

The Quds Force and drug trafficking in the world

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Abstract

The Quds Force is one of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps's five forces. It is impossible to separate the Quds force and the IRGC from each other. Since its establishment, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has supported terrorist groups in the region and Islamic countries.

The "*Quds Force*," or the "*Sepah*," took its name from the title given to Jerusalem by the Islamic Republic and was formed based on Article Seven of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps' Statute regarding the support of Islamic movements outside Iran's borders. This duty was first handled by the "Liberation Movements Unit" under the responsibility of Mohammad Montazeri and then by Mehdi Hashemi until the Unit was dissolved by the end of 1981. This Unit was also considered a sub-group of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The "Islamic liberation movements" was also taken over by the intelligence unit of the IRGC for a while. This force was established during the Iran-Iraq war, and its purpose was to operate on Iraq's soil. Some sources have estimated this force to have up to 50,000 members worldwide.

As the head of the Quds Force, Ghassem Soleimani created several other groups, such as the *Hosseinioun*, the *Fatemioun*, the *Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi*, *Badr Corps*, *Asaib Ahl al-Haq*, "*Hezbollah of Iraq*," in Yemen, the Quds Force supported the "*Ansar Allah*" group, all of these groups are politically, financially and militarily supported by the Iranian regime. Considering this organization's vast area of activities in the region, this article seeks to answer the central question of what role the Quds Force of the IRGC of Iran has played in drug trafficking in the Middle East and worldwide.

Key Words: Quds Force, The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Crisis, war, traffic, drugs, terrorism, Iran.

Introduction

The background of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) activity in the drug trade and smuggling dates back to the Iran-Iraq war.

During the eight years of war, considering the dire need to provide financial resources to buy weapons and ammunition and keep the war market warm, the Iranian Government took action by using the immunity of diplomacy and the vast land, sea, and air logistics facilities it had at its disposal to smuggle Opium all over the world (Hajizadeh, 2020).

After Iran's defeat in the eight-year war in Iraq and adoption of a costly nuclear weapons policy, the need to buy and sell these anti-human substances was felt more than before.

Taking into account that the per capita drug economy is 2,000 billion dollars and its annual profit is 600 billion dollars, it was considered by the Iranian authorities as a source of income.

Iran is an important crossing point for the passage of drugs and food to the world. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes reported that Iran's neighbor country, Afghanistan, produces 74% of the world's Opium poppy (UNODC, 2022). Thus, the role of government bodies, including the Revolutionary Guards, in this business and transaction cannot be denied (Sazegar, 2023).

However, the Iranian Government has executed thousands of smugglers to distort the world's public opinion, and experts believe this action shows only one side of the coin (Moradi, 2022). Security and intelligence

investigations carried out in some countries revealed the direct and extensive role of the overseas branch of the Quds force of the IRGC in this profitable business.

Therefore, to further clarify the connection between the "Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps" in drug trafficking in the world, the following points are mentioned:

The IRGC and heroin smuggling to Nigeria

On November 19, 2010, Nigerian government officials announced that they discovered 130 kilograms of heroin in a shipment that had entered Nigeria from Iran, whose final destination was Europe. The Nigerian security forces announced that they seized 13 containers containing illegal weapons from Iran (Reuters, 2010). The publication of this news caused Iran to bustle. Manouchehr Mottaki, the former minister of foreign affairs, tried to calm the situation by traveling to Nigeria and called everything a "misunderstanding." (Alarabiya,2010). However, the Nigerian security forces arrested several Iranians in connection with these shipments. They officially held the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps responsible for smuggling drugs and weapons to Nigeria (Zenn,2010). In this regard, Abolhasan Bani Sadr revealed the names of two smugglers in Nigeria named "Azeem Agha Jani and Seyyed Ahmed Tehmasabi" who are high-ranking elements of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guard Corps (BaniSadr, 2010).

The disclosure of the NTV television channel about the IRGC's smuggling activities in Azerbaijan

On May 6, 2011, the "Iran Briefing" website translated a report published on the Turkish NTV channel into Persian. This report stated that 25 members of a drug trafficking in Azerbaijan were arrested, 8 of whom were local employees of the Iranian embassy in Baku. In their confessions, they revealed they were members of the IRGC's criminal activities. The Iranian authorities promised the death penalty for all eight criminals and requested their deportation to Iran; thus, the Baku government handed them over. These people were arrested again on charges of drug trafficking in Azerbaijan after a while (Iran Briefing, 2011). In this incident, the coordination between the Quds Force and the Iranian embassies in drug smuggling to other countries, especially Europe, was revealed to everyone.

