

Terrorist Designations: Trump and Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps

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It's designed to give the US more leg room in the sanction stakes but may end up having its own hemming consequences. The designation by the Trump administration of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organisation was meant to expand options for the US while shutting others out. While Trump attempts to defrost matters with North Korea, Iran has played the convenient bug bear.

As President Donald Trump [outlined](#) in a statement,

"This unprecedented step, led by the Department of State, recognises the reality that Iran is not only a State Sponsor of Terrorism, but that the IRGC actively participates in, finances, and promotes terrorism as a tool of statecraft."

The policy had an inevitable resonance in Israel, where it [cheered](#) Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu prior to the Tuesday national poll. Designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guards "as a terrorist organization" kept "the world safe from Iran aggression and terrorism". Such a consequence may well be wishful thinking. Jacob Heilbrun [opines](#) rather pessimistically that such a policy shift is bound to be disruptive; the president "has allowed himself to be captured by a neocon contingent, housed at the Foundation of Defense for Democracies, that is thirsting for a new crusade to vanquish the mullahs in Tehran."

The IRGC has certainly made its effective, often bloody mark on Middle Eastern affairs. As US-led forces blundered in Iraq, leaving a security vacuum rich with opportunity, Iran saw a golden chance to increase its influence and harass the invaders. The role played by IRGC's Quds Force in supplying Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFPs) or Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) to militants in Iraq was cited in 2015 as a key reason for US policy makers to abandon the Iran nuclear deal.

"I understand," [claimed](#) Senator Ted Cruz (R-Tex) in a July 29, 2015 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, "that the Joint Personnel Recovery Agency has a classified list of roughly 500 American soldiers who were murdered by Iranian IEDs."

US Central Command revealed a [different figure](#): between November 2005 and December 2011, the number of US combatant deaths arising from EFP "events" stood at 196.

Dissecting such figures forensically is less significant for the anti-Iran hawks than reining in the broader effect of Tehran's influence. Training to its proxies has been forthcoming and consistent; the Syrian civil war has further opened the gates, leaving Israel jittery. Washington's ally, Saudi Arabia, has similarly balked, and seeks to plug the Shia breach in Yemen with bloody resolve. Operating behind the scenes is the IRGC.

The issue is complicated from another perspective. In so designating such an arm of the Iranian government a terrorist outfit, it stymies trading done with any Iranian entity from powers in the international scene untidy. (The IRGC's economic tentacles are not only thick, but lengthy.) This is bound to have a localising effect. In immediate proximity of Iran and Iran's influence, Lebanese and Iraqi authorities risk being barred from dealing with the IRGC and its surrogate arms. Asian and European companies, who do not have the same qualms in dealing with the theocracy, also risk facing the ire of Washington. In Trump's own words, "If you are doing business with the IRGC, you will be bankrolling terrorism."

The concept is strikingly simplistic, ignoring the myriad of entanglements that follows from IRGC involvement in the Iranian economy proper. It also side-steps the possibility that the Trump Organization, in signing contracts in 2012 with developers behind the Trump Tower Baku project, had [indirect dealings](#) with Azarpassillo, an Iranian construction company controlled by the IRGC. (Azarpassillo was awarded contracts in 2008 by then Azerbaijani transport minister Ziya Mammadov, who had been the key contact for Trump's company.)

Till this point, the approach to the IRGC has been one of economic encirclement featuring attempts to get to the organisation via other entities. The move to target the IGRC was already underway in other branches of the US government. The Treasury designated the Quds Force in 2007 a supporter of terrorism, sanctioning entities connected with it. It has assumed pride of place on the US Specially designated Global Terrorist List. The IGRC itself, as former Under-Secretary of State Wendy Sherman is on record as [saying](#), "is already fully sanctioned", making the issue one of superfluous classification and needlessly provocative.

Then comes the issue of Iran's direct response. What is good for the goose is invariably good for the unfortunate gander. Various Trump officials, to that end, were none too keen by the decision, claiming that retaliation would follow against US intelligence officers and troops. Former State Department official Jason Blazakis, who spent his time in the terrorist labelling business, [suggested](#) that the commander of the Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, could well call upon his Shi'ite militias "to take actions against US assets in places like Baghdad's Green Zone." In consistently upending fashion, Trump also gave his emissaries in the Middle East very little time to ponder matters, leaving no guidelines as to how to enforce the designation. On such points, White House national security advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hold courtly sway.

Rhetorical retaliation was not long in coming and seemed almost casual. The US was [branded](#) as a "state sponsor of terrorism" with its military elements in the Middle East duly designated as "terrorist groups". The move, suggested Iranian state TV, had as much to do with US dislike of Tehran's influence in the region as it did with its success in "fighting Islamic State". Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, in calling the move on Trump's part "a major strategic mistake", [insisted](#) that the new designation by Tehran would include "US military bases and their military forces in the region" and "confronted accordingly". Araghchi, like Trump, was merely stating the obvious, and dangerous turn in relations.

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Michel Chossudovsky

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