



The Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard

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On 25 October 2007 the United States government announced strengthened sanctions against Iran. The legal basis for the move was the listing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps as a proliferator of nuclear weapons, and of the Quds force division of the Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation. This followed a series of denunciations on the part of the US of Iranian interference in the Iraq conflict, with the US blaming Iran for many casualties among US and Coalition troops, and fomenting the insurgency. It is the Quds force that is accused of not only supplying Iraqi insurgents with funding and weaponry but also fomenting Islamic terrorism across the Middle East. This note looks at the background to the Quds force and the accusations against it.

Contents

A.	Background	1
B.	Activity in Iraq	3
C.	Lebanon	5
D.	Afghanistan	6
E.	Gaza and the West Bank	6
F.	Listing as a terrorist organisation and sanctions	6
G.	Possibility of a military strike	9

A. Background

When the Islamic revolution swept away the regime of the Shah in 1979, Iran's new rulers, unsure that they could trust the existing army despite officer purges, created a new and politically sympathetic force: the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, normally known in the English language press as the Revolutionary Guards. The regular Iranian army was not disbanded, but the Revolutionary Guards were different, focussing on asymmetric warfare, intelligence operations and internal security, and have become a major military

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political and economic force in Iran. The Guards' ascendancy was reinforced with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in 2005. Ahmadinejad was a member of the Guard, and is reported to have served in covert operations during the Iran-Iraq war, which may imply links to the Quds force (also known as the Qods or al-Qods force or brigade, al-Quds being the name for Jerusalem in Arabic).¹ Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani, present head of the Quds force, has direct access to Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

The Quds force was formed as part of the Revolutionary Guards during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988. It specialises in external action, gathering intelligence outside Iran on potential targets, training insurgent groups in camps in Iran, Lebanon and Sudan and funding and arming dissident organisations in Middle East countries with western-leaning governments.²

It was said to number some 1000 agents in 2000.³ It was reported that Iran's Supreme National Security Council had decided January 2006 to increase its strength to 15,000, although a reliable figure of current strength may not be available.⁴ The Congressional Research Service gives a figure of 3000 for the total number of operatives in the group.⁵

As well as military and intelligence capabilities and growing political influence, the Revolutionary Guards, have large and expanding business interests; the election of Ahmadinejad accelerated that expansion. The Iranian economy is "marked by a bloated, inefficient state sector".⁶ That has allowed the president to appoint allies and old colleagues from the Revolutionary Guard into key positions in the public sector, and to award government contracts to companies owned or controlled by Guard members, many of which are involved in dual use technology with both civilian and military utility, including telecommunications, engineering and firms linked to the nuclear industry. The al-Quds force is thought to be no less involved in the business world than the rest of the Revolutionary Guard, and analysts suspect that these growing business interests provide clandestine sources of funding to be channelled to overseas groups and individuals, hidden from the scrutiny of Iran's parliament and other public authorities.⁷

Iran does not acknowledge the existence of the force.⁸

In testimony to the US House Foreign Affairs Committee on 24 October 2007, US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice said:

Beyond its nuclear program, the Government of Iran is jeopardizing the security and prosperity of its neighbors through its support of extremist groups across the region. Iran is supporting select Shia militants in Iraq who kill innocent Iraqi civilians, Iraqi

¹ [Profile: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#), BBC News online, 22 April 2006

² [Global Security.org](#)

³ "[Defection of a Terror Suspect: Window into Iranian State Terrorism?](#)", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policywatch 468, 5 June 2000

⁴ Intelligenceonline.com, cited in Anthony Cordesman, Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2007

⁵ "[Iran's influence in Iraq](#)", Congressional Research Service report to Congress, 9 August 2007

⁶ CIA factbook: [Iran](#)

⁷ "Iran's Elite Cadre Extends Reach in Society", *Washington Post*, 7 October 2007

⁸ "US accuses Iran over deadly raid in Iraq", *Financial Times*, 3 July 2007

security personnel, and Coalition Forces. We are determined to cut off Iran's malignant activities in Iraq by apprehending and eliminating Qods Force members and other actors who endanger human life and overall national stability. We will defend ourselves and we will defend Iraqis against Tehran's meddling. The Government of Iran is also providing support to Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Palestinian territories, and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