Iran's role in the development of opium plantations in Afghanistan

In its analytical report dated May 24, 2011, titled "The Intractable Drug Problem in Afghanistan," the "Suboot News Agency" affiliated with Afghanistan stated:

Since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, not only has the cultivation and trafficking of narcotics not decreased in Afghanistan, but it has increased dozens of times. The cultivated area increased from 8,000 hectares in 2001 to 123,000 hectares by 2010 (Suboot, 2012). This proves that a big customer has entered the market to buy and sell drugs. This report added that Iran had adopted a policy encouraging narcotics cultivation in Afghanistan and supporting its production(EU4MD, 2021)

The IRGC intelligence forces import drugs into Iran in their own way and then send them to the world markets. In addition, to control the border with Afghanistan, the IRGC built a long wall from "Tasuki" to "Shagali" port and dug a ditch on the side of this wall, making it impossible to pass through the area. However, it has set certain places for the passage of Iranian forces, and in this way, it controls and smuggles drugs into Iran (AftabNews,2021).

All narcotics enter Iran in 3 ways:

1. One is through the land, where 40 to 50 people carry a few kilos of materials on foot and walk for 40 days from Rabat to Shiraz.
2. The second way is through caravans
3. The third way is by air. In this case, the Iranian Government cannot claim that it was unaware of its arrival. (MEI, 2007).

As a result, 60% of the drugs produced in Afghanistan are converted into heroin and morphine after entering Iran. Then, it is transited to European, Asian, American, and Canadian countries through the drug mafia networks of the Quds Force.

The IRGC uses billions of dollars of income from drug trafficking to advance its weapons policies and support global terrorist groups, interfere in neighboring countries' internal affairs, culturally attack them, and make the world community unsafe (Global Initiative, 2020).

Billions in drug trade income for the IRGC

According to the Times newspaper, since the Revolutionary Guards have a monopoly on drug trafficking in Iran and are connected with the criminal networks that distribute it worldwide, they receive billions of dollars annually. It further added that the American intelligence agency identified two high-ranking Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps members directly involved in drug trafficking. One of them was General Abdullah Iraqi, the head of the Security Department of the Adjutancy Intelligence of the Armed Forces, connected with criminal groups in Eastern Europe. The second person was one of the former commanders of the IRGC in 1980 named Mohsen Rafiqdoost, who has links with criminal organizations (Times newspaper,2011).

The growth of death sentences of Iranians in Malaysia.

Currently, 362 Iranians are in Malaysian prisons. The Iranian embassy in Malaysia has announced that most prisoners have been accused of opium smuggling, and 64 are awaiting the death sentence for transporting drugs to this country (Campaign against the execution of the Iranian prisoners in Malaysia. 2022).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran has intervened to help these criminals, has hired a lawyer for them, and is in talks with the Malaysian authorities to reach a bilateral agreement for the transfer of convicts between Iran and Malaysia. The question is how these defendants could import drug shipments into Malaysia after passing through inspections at the Iranian airports, which the IRGC controls.

The growth in glass smuggling in Southeast Asia.

"Radio Farda" reported on January 26, 2011, the issue of glass smuggling by Iranian nationals. This report stated: "At the end of 2010, the heads of the anti-narcotics organizations of the Southeast Asian countries officially announced in their 35th meeting that Iran had become one of the sources of drug imports." (RadioFarda. 2011). Thai authorities reported glass smuggling by Iranian nationals, and Japanese authorities said that one-fifth of non-resident foreigners arrested with glass are Iranian nationals.

By arresting 5 Iranians, the Malaysian police discovered 75 kilograms of glass, and the Sri Lankan police discovered about 16 kilograms of glass by arresting two other individuals in 2014. Also, 10 Iranian glass smugglers were arrested by the Indonesian police at the end of 2018; among them, 8 were girls with Chadors (fully covered with black cloth). This team carried contraband worth 12.5 million dollars, including glass and related liquids (Moafi. 2018).

The investigations found that these cargoes were imported to Indonesia from Iran, Syria, and Malaysia air borders. In addition, the IRGC sends pilgrims to holy places in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq as a cover for drug trafficking.

It should be noted that the complete control of Imam Khomeini Airport in Tehran by the Revolutionary Guards has clarified the reasons for the facilitation and proliferation of air narcotics smuggling (IFMAT, 2023).

Drug trafficking by Houthis with the help of IRGC and Hezbollah

With the help of Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Lebanon's Hezbollah, Houthi militias have created numerous mafia networks to smuggle drugs to Yemen and neighboring countries.

Since the Houthis took over Sana'a, drug trafficking has increased in Yemen (Al-Tamimi, 2022). By abusing its control over the institutions of transportation and military security services, the Houthis have put all local smugglers under its control.

In September 2016, the Houthis released 82 prominent traffickers from Sana'a Central Prison and four major drug traffickers from two regions in Hajjah province. By controlling Yemen's professional drug dealers, the Houthi militias forced their new dealers and smugglers to cooperate with the Revolutionary Guards and the Hezbollah mafia to implement their plans to increase their income with the booming drug trade.

According to Yemen's Ministry of Interior Affairs, in a joint operation, the naval and security forces seized about 78 drug shipments smuggled to Yemen between September 2016 and April 2022.

