

Iranian Concepts of Warfare

UNDERSTANDING TEHRAN'S
EVOLVING MILITARY DOCTRINES

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A M E R I C A N E N T E R P R I S E I N S T I T U T E

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Executive Summary

This study lays out how formal and informal structures in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) create strategy and doctrine, which institutions or individuals matter in shaping doctrinal ideas, and which historical and ideological factors drive IRI thinking about military power. The analytic framework provides a way to model the nature of IRI defensive and offensive doctrines, and it aims to explain how and why Iranian strategy and force posture may evolve as restrictions on resources and conventional weapon acquisitions are relaxed under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Rather than attempting to provide Tehran's military operational manual, this study attempts to demonstrate how to conceptualize and study IRI military doctrine.

The IRI's doctrine-formation process is promulgated through a series of policy documents, with input from IRI military planners at each stage in the process. As with the US planning process, the development, interpretation, and implementation of Iranian strategy and doctrine do not always follow in a clear and linear sequence. However, the IRI's system has several distinctive elements related to both the unique consultative decision-making structures in the government and the Marxist-influenced approach toward planned economy. Understanding the writings of the informal thought oligarchy of military leaders and the most influential authors in the IRI's extensive system of think tanks and staff colleges is also crucial to comprehending modern Iranian doctrinal trends.

Historical experience, religious ideals, and ideological concerns shape the IRI's approach to war and military doctrine, but they do not determine it. Across many historical periods, such as the Persian Empire, the Islamic conquest, the Safavid dynasty, the 19th-century Qajar dynasty, the Pahlavi shahs in the 20th century, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iranian state struggled with its relationship to modernity

and its religious and political nature. Many of these unresolved issues carried over into postrevolutionary era, even as new ideological concepts became dominant and Iran faced two external existential threats: Iraq and the United States. The IRI's split military structure, which is divided between the conventional Artesh and the ideologically driven Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and its current military thinking centered on defensive and asymmetric warfare against the United States are arguably reactions to these overlapping factors.

Several broad conclusions can be made about the characteristics of modern IRI doctrine, based on these key historical influences and formal processes, as well as a review of available IRI doctrinal materials, relevant senior leader statements, and major Iranian military exercises over the past five years. IRI military doctrine does not descend from Islamic revolutionary thought per se. IRI doctrines instead appear to draw mostly on military lessons learned to find effective, pragmatic solutions for Tehran's security challenges in the framework of the state's ideological and geostrategic objectives. Most doctrines are ad hoc, despite the overall increasing formality and complexity of the IRI's system for strategy development. There is explicit incorporation of foreign military thinking and capabilities, especially US doctrines, although ex post facto ideological and Islamic moral justification from the supreme leader for any doctrine is still required. The Artesh and the IRGC's competing military structures will remain an inherent feature of Iranian doctrine and strategy, even as the IRI leadership engages in stronger efforts to improve interoperability.

As a revolutionary state constantly worried about potential instability and counterrevolution triggered by its adversaries during conflict, the IRI sees war in 360 degrees. Iranian doctrines reflect this porosity across the spectrum of offensive and defensive

operations, when an external Artesh campaign may need to quickly transition into an internal one, or when IRGC actions may move from regime defense to deterrence to power projection then back to deterrence or attempt to achieve all three objectives simultaneously.

Together these concepts can be used to form a working model of the IRI's existing doctrines, showing how they align against Tehran's defensive and offensive objectives, indicating areas of particular doctrinal strengths and weakness, and pointing to potential future directions for the Iranian military. The IRI military is still dominated by defensive doctrines oriented around four primary objectives: regime security, territorial defense, demonstrative deterrence (or shows of force), and retaliatory deterrence.

The IRI's offensive doctrines are designed primarily around exporting the revolution and Iranian influence abroad while ensuring the creation and maintenance of proxy forces that can employ retaliatory deterrence against opponents, such as Lebanese Hezbollah. These

doctrines have notably remained almost entirely unconventional. The IRI generally continues to lack classical offensive doctrines to project conventional military power aiming to coerce an opponent; seize ground, air, or maritime space; or defeat or destroy an enemy's forces. However, the IRGC has increasingly integrated conventional capabilities and war-fighting concepts into its unconventional campaigns in the current Syria and Iraq conflicts.