We are actively working to counter Iran's destabilizing activities across the region. In regular consultations with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Egypt, and Jordan, I have reaffirmed the United States' commitment to protecting vital shared interests in the region. Additionally, we have had two rounds of discussions with the Iranian Government on its activities in Iraq. Ambassador Crocker has made clear that while we recognize Iran's strong cultural, political, and economic ties to Iraq, we believe that the lethal activities of the Qods Force in Iraq are inconsistent with the Iranian Government's obligations and stated commitment to support the Iraqi Government.⁹

B. Activity in Iraq

According to western governments, the al-Quds force is the principal arm of the Iranian regime for carrying out clandestine operations in Iraq, and particularly an alleged unit called Department 9000, the main conduit for Iranian aid to the Shi'a (and more recently Sunni) insurgents in Iraq.¹⁰ The al-Quds force is alleged to provide training and military advice to organisations within Iraq, including the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), (previously known as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI), Dawa, the Sadr movement Jaish al-Mahdi (the Mahdi Army), and other Shiite groups. These organisations also reportedly send representatives for consultations with the government in Tehran.¹¹ The relationship between SIIC and the Revolutionary Guards goes back to the days of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, when the Guard trained and equipped the SIIC's militia the Badr Brigade (now renamed the Badr Organisation) While the Badr Organisation, with some 20,000 operatives, is smaller than the Mahdi army at about 60,000 and has carried out fewer sectarian killings, it is more closely linked to Tehran.¹²

The US accusations of Iranian interference in Iraq were not supported by any strong evidence until in December 2006 the US detained a group of Iranians in Iraq. Some were released but two others, military personnel, were suspected of being members of the Quds force and kept in custody.¹³ US forces later revealed the identities of the two as Brig. Gen. Mohsen Chirazi and Col. Abu Amad Davari. Chirazi is allegedly the No. 3 in the al-Quds Brigade and the highest-ranking Iranian ever held by the United States.¹⁴ In January 2007 US forces detained five employees of an Iranian liaison office in Arbil, in the Kurdish region of Iraq. The US claims that the five were connected to the Quds force.¹⁵ The fact that this happened in the majority-Sunni Kurdish region would show that Iranian influence is not confined to Shi'i groups. On 19 September 2007, US forces arrested an Iranian, Agha

⁹ [Testimony](#) of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 24 October 2007

¹⁰ "Tehran's Secret 'Department 9000'", *Newsweek*, 4 June 2007

¹¹ "[Fighting Iran in Iraq](#)", Washington Institute for Near East Policy Policywatch 1198, 14 February 2007

¹² "[Iran's influence in Iraq](#)", Congressional Research Service report to Congress, 9 August 2007

¹³ "US is holding Iranians seized in raids in Iraq", *New York Times*, 25 December 2006

¹⁴ "Iranians captured inside Iraq", *Washington Post*, 12 January 2007

¹⁵ "Arrested Iranians tied to group arming Iraqis—US", *Reuters News*, 14 January 2007

Farhadi, in the Kurdish region city of Suleimaniya, claiming that he was an officer of the Quds force. In a statement, the US military said that Farhadi "has been involved in transporting improvised explosive devices and explosively formed penetrators into Iraq."¹⁶

Other al-Quds personnel have been detained in Iraq carrying plans for attacks on US troops.

The shaped charges used in Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), which have proved effective against US and other armoured vehicles and are suspected of being supplied by the Quds force, are said to be technically similar to devices found in Lebanon.¹⁷ In August 2006 the US claimed that the labels on C-4 explosives used by Shi'a Militiamen in Iraq proved they were supplied from Iran, and that only Iran's military apparatus would have access to such explosives.¹⁸ In January 2007, the US military announced that it had traced back to Iran serial numbers of weapons captured in Iraq including rocket-propelled grenades, IEDs and Katyusha rockets, and in August 2007 the commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq said that Iran had supplied Shi'a militias with 122mm mortars that were increasingly being used against the International Zone in Baghdad.¹⁹

It is alleged that intelligence had been obtained by the US from Quds force members about the capture in Gulf waters of the Royal Navy personnel in March 2007

Despite CIA warnings that British forces could be targeted after the US arrested five members of the al Quds force, the intelligence arm of the Republican [normally known as the Revolutionary] Guards, in northern Iraq in January, the Government appeared to have been caught flat-footed.²⁰

General David Petraeus, leader of US forces in Iraq, stated in his testimony to the US Congress that the Quds force was supporting a special unit of Hizbollah which was fighting against security forces in Iraq.²¹ On 7 October 2007, in a statement which analysts said raised the temperature of US rhetoric against the Revolutionary Guard, General Petraeus claimed that the Iranian ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, is a member of the al Quds force. During a recent television interview, Petraeus said:

One element of Iran, the Quds Force, this element of the Iranian Republican Guards Corps, the Quds Force, which has been very clear -- its leader has clearly stated that he controls the foreign policy for Iraq and for a couple of other countries as well.²²

Shortly after the testimony to Congress, it was announced that the US had detained three members of an Iranian-backed militia whom the US held responsible for the kidnapping of five Britons in Baghdad in May.²³

¹⁶ "U.S. troops arrest Iranian agent in northern Iraq: military", *Xinhua News Agency*, 20 September 2007

¹⁷ Anthony Cordesman, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces" (draft version), Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2007

¹⁸ "[Iran's influence in Iraq](#)", Congressional Research Service report to Congress, 9 August 2007

¹⁹ "Iran's influence in Iraq", *ibid*

²⁰ "Faye Turney's words show her spirit but Iran's defiance makes Britain look a waning world power", *Sunday Telegraph*, 1 April 2007

²¹ "[Rise Of A Secret Unit](#)" *Newsweek*, 1 October 2007

²² "David Petraeus Interview", *Charlie Rose Show*, 14 September 2007

²³ "US blames Tehran for escalating Iraq violence", *Guardian*, 8 October 2007

Defence Secretary Des Browne said in a Parliamentary answer in March 2007:

Iran is an influential neighbour in the region and its behaviour continues to be a cause for concern. We and the US continually assess the nature of insurgency in Iraq including the influence of outside groups. Support from within Iran, including the Quds Force, goes to groups who are attacking our forces and fuels the sectarian violence in Iraq. In our assessment some of the improvised explosive devices that are being used against our forces use technology that originates from Iran. Iranian links to illegal armed groups either through supply of weapons, training or funding, are completely unacceptable. We have said so and so have the Iraqi Government.²⁴

British forces in southern Iraq are said to be suffering an increase in the level of attacks, due to alleged support from the al Quds force to the al Mahdi army (Jaish al-Mahdi, "the Jam", in army slang):

[...] with the influx of support from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's al Quds division, the Jam has been transformed. It shells Basra Palace every day with newly made mortar rounds or rockets date-marked 2007.²⁵

This activity has been opposed by the British Army, with British Special Forces rumoured to have crossed the border from Iraq into Iran to pursue gun runners organised by the al-Quds force. British forces are said to be concerned that a militia ceasefire is being used by Iran to build up insurgent militias ready for an assault on the remaining British base at Basra airport.²⁶ It has also been reported that the US prevented British forces from withdrawing to Basra airport earlier in 2007, because of fears of the al-Quds force:

They [the US] claimed to have definite intelligence that elements of the al-Quds force were poised to infiltrate across the border from Iran when the British left. The British assessment did not support this scenario, holding that nationalism among the Shia population would supersede any affinity they felt with Shia Iran and that withdrawing from the palace would lessen violence.²⁷

Iran denies that it has any role in fomenting violence in Iraq.

C. Lebanon

The Revolutionary Guard was instrumental in setting up Hizbollah in the early 1980s as a militant Shi'a organisation that followed the ideals of the Iranian revolution. Experts believe that the al-Quds trains, arms and funds Hizbollah in southern Lebanon, and some would go so far as to categorise the 2006 war between Hizbollah and Israel as a proxy war between Israel and Iran. General Qassem Suleimani, leader of the al-Quds force, is reported to have been based in Lebanon during the 2006 war, and Israeli defence experts believe that an anti-ship missile attack against an Israeli missile patrol boat was largely the work of al-

²⁴ HC Deb 19 March 2007, c605w

²⁵ "Fighting for pride as pressure mounts on beleaguered troops", *Times*, 10 August 2007

²⁶ "SAS raiders enter Iran to kill gunrunners", *Sunday Times*, 21 October 2007

²⁷ "US "delayed" British withdrawal from Basra", *Independent*, 16 October 2007

Quds.²⁸ Ehud Goldwasser, 31, and Eldad Regev, 26, whose capture sparked off the conflict, were thought to be dead, but an item in the Asharq al-Awsat newspaper reported a senior Iranian source as saying that that the al-Quds force has transferred the two men to Iran.²⁹

