⁹	Fars
21st Imam Reza Independent Armored Brigade	Razavi Khorasan
Mohammad Rasoul Allah Unit	Tehran
32nd Ansar al-Hossein Brigade	Hamedan
82nd Saheb al-Amr Brigade	Qazvin
71st Rouh-Allah Brigade	Markazi
12th Ghaem Independent Brigade	Semnan
14th Imam Sadeqh Brigade	Bushehr
IRGC-GF Combat Support Groups	
15 Khordad Artillery, Missile, and Air Defense Group	Esfahan
45th Javad al-Aemeh Engineering Group	Golestan
56th Younis Artillery Group	Fars
62 Muminun Artillery Group	Kermanshah

The graph in Figure 5 plots the burial locations of 124 IRGC-GF casualties across 23 provinces. The burial locations for three IRGC-GF casualties could not be determined by the publication date, presumably because their bodies have been lost and have not been returned to Iran. IRGC-GF casualties appear generally to be buried in their home province co-located with their unit. The majority of casualties were buried in four provinces: Khuzestan, Esfahan, Fars, and Tehran. This distribution of data suggests that the IRGC-GF elements from these provinces were heavily represented on the frontlines. This supports the unit affiliations identified by other means and it makes sense in another way as well. Khuzestan is home to Iran's largest concentration of Arabic-

speakers, and IRGC individuals from that province could possess a linguistic advantage on the Syrian battlefield.⁹⁰ The degree to which units under the Vali-ye Asr Division are locally-recruited and, if they are, consist predominantly of Arabic-speakers, is unclear. Anecdotal evidence shows that some IRGC personnel in Syria do speak Arabic.⁹¹ It is therefore possible that these units deployed with all or most of their complement of officers but only with those of their enlisted personnel who speak Arabic. The IRGC division in Khuzestan, 7th Vali-ye Asr, is likely one of the IRGC-GF's most elite combat elements, moreover, as it would be the front-line fighting force in the event of an invasion from Iraq.

Figure 5



Source: AEI's Critical Threats Project

Esfahan is home to two IRGC-GF divisions, the 8th Najaf Ashraf Armored Division and the 14th Imam Hossein Division, which give the IRGC-GF a huge manpower reserve in that province. Fars Province is home to the 2nd Imam Sajjad Brigade, which took very heavy casualties during the February offensive. Tehran Province has the elite Mohammad Rasoul Allah Corps, which is responsible for ensuring security in the capital. Mazandaran and Qom provinces experienced a moderate amount of casualties that were reported at the same time, indicating that elements from IRGC units based in those provinces were deployed and took casualties together. The remaining 18 provinces account for very few casualties; this suggests that some of the IRGC elements from those provinces were likely more senior and relegated to non-combat support or training missions far from the front lines.

Data about the ranks and dates of the regular IRGC Ground Forces casualties suggests that at least six different units have been used in an expeditionary-cadre role (Table 2): the 1st Hazrat-e Hojjat and 2nd Imam Mojtaba Brigades likely of the 7th Vali-ye Asr Division (Khuzestan), the 2nd Imam Sajjad Brigade likely of the 19th Fajr Division (Fars), the 14th Imam Hossein (Esfahan), 17th Ali bin Abi Taleb (Qom), and 8th Najaf-e Ashraf Armored Divisions (Esfahan). The 21st Imam Reza Independent Armored Brigade (Razavi Khorasan) may also have been used in this role, although it took too few casualties to support a firm assessment.