The degree to which the IRI will become a more balanced or conventional military as the JCPOA allows for greater access to weapons and technology will be determined by the increase of defense budgetary resources, the level of the military leadership's trust and integration of the Artesh, the relaxation of the regime's ideological hesitation of appearing imperialistic through offensive conventional warfare, and, perhaps most importantly, a shift in threat perception away from a dominant focus on asymmetric defense against the United States toward competition and confrontation with regional rivals and threats.

Introduction

How does the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) think about using military power to achieve its security objectives? Is there one school or rather many schools of Iranian military thought? Why is Iran's military structured as it currently is? Why and how could that change, especially given the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and Iran's deepening role in the regional wars in Syria and Iraq?

These are fundamentally questions of doctrine that are important to defense policymakers and military planners. Understanding how the Iranian leadership looks at military power and strategy is crucial to designing a better US force posture in the region, improving security cooperation with our allies, and communicating more effective responses to Tehran's behavior in the Middle East and globally.

A state's written doctrine, such as it may exist, is essential to understanding its leadership's approach to employing armed force. However, the realities of military structure, deployments, operations, or goals do not always reflect what is officially published. What has happened or would likely happen on the battlefield is what really matters for commanders and planners on both sides.

Although doctrine can establish parameters for training, preparation, and initial campaign designs in conflict, it inevitably evolves to address the specifics of individual military challenges. In the heat of combat, sometimes this evolution can be quite rapid. Evaluating the decision-making processes, historical factors and trends, bodies of writing, and observed military behaviors related to the development of doctrine arguably provides the optimal approach for

assessing how a state prepares for and will likely conduct war.

This study draws from numerous Iranian strategy and doctrinal writings, statements and interviews from key leadership figures, observation of military exercises from the past five years, and observed military behavior in crisis and conflicts since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The report attempts to build an analytic framework for examining the IRI's war-fighting concepts. It explores doctrine at the strategic level—that is, how a state's military power is designed and employed to achieve its security objectives. It does not look deeply at the more operational or tactical levels of conflict. There will be no discussion of how many missiles Iran would theoretically launch in its first salvos against US, Gulf Arab, or Israeli forces in a regional war. Neither will it focus on the latest siege tactics used by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its proxies in Syria.

Instead, this study lays out how formal and informal structures in Iran create strategy and doctrine, which institutions or individuals matter in shaping doctrinal ideas, and the historical and ideological factors that drive IRI thinking about military power. This model conceptualizes the nature of IRI defensive and offensive doctrines and aims to explain how and why Iranian strategy and force posture may evolve as restrictions on resources and conventional weapon acquisitions are relaxed under the JCPOA. Rather than attempting to provide Tehran's operational manual, this study demonstrates how to conceptualize and study IRI military doctrine.

Strategy and Doctrine Formation

The United States has a system of strategy development and doctrine formation that begins with the president's National Security Strategy. This document informs the national defense and military strategies and subsequent joint planning processes, which guide doctrinal development, contingency planning, and defense acquisition across the Department of Defense.

In a similar way, the IRI develops its strategies and doctrines from an overarching conceptualization that the supreme leader lays out in his 20-Year Vision. From this document, Iran creates five-year cyclical development plans, which, at least in the past three iterations, not only direct Iran's budget and economic policies but also provide guidance for the Islamic Republic's security requirements and areas of defense investment. As with the US planning process, the development, interpretation, and implementation of Iranian strategy and doctrine do not always follow in a clear and linear sequence. However, there are several distinctive elements to the IRI's system related to both the unique consultative decision-making structures in the government and the Marxist-influenced approach toward planned economy.

The 20-Year Vision. The supreme leader and his inner circle of advisers receive information and advice from the Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) and the government's other foreign policy and defense principals before issuing recommendations for the 20-Year Vision document and the five-year plans. Under the direction of the IRGC's former head, Mohsen Rezaei, Iran's Expediency Council prepared the last 20-Year Vision. The council consulted multiple outside experts and took five years to reach a consensus before issuing it in 2005.

Contextualizing the document's timing is important. It was drafted during the last part of Mohammad

Khatami's presidency, when Iran was in a particularly defensive position. Iran's nuclear activities in violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty had been revealed in 2002, putting Tehran under intense diplomatic scrutiny. The US invasion of neighboring Iraq in 2003 had also triggered a significant fear of US military action against the state. The IRGC began a proxy war against US and allied forces in Iraq in reaction, while also apparently halting the bulk of its nuclear weapons program for at least two years.