In January 2023, the French naval forces seized thousands of assault rifles, machine guns, and anti-tank missiles headed from Iran to Yemen (Aljazeera, 2023).

The former security officials of Al-Jawf province stated that these shipments of drugs were imported from Iran, Lebanon, South America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. They were smuggled in by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps mafia in cooperation with the Houthis (Alariya,2023)

Approval of a new law to prevent the IRGC's illegal activities in America

In 2012, a bill entitled "Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act of 2012" was approved by the United States Senate and House of Representatives in the Congress session (H.R.3783- 2012). The following are mentioned in this law:

"To develop and promote relations, Iran's Quds Force deploys operatives and agents in foreign embassies, charitable institutions, and religious and cultural institutions. In recent years, their presence in Latin America has become more robust."

Through its representatives in Latin American countries, Iran engages in drug trafficking, forgery, and money laundering to increase income from illegal activities.

According to the narcotics police report, Americans are concerned about the cooperation of the IRGC and Hezbollah with Mexican drug cartels and syndicates to use smuggling techniques and ways to transport people and drugs to the United States (Valencia,2014). In 2022, 128 individuals connected to international drug networks and money launderers affiliated with Hezbollah were arrested in drug enforcement operations. (Anyssia, 2022)

Undoubtedly, Hezbollah, as one of the overseas mafia branches of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, is perfectly coordinated with Iran's Quds Force in carrying out illegal activities. Without the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps intelligence and logistical assistance, Hezbollah cannot perform its criminal activities in America.

In 2011, the United States arrested two Iranians, one named Mansour Arbab Siyar and the other a member of the IRGC's Quds Force, on charges of plotting to kill the Saudi ambassador. (The U.S. Department of Justice, 2011)

Arbab Siyar confessed that he traveled to Mexico to hire someone in the drug trade to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in America. This confession revealed the close connection between the Mexican drug cartels and the high-ranking members of the Quds Force.

In January 2023, FBI Director Christopher Wray stated that three people had been arrested and charged with murder. The criminal group, linked to the Quds Force, had been planning the assassination of Masih Alinejad, an Iranian-American journalist and activist, a vocal opponent of the Iranian regime, based in New York. Masi Alinejad was also the target of a foiled kidnapping attempt linked to Iranian intelligence operatives in 2021 (Johnson, 2023).

Revolutionary Guard Corps in America

Reuters news agency announced on July 3, 2012, that the U.S. Treasury placed Gholamreza Baghbani, one of the prominent members of the Quds Force, on the list of sanctioned and prosecuted people due to drug trade and trafficking and blocked all his assets.

Baghbani imported narcotics from Afghanistan to Iran and transported them worldwide using land and air routes. In return, he would supply weapons and ammunition to the Taliban forces. (The U.S Department of Treasury, 2012)

WikiLeaks and the IRGC

Wikileaks published documents regarding Iran's involvement in drug trafficking to the Republic of Azerbaijan.

According to BBC Farsi, WikiLeaks published "The confidential document, which dates back to December 12, 2009, revealed the involvement of high-ranking IRGC officials in drug smuggling to the Republic of Azerbaijan. This document, issued by the American Embassy in Baku, noted that heroin smuggled from Iran to Azerbaijan had increased from 20 kg in 2006 to 59 thousand kg in 2009. This document emphasized that Iran used the Republic of Azerbaijan as the central passage to smuggle heroin to Europe (BBC Farsi, 2012). On this basis, as American diplomats have emphasized, Iran is the largest buyer of Afghan Opium and the largest producer of heroin in the world.

In February 2023, The Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Azerbaijan announced that it had arrested the members of an organized criminal group under the leadership of an Iranian citizen. According to the Ministry of Interior Affairs, the detainees were engaged in the transportation of narcotics in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Nearly 11 kilos of drugs, including methamphetamine, known as "glass" or "crystal," were seized from this

group. In 2021, Ilham Aliyev, the president of Azerbaijan, accused Iran of smuggling drugs to Europe through Armenia for 30 years; Iran and Armenia denied the accusation. However, the facts are that Armenia managed the 130 kilometers of the border until 2020; therefore, Iran and Armenia used this route to send drugs to Europe in an international conspiracy (BBC,2021).

Conclusion

Iran's increasing need for money to complete its ambitious nuclear project is using all its political, diplomatic, and logistical facilities without hesitation to buy, sell and smuggle drugs.

As a result of the failure of different countries to take a serious stand against Iran's action, the IRGC has prepared its ground to implement and spread its criminal activities into the countries of Southeast Asia, China, Japan, Latin American countries, Africa, Europe, America, and Canada. It has expanded and gained billions of dollars annually by controlling the world's drug trade.

In January 2023, the European Parliament approved a resolution recognizing Iran's elite force and its subsidiaries, like the paramilitary Basij and the Quds Force, as "terrorist" organizations. The Quds Force and the IRGC have been on the American blacklist since 2019. President Biden also decided in 2022 to keep the organization on the American Blacklist.

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