Table 2

2 nd Imam Sajjad Brigade			21 st Independent Armored Brigade		
Date	Rank	Location	Date	Rank	Location
1/6/16	UNK	Not Specified	11/7/15	CPT	Not Specified
2/5/16	2LT	Zahra and Nubl	2/3/16	BG2	Not Specified
2/5/16	2LT	Zahra and Nubl	2/5/16	CPT	Zahra and Nubl
2/7/16	2LT	Zahra and Nubl			
2/5/16	COL	Zahra and Nubl			
2/7/16	COL	Zahra and Nubl			
2/7/16	CPT	Zahra and Nubl			
2/7/16	UNK	Zahra and Nubl			
2/7/16	UNK	Zahra and Nubl			
2/7/16	UNK	Zahra and Nubl			
2/7/16	UNK	Zahra and Nubl			
1 st Hazrat -e Hojjat Brigade			14 th Imam Hossein Division		
Date	Rank	Location	Date	Rank	Location
10/13/15	BG1	Not Specified	10/18/15	COL	Not Specified
10/24/15	3LT	Not Specified	11/27/15	BG2	Not Specified
2/2/16	COL	Zahra and Nubl	12/10/15	2LT	Not Specified
2/2/16	UNK	Zahra and Nubl	12/10/15	CPT	Not Specified
2/2/16	UNK	Zahra and Nubl	12/10/15	CPT	Not Specified
2/2/16	UNK	Zahra and Nubl	12/10/15	MAJ	Not Specified
			12/22/15	MAJ	Not Specified
			12/22/15	1LT	Not Specified
			12/23/15	1LT	Not Specified
			2/8/16	BG2	Not Specified
2 nd Imam Mojtaba Brigade			8 th Najaf-e Ashraf Division		
Date	Rank	Location	Date	Rank	Location
12/24/15	COL	Not Specified	10/19/15	1LT	Not Specified
12/4/15	CPT	Not Specified	10/19/15	2LT	Not Specified
12/9/15	SFC	Not Specified	10/26/15	2LT	Not Specified
12/2/15	UNK	Not Specified	10/26/15	2LT	Not Specified
12/4/15	UNK	Not Specified	11/16/15	2LT	Not Specified
12/13/15	UNK	Not Specified	11/7/15	MAJ	Not Specified
2/5/16	UNK	Zahra and Nubl			
			17 th Ali bin Abi Taleb Division		
Date	Rank	Location	Date	Rank	Location
			10/19/15	1LT	Not Specified
			2/4/16	Lt. Col.	Zahra and Nubl
			2/4/16	UNK	Zahra and Nubl

2/5/16	UNK (Supreme Leader's Rep.)	Zahra and Nubl	2/6/16	UNK	Not Specified
2/5/16	UNK	Zahra and Nubl	2/7/16	1LT	Not Specified

The relative distribution of ranks among these units provides valuable clues to how these cadre elements were deployed on the battlefield. For example, the junior-ranked casualties from the Imam Sajjad Brigade, the Imam Mojtaba Brigade, and the Hazrat-e Hojjat Brigade indicate that the elements from these units were probably engaged in actual combat operations, especially if one assumes that the individuals whose rank could not be determined were likely junior officers or enlisted personnel (as a few of them appear to be, based on their age). In contrast, a higher proportion of mid-level and senior-ranked individuals among casualties from the 14th Imam Hossein Division and the 21st Independent Brigade suggest that elements from these units were embedded at a relatively higher echelon of command, although they may have provided fighting cadre as well.

Iranians in Combat in Syria

There can be little question that elements of some of these IRGC units were engaged in actual combat rather than training. Pictures circulated on social media sites show body-armor-wearing Iranian fighters toting light-machine guns, and assault rifles in Syria, occasionally gathered in large groups. A handful of comments by Iranian commanders and soldiers also hint at the IRGC's combat operations in Syria.⁹² One IRGC brigadier general noted at the funeral for casualties from the 2nd Imam Mojtaba Brigade that he personally witnessed soldiers from the brigade and its "armored unit" play a decisive role in what appears to have been an operation clearing rebel forces from a key section of the Aleppo-Damascus highway:

The Imam Hossein Mojtaba (PBUH) Special Forces^{xiii} Brigade of Khuzestan under the authority of IRGC commander Hajji Mehdi Rafighdust and his armored unit^{xiv} over the course of unprecedented and unexpected operations created such an epic that a lesson-teaching terror fell amongst the *takfiri* enemy.... In these unprecedented and brave operations, the men of the Khuzestan special forces brigade in an action with little precedent slaughtered hundreds of key members of ISIS and al Nusra and it caused the flight of thousands of *takfiri* forces from the area so that after its liberation, a sea of blood flowed through this area...After this important operation four villages and one key town were free of

^{xiii} This brigade likely of the 7th Vali-ye Asr Division in Khuzestan is often designated as a "special forces" or "commando" unit, even though it appears to be organized and equipped like regular infantry units. See above, p. 10, for a discussion of how the IRGC identifies special forces elements.

