



Blacklist The IRGC

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What should President Trump do about Iran? Campaign rhetoric about a rapid dismantlement of the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 powers has given way of late to policy inertia, as the new White House focuses on domestic challenges (like health care) and foreign irritants, such as Syria and North Korea. But there are now fresh signs that the White House could soon seriously rethink its Iran strategy. As it does, it would be wise to revisit one of its earliest foreign policy concepts, and one with the potential to dramatically alter the strategic equation vis-a-vis Iran: a comprehensive blacklisting of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The starting point for any such discussion is to determine whether the group in question meets the legal definition of a foreign terrorist organization. Under the relevant sections of the United States Code, this means satisfying three distinct criteria.

First, the organization must be a foreign entity. The IRGC, which has served as the clerical shock troops of the Islamic Republic since the 1979 revolution, with broad powers enumerated under the country's constitution, clears this preliminary bar easily.

Second, the organization must engage in or support terrorist activity, such as hijacking, assassinations or willful attacks on protected persons. Here, too, the Guards clearly fit the bill. The IRGC serves as Iran's principal conduit for providing training and materiel to violent organizations like Lebanon's Hezbollah militia and Shi'ite factions in Iraq. And via its own elite paramilitary unit, known as the Qods Force, the IRGC has perpetrated numerous terror attacks throughout the region and beyond.

Finally, this terrorist activity must "threaten the security of United States nationals or the national security of the United States." The IRGC's complicity in, among many other things, support for radical forces that have targeted U.S. and coalition troops in Iraq has put it squarely on the wrong side of this criteria as well.

But if the legal case for designating the IRGC is airtight, the strategic rationale for such a blacklisting is even more compelling.

Most immediately, a ban on the IRGC would prevent a further normalization of international trade with Iran. As a result of its 2015 nuclear deal with the West, the Islamic Republic has reaped enormous economic dividends, with transformative effects on its economy and on the strategic aspirations of its leadership. But blacklisting the IRGC could change all that. The Guards, after all, are nothing short of an economic powerhouse, in control of a sprawling empire of companies and corporate entities within the Islamic Republic. All told, the IRGC is believed to command as much as one-third of Iran's total economy. And because it does, a designation would send a major warning signal to those international firms and foreign nations beginning to dip their toes back into various sectors of the Iranian market that, by doing so, they could run afoul of U.S. counterterrorism laws, with potentially disastrous monetary and political consequences.

Blacklisting the IRGC would carry concrete military dividends as well. For years, U.S. forces have labored under restrictive "rules of engagement" in Iraq, lest battlefield contact with Iranian paramilitary elements result in an uncontrolled escalation of hostilities between Washington and Tehran. This has hampered the effectiveness of U.S. counterinsurgency and stability operations, and continues to exert a profound effect on the freedom of action that field commanders believe they possess today.

Indeed, high-ranking military officials have been outspoken about the destabilizing role being played by Iran in the region and about the need to push back forcefully against it. In his recent testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Gen. Joseph Votel, the commander of United States Central Command, noted that Iran's actions in the region fall "just short of open conflict" with the U.S. In response, he counseled, America needs "to look at opportunities where we can disrupt [Iran] through military means or other means." A blacklisting of the IRGC would begin that process, providing U.S. commanders with greater authority to push back against Iranian destabilizing behavior on the ground throughout their area of responsibility.

Finally, and most importantly, designating the IRGC would send a powerful signal to Iran's captive population that the United States once again cares about its plight. During its time in office, the Obama administration progressively toned down its support for the Iranian people in order to ingratiate itself with the Iranian government (a process that culminated in 2015's nuclear agreement). As a result, it voluntarily ceded America's historic role as a champion of ordinary Iranians in their struggle against the theocratic state. By blacklisting the IRGC, Team Trump can reclaim this moral high ground and send an unequivocal message to the Iranian masses that, unlike its predecessor, it won't be content to pursue "business as usual" with the Islamic Republic.

Ultimately, though, only the White House itself can decide whether it is truly ready to take on the Islamic Republic. If it is, targeting the Revolutionary Guards represents one of the few meaningful ways by which the president can make good on his campaign promises to hold Tehran to account for its destabilizing global activities.

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