D. Afghanistan

While analysts argue that majority-Shi'a Iran and the Taliban regime in Sunni Afghanistan were rivals, and that Iran has benefited from the Taliban's overthrow, it is now suspected that Iran has formed a tactical alliance with anti-government forces in Afghanistan. Iran is accused of employing the same tactics in Afghanistan as it does in Lebanon and Iraq: arming and training insurgents for attacks on US and allied forces. It is alleged by British intelligence officers that the al-Quds force is supplying the same bomb-making equipment as has been arriving in Iraq. Materials for making 50 explosively formed penetrators, a type of roadside bomb familiar from operations in southern Iraq, were discovered in lorries crossing the border from Iran, according to US Afghanistan head General Dan McNeill, who said that this showed the Iranian regime's active support for the Taliban. He said:

I cannot see how it is possible for at least the Iranian military, probably the Quds force, to not have known of this convoy. [...] The observation of a number of British officers who served in southern Iraq was that [the bomb timers] were relatively common there and that they originated from Iran.³⁰

E. Gaza and the West Bank

The Quds force is thought to be supporting both Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist party in control of Gaza, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the militant group based in the Syrian capital Damascus. It is also believed to be helping other anti-Israeli elements in the West Bank. The scale of such assistance, however, is not clear. In 2002, a ship carrying explosives from Iran destined for Gaza was intercepted by the Israeli navy, but Iran has reportedly tried to set up new supply routes to get assistance into Gaza. On February 24 2007, Khaled Mashaal, head of the political bureau of Hamas, travelled to Khartoum, capital of Sudan, where he is alleged to have met with al-Quds force representatives and Sudanese officials to discuss the smuggling of rocket-propelled grenades, anti-tank missiles and other ammunition into Gaza via Egypt. Iran is also reported to send Hamas members for training at camps run by the al-Quds force in Lebanon and Iran.³¹

F. Listing as a terrorist organisation and sanctions

There has been division both in the US administration and in the UN Security Council over how to tackle the Revolutionary Guards and the al-Quds force. In August 2007, White House plans to list the entire Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation were leaked to the US press. Terrorist listing would allow the administration to take tough measures against the finances of the Revolutionary Guards. It was reported that there was a

²⁸ Anthony Cordesman, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces (draft version)", Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2007

²⁹ "[Israeli Soldiers Abducted by Hezbollah in Iran – Source](#)", *Asharq Alawsat*, 15 October 2007

³⁰ "Iran 'arming Taliban with anti-armour roadside bombs'", *Daily Telegraph*, 4 October 2007

³¹ "Islamic fundamentalists now threaten Israel from all sides", *Daily Telegraph*, 15 June 2007

split between the White House and vice president's staff on one side, pushing for the listing of the whole Revolutionary Guard, and the State Department and the Treasury on the other arguing for more focused action. The administration backed away from the idea of listing the entire Revolutionary Guard as terrorists. This would be the first time that the armed forces of a sovereign state had been designated "terrorist", and would be legally complicated. European governments are reported not to be enthusiastic about the plan, partly because of the legal situation. An unnamed European official was also quoted as saying, "We want to keep our eyes on the nuclear file,"³² A senior US official was reported as saying in September 2007:

There is no consideration being given at present to designating the entire (Guard). The issue is the Quds.³³

On 25 October 2007 after much disagreement, a compromise policy was announced. Secretary of state Condoleezza Rice said:

Many of the Iranian regimes' most destabilizing policies are carried out by two of its agencies: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or the IRGC, and the Quds Force, an arm of the IRGC. Because of the Revolutionary Guard's support for proliferation and because of the Quds Force support for terrorism, acting under U.S. law and consistent with our international obligations, the United States today is designating both of these groups. We are similarly designating three Iranian state-owned banks: Bank Melli and Mellat, for their involvement in proliferation activities, and Bank Saderat as a terrorist financier. We are also designating several additional Iranian individuals and organizations.

What this means is that no U.S. citizen or private organization will be allowed to engage in financial transactions with these persons and entities. In addition, any assets that these designees have under U.S. jurisdiction will be immediately frozen. These actions will help to protect the international financial system from the illicit activities of the Iranian Government and they will provide a powerful deterrent to every international bank and company that thinks of doing business with the Iranian Government.

The administration's provided detail on the reasons for its move on the sanctioning Iran, saying that the Quds force had provided:

material support to the Taliban, Lebanese Hizballah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC).