^{xiv} Russian analysts assess that infantry units in the IRGC have small armored elements as well. See The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps of the Armed Forces of Iran (2013), Captain 2nd Rank A. Koshkin, *Foreign Military Review*, 2013, No. 9, pp. 8-14 ["Корпус стражей исламской революции Вооруженных сил ирана (2013)," А. Кошкин, *Зарубежное военное обозрение*.]

takfiris and further the most fundamental point on the sensitive Aleppo-Damascus highway that was in control of the terrorists was retaken after this unprecedented operation.⁹³

This is hardly language one would use to describe any sort of purely advisory mission, even one that was as forward-leaning as Iran's TAA deployments to Syria earlier in the conflict. The brigade appears to have suffered six casualties during this operation. The sheer number of casualties during the Zahra and Nubl offensive indicates that IRGC cadre elements were also likely heavily represented in these operations. One video taken before this offensive shows around forty Iranian troops rallying before the fight, chanting in Farsi, and carrying light-machine weapons, sniper rifles, assault-rifles, and even rocket-propelled grenades.⁹⁴ Some of the individuals identified in the film belonged to the 1st Hazrat-e Hojjat Brigade, which took losses during the Zahra and Nubl fight.⁹⁵ At least one individual, however, was identified as a member of a Basij unit based in Khuzestan. This anecdotal evidence suggests that at least some of the Basij organization members served in combat positions on the frontlines in order to support IRGC cadre deployments. It is likely that at least some of the other Iranian "volunteers" who were reported among the casualties were also engaged in direct combat.⁹⁶ Basij members or other recruited Iranian volunteers have very little to offer in terms of training or advising to pro-regime officers, but can provide dependable firepower to IRGC elements operating on the ground.



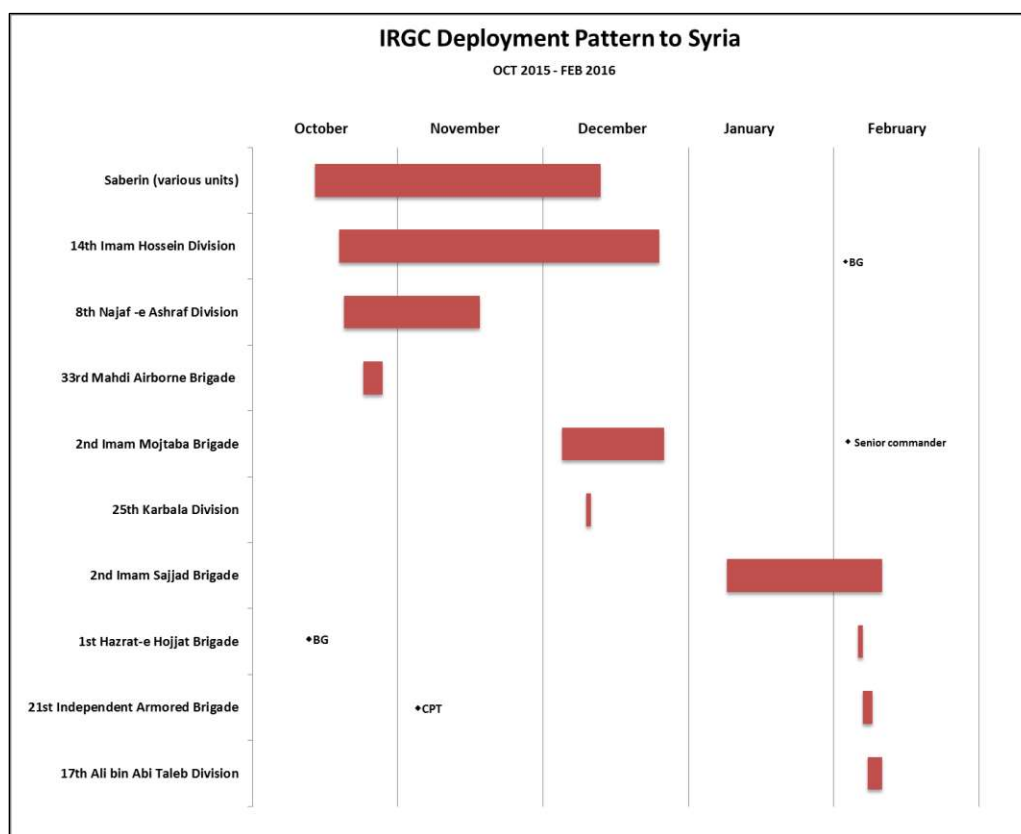
Note: A picture of Iranian fighters allegedly taken in Syria.

Source: "Persian War News," Facebook post, March 16, 2016. Available in Persian: <https://www.facebook.com/persian.war.news/photos/pb.1448549682068931.-2207520000.1458572672./1718522031738360/?type=3&theater>.

