



IRAN DEMOCRACY MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
Radicalism and Reform in Islamic Republic of Iran

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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Iran; Middle East

IRAN'S BURGEONING NAVAL ARSENAL

Iran's feared Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is continuing to expand its strategic capabilities. In recent weeks, the Islamic Republic's clerical army has unveiled a range of new military platforms designed to bolster the country's maritime strike capabilities. These include the acquisition of more than 300 new stealth capable fast attack boats armed with torpedoes, anti-ship missiles, and drones. The focus on the use of sea-based drones, in particular, is significant, as it provides the IRGC Navy with expanded reconnaissance and strike capabilities that can be used against merchant vessels in the Strait of Hormuz, or against adversary navies in the event of a regional conflict. (*Jerusalem Post*, February 10, 2021)

HOW IRAN LEARNED TO LOVE CRYPTOCURRENCY

Despite growing criticism of the country's domestic cryptocurrency mining industry for its role in recent blackouts, top Iranian scholars are now advocating for expanded use of the technology by the regime. The Center for Strategic Studies, a research institute affiliated with the office of the Iranian president, has stressed the importance of crypto mining for generating income and circumventing sanctions. The center's analysis projected that mining operations and associated job creation could earn the Islamic Republic some \$700 million in revenue annually, as well as lead to an appreciation of the rial and increased foreign direct investment. As such, the center concludes, the industry – heretofore largely unregulated and populated by private actors – should become an area of focus for the regime. (CoinDesk, March 3, 2021)

TEHRAN WORKS TO SILENCE ITS CRITICS

Over the last several years, Iran has intensified its efforts to silence dissidents living abroad, a prominent pro-democracy NGO has noted. Since 2014, the Islamic regime has carried out at least five assassinations or attempted assassinations in Europe and Turkey, details Freedom House in a new report on foreign repression, entitled *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach*. Utilizing the IRGC, the regime has also kidnapped and repatriated several prominent Iranian activists from foreign countries, among them Iraq, Turkey, and the UAE. Upon being returned home, many of these individuals have faced the death penalty. Iran is also notorious for its spyware and "proxy-coercion" efforts. The regime routinely carries out spear-phishing operations against troublesome expatriates and commonly harasses and detains the home-bound family members of activists who have fled the country. These measures have made life difficult even for Iranian dissidents who are lucky enough to escape physical retribution. "They drain you, emotionally, financially, in every way," said one Iranian activist. (Freedom House, February 2021)

IRAN'S DEEPENING RELIGIOUS ROOTS IN SYRIA

Since the 1970s, the Islamic Republic has engaged in a systematic effort to coopt local "Shia religious infrastructure" in Syria while building up a local alternative of its own, a new policy paper from The Washington Institute has outlined. The study, entitled *In the Service of Ideology* and authored by Syrian-American scholar Oula Alrifai, documents the extensive ways in which Iran has, since 1979, sought to export its revolution into Syria. These include the construction of seminaries – of which "nearly seventy" have been built over the past four decades, according to Alrifai – as well as shrines and religious centers. Iran has also deeply insinuated itself in Syria's academic institutions; former Syrian officials have confirmed that Iran has helped in the reconstruction of more than 10,000 Syrian schools destroyed during the civil war, and the Iranian regime is now said to control a network of private Iranian schools throughout the country. Iran is also coopting Syrian higher education institutions, like Damascus University, Bilad al-Sham University and Latakia's Tishreen University, and has established a branch of its own Islamic Azad University in Damascus. Iran is likewise infiltrating Syria through infrastructure aid, and Iranian investors "are involved in reconstruction projects in Syria worth \$600 billion."

The aggregate result is significant – and worrisome. Iran, Alrifai observes, "has entrenched itself in Syria far beyond the battle lines." That, in turn, presents a significant challenge for the U.S. and its allies because "[t]he arduous task of removing Iran from Syria cannot be accomplished without an understanding of (1) how the relationship between the Assad regime and the Khomeinists has evolved since the 1970s and (2) the degree to which Iran is involved in Syria today." She concludes: "Undoing [Iran's] methods of brainwashing and indoctrination will not be easy, but it must be done now – before reversing course becomes impossible." (The Washington Institute, March 2021)