As U.S.-Iranian tensions escalate in the Middle East, it is important to take a close look at Iran’s primary irregular force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF). The IRGC-QF is instrumental in helping Iran expand its influence in the Middle East and other regions. It engages in a wide range of activity, such as gathering intelligence; training, equipping, and funding state and non-state partner forces; conducting assassinations and bombings; perpetrating cyberattacks; and providing humanitarian and economic aid. The IRGC-QF has partners in countries like Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bahrain.

In an effort to better understand IRGC-QF and broader Iranian activities, this analysis examines satellite imagery of the Imam Ali training facility, west of Tehran. Satellite imagery acquired in 2019 shows that locations like Imam Ali, which is on the northeast outskirts of the city of Qods, allow Iran to train and advise partner forces from across the region.
Imam Ali Training Facility, Tehran (Figure 2): CSIS’s review of imagery of the facility indicates that the base was likely a minor facility from 2000 to 2003 and then went through a major infrastructure development phase beginning around 2003. From the size, nature, and layout of the base’s various components, it appears the facility is used for the training of light infantry or special operations forces. The base can be divided into six broad areas: (1) combat training facilities; (2) warehouse and storage area; (3) housing and support area; (4) headquarters administration and classrooms; (5) mosque and religious education center; and (6) the original base.
Combat Training Facilities (Figures 3 and 4): The combat training facilities occupy the majority of the base (to the south and west). These include a 100-meter firing range; a second 100-meter open range that could be used for rocket launcher, improvised explosives, and other weapons training; a driver training course; an obstacle course; and a shooting gallery (sometimes called a combat course, consisting of a dispersed collection of small walls, miscellaneous objects, and likely small vehicles) used to train troops for combat in buildings and streets. The remainder of the combat training facilities consists of rolling hills with a road running through. This area likely allows for physical training, such as hikes with weighted packs and patrol training. Vehicles or personnel are observed within the training area in all imagery reviewed.
Figure 5: Warehouse and Storage Area, Imam Alit Training Facility, Iran

Warehouse and Storage (Figure 5): Located in the northwest corner of the training facility, this area consists of approximately 13 warehouse, vehicle maintenance, storage, and support structures. There is a communications tower located in the southern side of this area. A large number of vehicles of all sizes and types, as well as the high level of activity observed in the warehouse and storage area, indicate a significant operational tempo at the facility. It also suggests that the warehouse and storage area support a large population living and working at the facility.

Figure 6: Housing and Storage Area, Imam Ali Training Facility, Iran

Housing and Support (Figure 6): An apparent housing area is located between the warehouse and headquarters areas. This area consists of two large and four small buildings, as well as a large
parking area. Large numbers of passenger type vehicles are observed in the parking lot and throughout this area in all imagery. The main entrance and security checkpoint for the Imam Ali training facility is located between this area and the headquarters area. The approximately 75 passenger-type vehicles observed in the housing area’s parking lot and along the immediately adjacent roads suggest a sizeable and active population living and working at the facility.

**Figure 7: Headquarters, Administration & Classroom, Imam Ali Training Facility, Iran**

*Headquarters Administration and Classrooms (Figure 7):* The headquarters, administration, and classroom area are located in five multistory, connected buildings in the center of the facility, on its north side. A sports field and several support buildings are located on the east side of the headquarters buildings. The size and layout of the headquarters, administration, and classroom area suggest a large military unit. Of note are the vehicle shelters, which would typically be used by senior officers and leaders as well as important visitors.
Figure 8: Mosque and Religious Education Area, Imam Ali Training Facility, Iran

Mosque and Religious Education (Figure 8): The facility’s mosque, oriented to face Mecca, is located immediately south of the headquarters area. Several buildings, likely for religious education or a medical clinic, are located adjacent to the mosque. A large parade ground with viewing stand sits immediately west of the mosque. Of note are two large communications towers located adjacent to the parade ground and mosque. Given the facility’s association with the IRGC-QF, it is likely that they are used for communicating with units deployed throughout the region, monitoring foreign broadcasts, broadcasting of propaganda, and other related activities.
The Original Base (Figure 9): The original base, which is located in the southeast corner of the enlarged facility, is connected to the new facility via an opening in its western wall. This area underwent minor expansion during 2008 and has remained relatively unchanged since that time. It consists of approximately 28 housing, warehouse, training, and headquarters and administration buildings. Vehicles or personnel are observed within the old base area in all imagery reviewed. The fact that this area retains its old walls and is active and well maintained in all imagery suggests that it may be used to house a separate component of the IRGC-QF or a separate category of trainees.
Conclusion

The Imam Ali training facility, and similar facilities throughout the country, highlight Iran’s commitment to using irregular methods like training partner forces to project power throughout the region. Iranian leaders appear just as committed as ever to engagement across the Middle East using irregular methods. Based on Iran’s continuing activism in the region—led by the IRGC-QF and its head, Qassem Soleimani—the United States needs to closely cooperate with its partners to continue assessing the threat and to effectively balance against Iran.

As this case study highlights, Iran relies on unconventional or irregular means to expand its power and leverage proxy forces and other partners in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bahrain. Consequently, the U.S. response should focus on countering Iran’s activities through diplomatic, financial, informational, intelligence, and military (particularly special operations) means—but not escalating to conventional war.

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