Rotation of Units

IRGC brigade and division cadres appear to have rotated into and out of Syria with on-the-ground deployments of about two months (Figure 6). Elements from the 14th Imam Hossein Division appear to have been on the battlefield from mid-October through mid-December (about 66 days), roughly corresponding with elements from the 8th Najaf-e Ashraf Division as well. Troops from the 2nd Imam Mojtaba Brigade were reportedly dispatched to Syria in mid-October for about a three-week overlap with the 14th Imam Hossein Division, and seem to have left sometime by the end of December.⁹⁷ A picture published on Khuzestani local media sources dated December 31 shows members of the Imam Mojtaba Brigade leaving Syria, and its last reported casualty was roughly a week earlier; suggesting that it cycled out of theater in late December.⁹⁸ Elements from three different units took part in the February 2016 fighting north of Aleppo: The 1st Hazrat-e Hojjat Brigade, the 2nd Imam Sajjad Brigade, and the 17th Ali bin Abi Taleb Division.

Figure 6



Note: The graph above illustrates the periods from October 2015 to February 2016 that the units identified on the Y-axis took casualties. The solid bars represent the period in which casualties from the unit were reported. Short segments (for the 25th Karbala Division and the 1st Hazrat-e Hojjat Brigade, e.g.) signify that the unit only took casualties over the course of a day. Individuals killed more than a month before or after the main grouping of casualties are denoted by diamonds with their respective ranks and could represent a different deployment. Saberlin units are considered a different category even though these units appear to be attached to various IRGC Ground Force divisions.

Source: AEI's Critical Threats Project

The IRGC has thus exposed multiple divisions to the challenge of sending brigade-sized cadre to fight in Syria and return. It maintained at least three such cadre formations on the ground at a time for the major fighting in February. This pattern suggests that the IRGC leadership does not intend to keep the ability to deploy cadre forces as an elite niche capability, but rather sees it as something that many if not most of the operational divisions of the IRGC Ground Forces should be able to do. The implications of that assessment for the possibility of expanded Iranian support to Assad and potential operations in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon are far-reaching.

The ability to deploy even limited numbers of forces in a rotational pattern is no small feat. It requires sophisticated campaign planning, extensive logistical support, and a sizeable force structure that can be deployed abroad. To be sure, Iran's expeditionary capabilities are in no way comparable with the major militaries in the world. Iran's ability to project power is nevertheless impressive when assessed in the context of the capabilities of other regional powers.

Conclusion

The appearance of expeditionary-cadre IRGC formations in combat on Syrian battlefields is one indicator that Iran's armed forces are beginning to move toward fielding conventional military capabilities. Reports of Iran's intention to purchase Su-30 long-range air superiority fighter-bombers from Russia and of its plans to field an air assault unit are other such indicators.⁹⁹ Such systems and units are neither necessary nor appropriate for the kinds of strictly covert, low-level unconventional war that has characterized Iranian military operations throughout the region for decades. They suggest that Iran's leaders are contemplating building armed forces that could wage war against other regional states in a relatively conventional and symmetrical fashion.

These activities and discussions are still only indicators, however. IRGC expeditionary-cadre formations in Syria remain at the upper-most end of unconventional warfare. They provide the thinnest veneer of plausible deniability and seem to reflect the desire of the regime to keep its military operations just short of the point at which they would have to acknowledge openly their direct role as co-belligerents in combat.

It is tempting to see Iranian activities in Syria through the prism of hybrid warfare and to equate it with Russia's use of "little green men" and militia proxies in Ukraine.¹⁰⁰ Those parallels are certainly valid and informative, but they likely go only so far in describing what Iran is really up to. The Iranians follow the Russian pattern in requiring their soldiers to strip all identifying insignia and ranks from their uniforms (thereby rendering them illegal combatants under Geneva Convention standards), and they persist in describing their activities in Syria as limited to training and advising. They appear, however, to be creating organizations and standard operating procedures that would give them a generalizable capability to deploy such expeditionary-cadre units to a number of states throughout the region, rather than simply trying to manage local and Western responses to a

particular conflict. They may thus be attempting to create a new model of warfare that can shift easily over time toward ever more conventional and symmetric operations against regional actors.

