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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Warfare; Iran

IRAN'S GROWING BOLDNESS ON THE HIGH SEAS...
The Iranian regime is stepping up its naval presence in the Strait of Hormuz anew. On May 3rd, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Navy (IRGCN) seized a Panama-flagged tanker, the NIOVI, as it was passing through the waterway, through which one-fifth of the world's oil traffic transits. The NIOVI was the second tanker seized by the IRGCN in the span of a week. (*The Foreign Desk*, May 3, 2023)

...AND IN CYBERSPACE
Iran's activism is increasing in the digital domain as well. On May 2nd, tech giant Microsoft issued a public warning that it was tracking a significant expansion of the Iranian regime's cyber activities. "Iran continues to be a significant threat actor, and it is now supplementing its traditional cyberattacks with a new playbook, leveraging cyber-enabled influence operations (IO) to achieve its geopolitical aims," the analysis lays out.

The objectives of this campaign are ambitious – and deeply destabilizing. "Iranian cyber actors have been at the forefront of cyber-enabled IO, in which they combine offensive cyber operations with multi-pronged influence operations to fuel geopolitical change in alignment with the regime's objectives. The goals of its cyber-enabled IO have included seeking to bolster Palestinian resistance, fomenting unrest in Bahrain, and countering the ongoing normalization of Arab-Israeli ties, with a particular focus on sowing panic and fear among Israeli citizens," Microsoft says. (Microsoft, May 2, 2023)

THE SHADOWY DOMESTIC ORGANIZATION BEATING BACK IRAN'S PROTESTS
Now more than half-a-year old, Iran's "hijab" protests represent the largest, most sustained challenge to the Iranian government in the Islamic Republic's 44-year history. But Iran's leaders are marshalling massive domestic force to beat back protesters – and harnessing a powerful but little-known organization in order to do so. "The bloody crackdowns at universities across Iran have not been led directly by the usual suspects — the police, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or its civil militia, the Basij," write scholars Saeid Golkar and Kasra Aarabi for New Lines magazine. "Rather, the brutal repression against students is being driven by a shadowy paramilitary group almost unknown beyond Iran's borders: the Student Basij Organization (SBO)."

What, exactly, is the SBO? "The SBO is the single most important branch within the Basij militia. The SBO not only acts as the IRGC's violent enforcers on university campuses, but its membership also forms the core of the Revolutionary Guard's military-research projects, such as its nuclear and ballistic missile programs," Golkar and Aarabi explain. "The SBO consists of the youngest and most radical members of the Basij, who tend to be more active and idealistic than older and retired Basijis. Membership in the SBO is also helpful for gaining employment in the state bureaucracy and security and intelligence organizations." (*New Lines*, April 20, 2023)

CONGRESSIONAL PRESSURE ON BIDEN'S IRAN POLICY BUILDS
Republican opposition to the Biden administration's Iran policy is intensifying. The Republican Study Committee, the largest conservative grouping in Congress, is poised to introduce half-a-dozen new legislative measures aimed at derailing the Biden administration's attempts to revive the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran. Among other steps, the bills will target Iranian military and political officials, as well as financial institutions, with new sanctions and economic penalties; seek to prevent the White House from unilaterally waiving such restrictions as part of any compromise deal with Tehran; and force any new agreement with the Islamic Republic to be introduced as a treaty requiring two-thirds consent by the Senate.

The measures represent an effort to reimpose a measure of the Trump-era "maximum pressure" policy, and penalize the Iranian regime for its regional behavior. "The Iranian regime continues enriching uranium, oppressing the Iranian people, and exporting missiles and terrorism," explains Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC-2nd), who leads the RSC's National Security Task Force. "Now that the Republicans are in the House majority, we will pass legislation to continue to pressure this brutal regime." (*Washington Free Beacon*, April 28, 2023)

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