It is important to examine how the 20-Year Vision addresses the long-standing tensions and internal contradictions of Iran's ideological, security, and economic objectives.

With this defensive context in mind, it is important to examine how the 20-Year Vision addresses the long-standing tensions and internal contradictions of Iran's ideological, security, and economic objectives. The vision reflects a developmentalist foreign policy, whereby Iran should conduct its external affairs to promote a stable international environment that allows for the economic growth necessary for the

republic to become a first-rate power.¹ Despite this focus on stability, the vision calls for Iran to continue spreading its model of religious governance in the Islamic world, which is just the first of many contradictory goals articulated through Iran's doctrinal development process. The IRGC's execution of this mission through the development of its proxy forces in the region, of course, inevitably results in a significant amount of instability that supposedly Iran is trying to avoid.

The vision's most explicit security-related guidance focuses on defense and deterrence. The vision states that Iran will become "secure, independent, and powerful with a defense system based on all-fronts deterrence [or full-scale deterrence] and alliance between the government and the population."² This language is arguably reflective of the conceptual basis for the state's strategy and force posture since the end of the Iran-Iraq War. As I argued in *Iran's Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolution*, the IRI remains a fundamentally defensive state from a conventional military sense, focused on deterrent rather than offensive operations.³ This guidance also reflects the importance Iran's leadership places on maintaining the stability and legitimacy of the revolutionary Islamic regime. The emphasis on "alliance between the government and the population" and the fear of efforts by external forces to undermine this alliance plays an outsized role in the IRI's military and security efforts to defend against foreign subversion, or the so-called soft war, and prevent the potentially destabilizing effects of foreign economic investment.⁴

It is uncertain whether Iran will have another 20-Year Vision or if this was a one-time exercise. However, the themes and direction provided in this document still appear to be highly relevant 10 years later, despite the confrontation with the international community over Iran's nuclear program and the dramatic expansion of regional and sectarian conflicts involving Iran that have occurred since it was issued. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's decision to de-escalate with the West and pursue a nuclear agreement to rescue Iran's economic situation can also be seen in this developmentalist framework.

The idea that Iran's foreign policy should serve to enrich and strengthen the republic has been a major theme of President Hassan Rouhani's since taking office in 2013. In a January 2015 speech, Rouhani emphasized the importance of using Iran's foreign policies to strengthen its economy, implying criticism of the IRGC's willingness—in contrast—to take the state's wealth and use it to further ideological or strategic objectives abroad, such as in Syria since 2011.⁵ This policy construct should not be surprising since President Rouhani was likely involved in the vision's drafting: he was the secretary of the IRI's Supreme Council for National Security, lead nuclear negotiator with the P5+1, and a member of the Expediency Council during that period.

Five-Year Development Plans. Since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran has implemented five five-year development plans, reflecting the state-directed economic philosophies preferred by the revolutionary leadership. The first three plans—in 1990, 1995, and 2000—focused only on economic priorities and did not directly provide guidance in foreign policy, defense, or security issues. This changed with the creation of the 20-Year Vision. The fourth (2005) and fifth (2010) development plans gave increasingly detailed guidance for the IRI's defense and security requirements, drawing from the vision principles.

The US strategy and planning system stays in the executive branch, although Congress certainly retains control over budget allocation and defense policy oversight. In the Islamic Republic, the legislature (*majles*) has a more direct role in implementing defense strategy and planning. After a consultative process with key national leaders and advisers, Supreme Leader Khamenei issues broad guidance for each development plan, which is then sent to the Expediency Council and parliament for consideration.⁶ The Expediency Council then advises the president on crafting a bill with provisions for carrying out policies, which he sends to the parliament for amendment and ratification.⁷

Each year's annual budget is guided by the Five-Year Development Plan. The bill to amend and ratify the sixth Five-Year Development Plan was delayed until

2016 so that the JCPOA could be implemented and the new parliament, which sat in May 2016, could consider it. The fact that defense and security requirements that direct the armed forces procurement, training, and doctrinal formation are codified into law is a distinctive aspect of the IRI system.