The evolution of such a model could pose a significant challenge to American policy and strategy in the Middle East. The US and its allies would face a conundrum even if the Iranians openly acknowledged the presence of their expeditionary-cadre formations because of the degree to which those formations are intertwined with both local and trans-regional militias. That intertwinement denies the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Israel, or other states any set of distinct Iranian units that could be attacked with conventional weapons. Fighting those units with either air or ground forces would inevitably draw the U.S. or other regional states into all the complexities of the internal conflict, a prospect that has proved daunting enough to deter any of the regional or extra-regional powers from directly intervening in Syria. This intertwinement also makes it extremely difficult to know when operations against any local force will actually become direct combat with the IRGC, thus precipitating a possibly-unintentional escalation with Iran.

If the IRGC chose to replicate this model in Iraq the U.S. would find itself in quite a difficult position. American strategic leaders would naturally want to expel the IRGC from Iraq, but they would have little ability to do so without risking conflict with Iraqi militias and possibly even Iraqi Security Force units with which IRGC expeditionary-cadre formations could intermingle. There is thus an escalation path for Iran in which it gradually establishes the on-the-ground reality of direct IRGC intervention in Iraq in such a way that American leaders feel themselves unable to resist it.

Iran's aggressive efforts to develop and expand its ballistic missile force should also be considered in this context.¹⁰¹ The U.S., Saudi Arabia, or Israel might well be tempted to try to avoid the complexities of internal Iraqi or Syrian dynamics by addressing a response to IRGC deployments directly to Iran itself. But Iran's ballistic missile force is already large enough to compel the U.S. and its Gulf allies to think very carefully before risking retaliatory missile strikes against military and economic infrastructure. The expansion of that force will increase Iran's ability to deter Israel and NATO more generally. The Iranian regime could seek a deterrent missile force for many reasons, but the development of this expeditionary-cadre capability offers a new one—the desire to create a deterrence umbrella for quasi-conventional military operations in the region.

Western analysts have long taken for granted that Iran would not seek to build a symmetric, conventional military capability because of the obvious futility of such an effort in the face of overwhelming American, Israeli, and European conventional military power. It is widely assumed that Iranian military activities will remain covert, unconventional, and limited.¹⁰² Such assessments may still be valid. We can so far demonstrate only the viability of a hypothesis about an expeditionary-cadre capability that could be an indicator of a different approach.

It is vital to open our imagination-space to the possibility that Iran could be working to develop a fundamentally different model of conventional military capabilities that is optimized for the environments it finds and creates in the Middle East. Such a model could be both more effective

against and less vulnerable to Western conventional military capabilities than is often assumed. If the IRGC continues to perfect and expand this capability to many or most of its combat divisions and brigades, it could pose a significant threat to regional states and could create, at a minimum, a major strategic headache for the US and its Western allies. It is a development that demands careful and creative observation and assessment, as well as the urgent and thoughtful development of appropriate counter-measures. Ignoring the changing nature of IRGC involvement in Syria and its implications or forcing new patterns into old paradigms could well be setting conditions for major strategic surprise and setbacks that could be avoided.

Notes

¹ For more information on the IRGC's insignia and rank structure, see Will Fulton, "IRGC Rank Insignia Guide," AEI's Critical Threats Project, October 31, 2012. Available: <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/fulton-irgc-rank-insigniaguide-october-31-2012>.

² Ibid.

³ For more on the IRGC and its history, please see Emanuele Ottolenghi, *The Pasdaran: Inside Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (Washington, DC: Foundation for the Defense of Democracy, 2011).

⁴ Frederick Kagan, "Security Structures of Iran," AEI's Critical Threats Project. Available: <http://www.irantracker.org/basics/security-structures-iran>.

⁵ Michael Connell, "Iran's Military Doctrine," United States Institute of Peace, The Iran Primer. Available: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-military-doctrine>.

⁶ Anthony Cordesman, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 16, 2007. Available: http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/070816_cordesman_report.pdf and Gabriel Weinmann and Saeid Golkar, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁷ The U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned Basij Commander Mohammad Reza Naghdi for his role in the suppression. See "Treasury Designates Tehran Prosecutor General, Basij Commander for Human Rights Abuses in Iran," U.S. Department of Treasury, February 23, 2011. Available: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1076.aspx>.

⁸ "Iran News Round Up, March 16, 2016," AEI's Critical Threats Project, March 16, 2016. Available: <http://www.irantracker.org/iran-news-round-march-16-2016>.

⁹ "The Artesh: Iran's Marginalized Regular Military," Middle East Institute, 2011. Available: http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military_171758621702.pdf.