The Qods Force is the Iranian regime's primary instrument for providing lethal support to the Taliban. The Qods Force provides weapons and financial support to the Taliban to support anti-U.S. and anti-Coalition activity in Afghanistan. Since at least 2006, Iran has arranged frequent shipments of small arms and associated ammunition, rocket propelled grenades, mortar rounds, 107mm rockets, plastic explosives, and probably man-portable defense systems to the Taliban. This support contravenes Chapter VII UN Security Council obligations. UN Security Council

³² "Divisions in Europe May Thwart U.S. Objectives on Iran", *Washington Post*, 18 October 2007

³³ "U.S. Looks to Sanctions on Iran's Quds Force", *Reuters*, 13 September 2007

resolution 1267 established sanctions against the Taliban and UN Security Council resolutions 1333 and 1735 imposed arms embargoes against the Taliban. Through Qods Force material support to the Taliban, we believe Iran is seeking to inflict casualties on U.S. and NATO forces.

The Qods Force has had a long history of supporting Hizballah's military, paramilitary, and terrorist activities, providing it with guidance, funding, weapons, intelligence, and logistical support. The Qods Force operates training camps for Hizballah in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley and has reportedly trained more than 3,000 Hizballah fighters at IRGC training facilities in Iran. The Qods Force provides roughly \$100 to \$200 million in funding a year to Hizballah and has assisted Hizballah in rearming in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

In addition, the Qods Force provides lethal support in the form of weapons, training, funding, and guidance to select groups of Iraqi Shi'a militants who target and kill Coalition and Iraqi forces and innocent Iraqi civilians.³⁴

The designation of the Revolutionary Guard and the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) as a proliferators of weapons of mass destruction will enable the US to freeze any assets the Guard holds in the US, and facilitate action against other assets and accounts belonging to the Guard, although after years during which there have been no diplomatic relations between the two countries, commentators doubt that many official Iranian assets will be held in the USA.³⁵ According to the *New York Times*:

The immediate legal consequence of designating the Quds unit as a terrorist organization would be to make it unlawful for anyone subject to United States jurisdiction to knowingly provide material support or resources to it, according to the State Department. Any United States financial institution that becomes aware that it possesses, or has control over, funds of a foreign terrorist organization would have to turn them over to the Treasury Department.³⁶

Reacting to the US move, the Russian president Vladimir Putin asked "why should we make the situation worse?" and compared the Bush administration to "mad people wielding razor blades", and the Chinese government also warned that the heightened sanctions "would only complicate matters".³⁷ Indicating a level of cross-party support for the move in the US, Tom Lantos, Chairman of the House Foreign Relations Committee said in a statement:

I commend the Administration on its new, far-reaching sanctions on the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, the Quds Force, and associated institutions and individuals. These sanctions will have a significant impact on Iran's energy sector. We need to use every available peaceful means – diplomatic, economic and political

³⁴ "[Designation of Iranian Entities and Individuals for Proliferation Activities and Support for Terrorism](#)", US State Department fact sheet, 25 October 2007

³⁵ For more detail on the application of, and legal basis for, US sanctions on entities listed as proliferators of mass destruction and their supporters, see Congressional Research Service report for Congress, "[Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses](#)", 6 August 2007

³⁶ "US will accuse Iran elite guard of aiding terror", *New York Times*, 25 October 2007

³⁷ "Rice defends US sanctions on Iran as Russia objects", *Independent*, 27 October 2007

– to resolve the Iranian nuclear problem, and serious sanctions are the surest way to do that without firing a shot.³⁸

European governments are considering whether to follow the United States in designating the Quds force as a terrorist body, but the legal definition of a terrorist organisation and the process of designation are different in Europe from that in the US.

G. Possibility of a military strike

Military strikes against facilities in Iran belonging to the Revolutionary Guard generally or the al Quds force specifically have been mooted by sources close to the US administration. An official was cited as saying that such a strike would only come if a high-casualty attack against US forces could be traced directly back to Iran.³⁹ Commentators suggested that the move to target the Guard and Quds force for sanctions lent credence to the idea that the US is heightening the rhetoric against the Revolutionary Guard to justify military action against Iran, while a UN Resolution authorising force over the nuclear issue will be difficult to obtain.

³⁸ [“Lantos welcomes new sanctions on Iran”](#), House Committee on Foreign Affairs press release, 25 October 2007

³⁹ “A Way Out’ for Iran”, *Washington Post*, 7 October 2007