The fifth Five-Year Development Plan guides the budgets and defense and security policies from 2011 to 2017. There are three major security directives.⁸ The first focuses on raising Iran's prestige, status, power, and role in the region and the international system to strengthen national security and advance the national interest. This includes strengthening international ties, especially with its neighbors and nonhostile powers. The plan also reiterates the IRI's long-standing position to work to liberate the region from foreign military presence.

The second directive addresses the IRI's distinctive concept of comprehensive security.⁹ This includes not only traditionally defensive measures such as border security and defense of sovereignty but also defensive goals aimed at preventing civil insurrection. The aim of strengthening the people's role in "pursuing anti-security activities," "developing passive defenses," and encouraging collaboration among the intelligence, security, and judicial institutions are all part of the IRI's fear of soft war, or the United States and other Western powers' efforts to undermine and ultimately overthrow the regime.¹⁰

The third security-related directive focuses on territorial integrity and creating a regional balance through "updating and repairing defensive industries," "increasing self-sufficiency," expanding the popular mobilization, and securing Iran's border regions.¹¹

The sixth Five-Year Development Plan has not been amended and ratified at the time of writing. Khomeini provided the guidance for the plan in 2015.¹² He emphasized the need to build Iran's scientific and technological base, improve defensive systems, and place a major investment in cyber capabilities. The plan still primarily remains a document focused on economic and social development, but some points are related specifically to defense, security, and foreign policy. It focuses on expanding Iran's trade and foreign relations with Southwest Asia and promotes

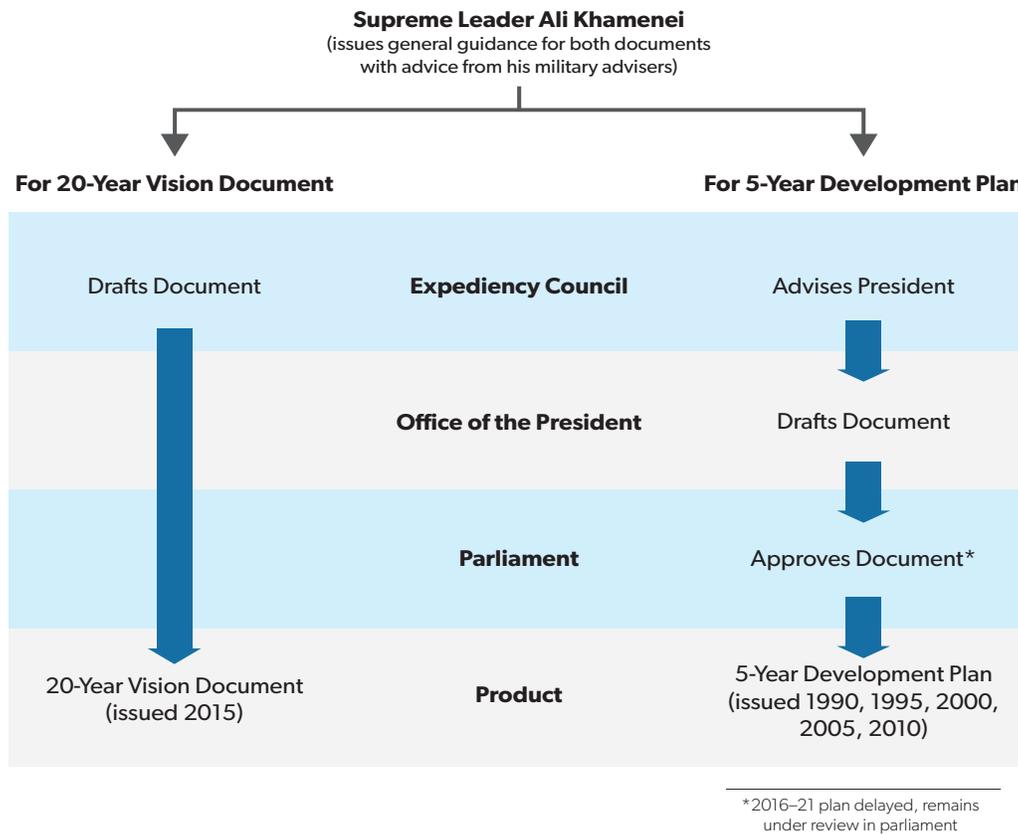
policies designed to encourage foreign direct investment.¹³ Among the plan's security specific provisions are a 5 percent increase to Iran's defense budget and increased development of Iran's ballistic missile capabilities, cyber infrastructure, arms production, and modern weapons acquisitions.¹⁴

Doctrinal Formation in Military Institutions.