¹⁰ On the Qods Force's proxy network within the Middle East, see Frederick W. Kagan, Ahmad K. Majidiyar, Danielle Pletka, and Marisa Cochrane Sullivan, "Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan," American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War, May 2012. Available: http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/iranian-influence-in-the-levant-egypt-iraq-and-afghanistan_171235465754.pdf.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² On the history and activities of the Qods Force, see "The Qods Force: Spearheading Iran's Foreign Policy," The Soufan Group, March 12, 2013. Available: <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-qods-force-spearheading-irans-foreign-policy/> and Will Fulton, "Testimony: Iran's Global Force Projection Network: IRGC Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah," AEI's Critical Threats Project, March 20, 2013. Available: <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/fulton-iran-global-force-projection-network-irgc-quds-force-lebanese-hezbollah-march-20-2013>.

¹³ Anthony Cordesman, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 16, 2007. Available: http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/070816_cordesman_report.pdf

¹⁴ Francis Hoffman, "Perspectives on the Future Security Environment," National Defense University, February 13, 2012. Available: <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS26/20130213/100261/HHRG-113-AS26-Wstate-HoffmanF-20130213.pdf>.

¹⁵ Ali Alfoneh, "What Do Structural Changes in the Revolutionary Guards Mean?," AEIdeas, September 23, 2008. Available: <https://www.aei.org/publication/what-do-structural-changes-in-the-revolutionary-guards-mean/>.

¹⁶ Alireza Nader, "The Revolutionary Guards," United States Institute of Peace, The Iran Primer. Available: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/revolutionary-guards>.

¹⁷ Michael Connell, "Iran's Military Doctrine," United States Institute of Peace, The Iran Primer. Available: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-military-doctrine>.

¹⁸ Alireza Nader, "The Revolutionary Guards," United States Institute of Peace, The Iran Primer. Available: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/revolutionary-guards> and "Saudi Arabia: The Gulf's Best Equipped Military," Defense News, March 26, 2015. Available: <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/mideast-africa/2015/03/26/saudi-arabia-gulfs-best-equipped-military/70494532/>.

¹⁹ The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps of the Armed Forces of Iran (2013), Captain 2nd Rank A. Koshkin, *Foreign Military Review*, 2013, No. 9, pp. 8-14 ["Корпус стражей исламской революции Вооруженных сил ирана (2013)," А. Кошкин, *Зарубежное военное обозрение*.]

²⁰ See Koshkin, "Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps" for one of the most detailed (but unfortunately unsourced) description of the IRGC's structure.

²¹ Anthony Cordesman and Bryan Gold, "The Gulf Military Dimension: The Conventional and Asymmetric Dimensions," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 24, 2014. Pg. 131.

²² "Iran News Round Up, February 22, 2016," AEI's Critical Threats Project, February 22, 2016. Available: <http://www.irantracker.org/iran-news-round-february-22-2016>.

²³ "Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran," Defense Department, April 2010. Available: http://fas.org/man/eprint/dod_iran_2010.pdf; "Yegan-e vizhe Saberini chist va chegune mitavan ozv-e an shod?" [What is the Saberini unit and how can one become a member], Fars News Agency, January 20, 2015. Available in Persian: <http://www.farsnews.com/printable.php?nn=13931020000466>; "Avalin shaheed modafeh haram az kordkuzye taghdim shod" [The first martyr from the defenders of the shrine presented from Kordkuzye] Dana News, November 3, 2015. Available in Persian: <http://dana.ir/News/520759.html>.

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²⁵ For example the 117th Saberini Battalion is listed as part of the 17th Ali Ibn-e Abi Taleb division based in Qom. See "Saberini goruiy-e jihadi bar amadeh az del-e heyati-e mazhabi" [The Saberini has created a jihad group from its religious association] Sepah Qom, June 30, 2014. Available in Persian: <http://sepaheqom.ir/?q=node/10543>.

²⁶ See Ю.М. Бондарь, Войска специального назначения Вооруженных Сил Ирана ("Special Forces Troops of the Iranian Armed Forces,") 3 April 2013, <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=17191> for a detailed discussion of these forces. This article does not list the 7th Vali-ye Asr Infantry Division among the Special Forces-designated formations in the IRGC, but Iranian media regularly calls one brigade of that division "commandos."

²⁷ "Reaction of Iranian officials to potential U.S. strike on Syria," AEI's Critical Threats Project, August 31, 2016. Available: <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/toumaj-iranian-reaction-syria-aug-31-2013>.

²⁸ "Resistance axis must block US influence in region: Iran official," PressTV, August 16, 2015. Available: <http://217.218.67.231/Detail/2015/08/16/424974/Iran-Ali-Akbar-Velayati-resistance-US>.

