

Iranian Force, Focus of U.S., Still a Mystery



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WASHINGTON, Feb. 16 — Like so much else about the Iranian state, the Quds Force, which conducts overseas operations for [Iran](#)'s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, remains remarkably mysterious even to those who closely study the country.

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The Quds Force is under intense scrutiny by American intelligence agencies because it is suspected of supplying sophisticated explosives to Iraqi militants. Among those detained in recent American raids on Iranian offices in Iraq were several Iranians identified by the United States military as Quds operatives, including a diplomat said to be the No. 2 official in the Quds Force.

Questions about what exactly Quds Force officers have done and whether they acted at the direction of the Iranian leadership have taken on particular urgency as the Bush administration sends more troops to damp the violence in Baghdad. But the competing power centers inside the Iranian government, and the intense secrecy that obscures decision making, make answers elusive.

“We know that the Quds Force is involved,” Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) told reporters on Thursday. “We know the Quds Force is a paramilitary arm of the I.R.G.C.,” he added, using the abbreviation for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

“So we assume that the leadership of the I.R.G.C. knows about this,” Mr. Gates said. “Whether or not more senior political leaders in Iran know about it, we don’t know.”

Most independent experts say it is only logical to assume that Iran deployed large numbers of operatives in Iraq as soon as [Saddam Hussein](#) was ousted in 2003. Many of Iraq’s Shiite clerics, politicians and militia leaders have close ties to Iran, where some spent years in exile while Mr. Hussein and the Sunnis of his Baath Party ruled Iraq.

And the past role of the Quds Force as the long arm of the Islamic revolution abroad, performing a mix of military, intelligence and training operations, has been widely reported in past conflicts like those in Lebanon and Bosnia. Its name, the Arabic word for Jerusalem, symbolizes the Iranian government’s commitment to driving Israelis out of the occupied Palestinian territories.

The Quds Force “is the handpicked elite of an already elite ideological army,” said Abbas Milani, director of Iranian studies at [Stanford University](#).

As part of the Revolutionary Guard, the force officially answers to the supreme religious leader, Ayatollah [Ali Khamenei](#), and not the Iranian president, [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#), though Mr. Ahmadinejad is believed to have personal ties to many senior guard officials.

But the Quds Force is cloaked in secrecy inside Iran and is the subject of considerable guesswork from scholars in the United States, who in interviews this week offered estimates of its size ranging from 3,000 to 50,000 men. The true number, along with details of the strength and

budget of the entire Revolutionary Guard, is hidden even from the Iranian Parliament, said Mr. Milani, according to legislators he has spoken with.

Some specialists even question whether the Quds Force exists as a formal unit clearly delineated from the rest of the Revolutionary Guard.

“It could be that anyone with an intelligence role in the Revolutionary Guard is just called Quds,” said Vali R. Nasr, who studies Iran and political Islam at the Naval Postgraduate School.

Whether properly identified as part of the Quds Force or not, members of the Revolutionary Guard mobilized intelligence and paramilitary agents in Lebanon in the 1980s, where they trained the Shiite militia [Hezbollah](#); in Afghanistan, during the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s and episodically since then; in the former Yugoslavia, supporting the Bosnian Muslims against Serbian forces; and in other trouble spots.

The guard has also been accused of supporting terrorist attacks outside Iran, notably the 1996 truck bomb attack on the Khobar Towers complex in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 American service members. In December, a federal judge ruled that the government of Iran bore responsibility for the Khobar Towers attack and ordered Tehran to pay survivors of those killed more than \$253 million.

The Revolutionary Guard was created after the Islamic revolution that overthrew the shah in 1979. The government of Ayatollah [Ruhollah Khomeini](#) did not trust the existing Iranian military, where support for the monarchy remained strong. The new rulers established the guard as a parallel military force, recruited from among the revolution’s most devout religious supporters.

In the past 25 years, the Revolutionary Guard, whose strength is estimated by Western specialists at 125,000 to

300,000, has gradually evolved into more of a conventional military and has become deeply involved in lucrative business enterprises inside and outside Iran. But all along, it has conducted overseas operations, both covert and overt, often under the Quds Force name.

The actions of the Quds Force are not necessarily ordered by Ayatollah Khamenei, and the supreme leader may not even get reports of all its actions, said Hooshang Amirahmadi, director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at [Rutgers University](#). “The Iranian government is a very loose grouping of power centers,” blurring lines of control and authority, he said.

There have been past instances of actions by rogue intelligence officers that the Iranian government has disavowed. In 1999, for example, Iran’s Intelligence Ministry blamed rogue officers for the killings of five prominent critics of the government’s conservative wing.

But Mr. Amirahmadi said he did not think the Iranian leadership should be allowed to sidestep responsibility for actions by its operatives in Iraq. “The Bush administration can’t say, ‘We have a [C.I.A.](#), but we don’t control it,’ ” he said, adding that the same rules should apply to Tehran.

Though the American allegations about the Quds Force have received attention from administration officials and the media only in recent weeks, they are not new. On several occasions over the last year, senior Pentagon officials have spoken publicly about the Iranian role in Iraq.

More recently, Bush administration officials have engaged in a balancing act, engaging in harsher rhetoric about Iranian actions and offering more evidence on sophisticated improvised explosive devices, which they say are traceable to Iran, but vehemently denying they have any plans to go to war against the country.

But by all accounts, the imperfect nature of American intelligence agencies' reporting on Iran makes certain conclusions difficult to reach. "I just don't think we have a very acute understanding of the internal workings of the regime in Iran," said Patrick Clawson, an Iran expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.