

The IRGC Designation Couldn't Come at a Worse Time for Iran

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The regime has repeatedly avoided precipitous responses to U.S. sanctions, and it will be even more risk-averse today due to its domestic flood crisis and fears of broader escalation.

On April 8, President Trump announced that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps will be added to the State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations—the first time Washington has applied this label to another country's formal government institutions. In recent years, both hardliners and moderates in Tehran have threatened that designating the IRGC in this manner would trigger a harsh response against American forces and interests in the region, and their rhetoric this week has followed suit. But will Iran actually make good on these warnings and respond aggressively to new sanctions?

SPEAK HARSHLY AND CARRY A SMALL STICK

The idea of naming the IRGC an FTO has been in the news before, and Iran's reaction at the time was telling. When reports surfaced in 2017 that newly elected President Trump might order such a designation, Tehran threatened to list the U.S. Army as a terrorist group "like ISIS." IRGC chief Mohammad Ali Jafari went further, implying that Iran would target American forces and promising to resist U.S. pressure by advancing the regime's "conventional defense, missile, and regional programs."

Tehran's rhetoric in recent days has shared these themes. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif warned that the United States would enter a "quagmire and disaster" if it designates the IRGC, while General Jafari claimed that such a move would make American forces in the region "lose their ease and serenity."

Yet Jafari's declarations included a telling wrinkle: that Iran's response would be "reciprocal," suggesting that any retaliation would be proportional to Washington's move. He further clarified that Iran's reaction would be "based on the policies of the establishment of the Islamic Republic"—Tehran's traditional code for signaling that it will refrain from harsh measures due to "regime interests" (e.g., Zarif used such language in December to issue ultimately empty threats against Europe regarding delayed financial relief).

This subtle rhetorical retreat is hardly surprising given Iran's current domestic circumstances. The regime is struggling to cope with massive floods in many provinces and has received harsh public criticism for mismanaging the crisis. Senior IRGC officers who traveled to flood-hit areas have been threatened and cursed by angry mobs; after IRGC Ground Forces commander Mohammad Pakpour experienced such treatment firsthand, he recommended that military officials refrain from further visits. Nevertheless, Tehran is under such heavy pressure that it has just deployed IRGC Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani for a one-month tour of flooded provinces, hoping the popular general can rally public support for the regime.

Even when its domestic situation has been far more placid, Iran has refrained from retaliating against U.S. sanctions with force. This was the case when it threatened to target American bases and forces within a "radius of 1,000 km from Iran" if Congress passed the "Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act." The wide-ranging bill became law in 2017, but Tehran's threat never materialized. The regime also refrained from action when the U.S. government previously hit the IRGC with targeted sanctions for proliferation (2007), human rights abuses (2011), and terrorism (2017). For years before Trump's FTO announcement, these sanctions essentially prohibited U.S. nationals from having any dealings with the IRGC and its affiliates, and barred the use of U.S. dollars in foreign transactions with them.

Listing the IRGC is still a significant move, both symbolically and in terms of setting a legal precedent. Yet given the degree to which past sanctions and executive orders have already restricted foreign dealings with the organization, the economic effects of the FTO designation will likely be limited, and the regime will probably perceive it as a purely political move—part of Washington's "maximum pressure" policy toward Iran. Over the past few months, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has repeatedly discussed the need to counter the U.S. "economic war," but he has been careful to state that the necessary countermeasures are economic and psychological in nature, not military. Likewise, his "IRGC Day" speech on April 9 was full of slogans about enduring in the face of pressure, with no warnings of direct military retribution.

IRAN'S LIKELY NEXT STEPS

Similar to statements by Jafari and other Iranian officials, judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi urged the Foreign Ministry and the Supreme National Security Council to take reciprocal actions if Washington designated the IRGC as an FTO. Thus far, the council has formally designated U.S. Central Command as a terrorist entity (a move with no real implications), while the Majlis announced it will table an inter-ministry strategy that includes listing the U.S. Army as a terrorist group and treating American forces as if they were Islamic State terrorists. These moves will likely be followed by a series of symbolic steps and signals from Tehran in the coming days, along with a campaign to rally the public around the IRGC and distract citizens from the flood crisis.

In military terms, Iran may conduct missile launches and drills to show the IRGC's endurance in the face of U.S. pressure. It is also likely to increase its harassment of U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf, perhaps even trying to seize small boats if they happen to venture into Iranian waters (as it did in January 2016). In December, Iran released drone footage of the USS *Stennis* being harassed by IRGC vessels, claiming that "thirty boats followed the American carrier after it entered the Gulf waters." And in October, two Iranian attack boats came within hundreds of meters of the amphibious assault ship USS *Essex* in the Gulf, while CENTCOM commander Gen. Joseph Votel was onboard.

Iran might also detain more foreign citizens on "espionage" charges as bargaining chips with the United States. It has used this tactic against American citizens more frequently in recent years; going forward, it might focus on apprehending individuals with direct or indirect links to the U.S. Army, hoping to hit them with "terrorism" charges.

THE LESS PROBABLE HARDBALL SCENARIO

Although wider Iranian escalation seems less likely at the moment, the regime has a variety of proxy tools at its disposal to retaliate against U.S. forces and bases in the region. Some of the Shia militias in Iraq and Syria are potential candidates for attacks involving mortars or improvised explosive devices, while the Houthi rebels in Yemen could be tasked with launching missile strikes. This type of retribution would enable Tehran to make good on its threats while preserving some level of deniability, but it would also increase the risk of escalation with the United States.

Whatever the case, the IRGC is unlikely to act without the approval of the Supreme Leader, who controls Iran's national security portfolio. Khamenei is known for his calculated and cautious approach to decisionmaking. Although some in the regime will urge him to escalate, the experienced ayatollah surely knows that doing so could serve as a readymade *casus belli* for Washington.

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