²⁹ Evidence suggests that Khamenei has directly controlled Iran's involvement in Syria; for example, the Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) do not fall under IRGC or the Artesh chain of command but are part of the President's cabinet. The participation of LEF in Syria indicates that Iran's efforts were a coordinated effort by the entire regime and the Supreme Leader, rather than simply a product of the IRGC. For more, see Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, & Sam Wyer, "Iranian Strategy in Syria," AEI's Critical Threats Project and Institute for the Study of War, May, 2013. Available: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ "Iran's Forces in Syria," Soufan Group, November 24, 2015. Available: <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-irans-forces-in-syria/>.

³² Marisha Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria" Institute for the Study of War, April 2014. Available: http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Hezbollah_Sullivan_FINAL.pdf.

³³ For example, "(Tasvir) namnevisi davtaleban-e ezam beh suriyeh" [(Pictures) signing up volunteers to send to Syria]. Faruru News, May 27, 2013. Available in Persian:

[http://fararu\(.com\)/fa/news/151125/%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%E2%80%8C%D9%86%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87](http://fararu(.com)/fa/news/151125/%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%E2%80%8C%D9%86%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87)

³⁴ "Elam-e Amadegi-e javanan-e irani bareye jahad dar suriyeh" [The announcement of readiness of the youths of Iran for jihad in Syria], IRINN, August 30, 2013. Available in Persian: <http://www.irinn.ir/news/26360/%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86->

%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87.

³⁵ For example. "Iran News Round Up, July 16, 2015," AEI's Critical Threats Project, July 16, 2015. Available: <http://www.irantracker.org/iran-news-round-july-16-2015>.

³⁶ Will Fulton, "IRGC Shows Its (True) Hand in Syria," AEI's Critical Threats Project, January 14, 2013. Available: <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/fulton-irgc-shows-its-true-hand-syria-january-14-2013>.

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³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ For an in-depth analysis of this earlier casualty data, see Ali Alfoneh, "Shiite Combat Casualties Show the Depth of Iran's Involvement in Syria," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 3, 2015. Available: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shiite-combat-casualties-show-the-depth-of-irans-involvement-in-syria>.

⁴⁰ Christopher Kozak, "'An Army in All Corners' Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria," *Institute for the Study of War*, April 2015. Available: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/An%20Army%20in%20All%20Corners%20by%20Chris%20Kozak%201.pdf>, 18.

⁴¹ Ibid. 18.

⁴² Ibid. 17.

⁴³ Ibid. 17.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 18.

⁴⁵ Bassem Mroue, "Syria's embattled president admits manpower shortage," Associated Press, July 26, 2015. Available: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/baec72e0fbc34cea9fb18b61327c926e/syrian-president-says-he-supports-dialogue-end-civil-war>.

⁴⁶ IRGC Brigadier Generals Jalal Habib Allahpour, Hadi Kajbaf, Qods Force Brigadier General Mohammad Ali Allahdadi, IRGC Colonels Abbas Abdollahi, Abdul Karim Ghavabish, Ghasem Gharib, IRGC Captains Mohammad Saheb Karam Ardakani, Ahmad Heyyari, and IRGC First Lieutenant Hamid Javani.

⁴⁷ Yalda Hakim, "Syria footage sheds light on Iran's Involvement," BBC, October 30 2013. Available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24748143>.

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⁴⁹ Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian general plotted Syrian assault in Moscow," Reuters, October 6, 2015. Available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>.

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⁵² "Iran News Round Up, October 8, 2015," AEI's Critical Threats Project, October 8, 2015. Available: <http://www.irantracker.org/iran-news-round-october-8-2015>.

⁵³ IRGC First Lieutenants Mehdi Alidoust, Kameil Ghorbani, Mojtaba Karami, Mohammad Reza Asghari Fard, Second Lieutenants Hassan Ahmadi, Pooya Izadi, Hamid Reza Daei Taghi, Moslem Nasr, Third Lieutenant Hadi

Shojah, Sergeant First Classes Sajjad Tahernia and Mohammad Zahrovand, Captains Abuzar Amjadian and Hossein Jamali, Major Jabar Araghi.

⁵⁴ IRGC Colonel Ruhollah Emadi

⁵⁵ Hassan Ahmadi, Kameil Ghorbani, Pooya Izadi, and Hamid Reza Daei Taghi.

⁵⁶ Mohammad Estehkami Jahrom and Moslem Nasr.

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⁶⁰ Behzad Seyfi and Sattar Abbas.

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<https://www.instagram.com/p/9RU7q6puqU/>;

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⁶⁵ “Sardar Soleimani dar halqhe tip takavar ghareman beheban” [Commander Soleimani surrounded by the special forces of the Beheheban brigade] Dana News, December 31, 2015. Available in Persian:

<http://tnews.ir/%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7/25C754846052.html>.

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⁶⁸ Efforts to complete the encirclement picked up again in March and have continued during the nominal “cessation of hostilities” agreement that went into effect on February 27. Christ Kozak, “Warning update: Pro-regime forces continue encirclement of Aleppo despite truce,” Institute for the Study of War, March 4, 2016. Available: <http://www.understandingwar.org/map/warning-update-pro-regime-forces-continue-encirclement-aleppo-despite-truce>.

⁶⁹ IRGC Brigadier Generals Hossein Rezaei, Sattar Varang, Mohsen Ghajarian, Ahmad Majidi, Ali Ghorbani, Colonels Hassan Razaghi, Safdar Heydari, Sattar Mohammadi, Saed Moslemi Saadat Khavae, IRGC Lieutenant Colonel Sajjad Roshanei, IRGC Major Sajjad Habibi; IRGC Captains Ahmad Rezaei and Saeed Alizadeh Barmi, IRGC Second Lieutenants Mohammad Taghi Arabi, Abouzar Daoudi, and Hojatallah Bagheri, and IRGC First Lieutenants Said Said Samanloo and Mohammad Ebrahim Tofighian.

⁷⁰ IRGC Colonel Hassan Razaghi, Habib Rahimimanesh, Mahmoud Eskandiari, Hojjot ol Elsam Mostafa Khalili, and Daoud Neri Mesaei were members of the Hazrat-e Hojjat Brigade. Lieutenant Colonel Sajjad Roshanaei, Mohammad Hossein Saraji, Hojjat ol Eslam Mohammad Ali Ghalizadeh, Ali Akbar Arabi, Absolsaleh Zareh, and First Lieutenant Said Samanloo were members of the 17th Ali bin Abu Taleb Division. IRGC Colonel Safdar Heydari, Second Lieutenant Hojjatollah Bagheri, Hedayat Allah Ghami, Ali Joukar, Colonel Sajjad Dehghan, Second Lieutenant Eskar Zamani, Fakhraddin Taghvi, Mohammad Masrour, and Mohammad Kazem Toufighi were members of the 2nd Imam Sajjad Brigade. IRGC Brigadier General Mohsen Ghajarian and Captain Hajj Javad Mohammadi were members of the 21st Independent Armored Brigade.

⁷¹ Seyyed Nader Hosseini, Ismail Nazari, Mirzanbi Heidari, Ali Asghar Mohammadi, Jamalaldin Mohammadi, Javed Sultani, Seyyed Imam Hossein, Mohammad Yusuf and Ali Alizadeh were members of the Fatimiyoun brigade. Seven unnamed members of the Zeinabiyoun brigade were also buried in Qom on February 17. See “Peykar-haye 7 shaheed pakestani modafeh haram dar qom tashiih shavand” [The bodies of seven Pakistani defenders of the shrine buried in Qom] Defa Press, February 17, 2016. Available in Persian:

<http://www.defapress.ir/Fa/News/70667>.

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Available: <http://www.criticalthreats.org/iran-news-round-march-16-2016>.

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⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Gabriel Weinmann and Saeid Golkar, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

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⁸¹ "Syrian army rolls militants back to border of northern Idlib province," Tass News Agency, October 29, 2015. Available: <http://tass.ru/en/world/832662>.

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⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ For an excellent overview of this type of military involvement, please see Farzan Sabet, "Military Intervention, Iranian-Style," War on the Rocks, June 30, 2014. Available: <http://warontherocks.com/2014/06/military-intervention-iranian-style/>.

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⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ There have also been reports of the IRGC recruiting Baluch fighters from Sistan and Baluchistan province for deployment to Syria. Sistan and Baluchistan is one of the most economically underdeveloped regions in Iran, and local officials have accused the IRGC of recruiting Baluch to fight in Syria with promises of economic benefits. Indeed, seven individuals killed in Syria were buried in Sistan and Baluchistan in late November and at least two appeared to belong to the native Baluch group.

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<http://tnews.ir/%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7/25C754846052.html>.

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