Not surprising for observers of the US or other states' defense planning process, the IRI faces serious challenges in systemically generating and implementing doctrine, procurement strategy, and capability development. The planning and guidance documents released by the supreme leader and the president and ratified by the legislature do set priorities and boundaries for doctrinal development debates, their comprehensiveness improving with each iteration. However, the vision document and five-year plans do not resolve those debates. That is left to the AFGS and the individual services of the IRGC and the regular Artesh. There is a circular element to this process (as detailed in Figure 1), as the senior AFGS officers advise the supreme leader, sit on the Expediency Council, and engage with the legislature during the development of the guiding documents. New strategies, war-fighting concepts, techniques, tactics, and procedures are operationalized through procurement and training policies.

Procurement and Policy Organizations. Procurement policy and capability generation are implemented primarily by Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL), although agencies such the Passive Defense Organization (PDO) and the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC), formed in 2012, lead the development and employment of their respective platforms given their increasing importance for internal defense and need for intra-governmental coordination.¹⁶ In a June 2015 interview, the newly appointed head of the AFGS Cyber Headquarters, IRGC Brigadier General Second Class Behrouz Esbati, specifically compared his role to that of IRGC Brigadier General Gholam Reza Jalali, the head of the PDO.¹⁷ Esbati explains deficiencies in the SCC but notes that its status should be protected.

Figure 1. 30,000-Foot View of the Doctrine Formation Process¹⁵



Source: The author, adopted and modified from Fariborz Pir Islami, “National Security in Light of the 5th Development Plan of the I.R.I.,” *Journal of Defense Policy* 20, no. 78.

Coordination of war-fighting strategies and contingency planning for the military rests in the AFGS’s staff elements, most likely centered in the strategic planning and deputy commander’s offices. The IRGC and Artesh staffs, however, likely shoulder the majority of the planning requirements themselves. This relationship among the staffs is unclear, although the recent AFGS personnel changes may indicate that the AFGS is increasingly important in managing this process.

Another uncertainty is the role of the recently revived Khatam-al Anbiya Central Headquarters under former AFGS Deputy Chief Brigadier Gholam Ali Rashid, who assumed command in July 2016. Khatam-al Anbiya played a significant role in the Iran-Iraq War by coordinating operations between the IRGC and Artesh, and command of it has been

referred to as one the most prestigious positions in the military.¹⁸ However, the AFGS was created to make up for the failings of Khatam-al Anbiya, which apparently has not had a commander since the 1980s.¹⁹ Khatam-al Anbiya’s resurrection shows a new emphasis on improving intermilitary operational coordination in addition to allowing for fresh blood in the crucial AFGS deputy position.

Training and Education Organizations. Responsibility for interservice doctrine and training rests primarily with the IRGC’s and Artesh’s Command and General Staff colleges, collectively known as Dafoos. The IRGC’s and Artesh’s individual Command and General Staff schools were merged in 1990 as part of post-Iran-Iraq War efforts to professionalize the

postrevolutionary military, although each side retains a degree of operational autonomy. The individual services in the IRGC and Artesh appear to retain their own professional military education (PME) institutions for doctrinal purposes.

At the more strategic level, training and education for rising senior military leaders from all services are conducted at the Supreme National Defense University (SNDU), which reports directly to the AFGS. As mentioned earlier, the PDO is responsible for coordinating the development of cross-government training and education of passive defense, although a large focus of the organization is also to sponsor scientific research into better deception, concealment, and hardening of vulnerable military and civilian targets against superior US and allied air power. The Supreme Council for Cyberspace may eventually develop the capacity to play a similar role on the IRI's cyber policy.

IRI Culture of Strategic Research. These key nodes for development of IRI military doctrine—the SNDU, the IRGC's and Artesh's Command and General Staff College, and the PDO—are joined by numerous government-controlled think tanks and several academic institutions devoted to research and education on military and security issues. The IRI government invests significantly in these organizations, which together form a dense network of technical knowledge policy influence. Figure 2 details key elements of this network.

Only China and Russia have anything like the IRI's system of official, government-sponsored think tanks and universities devoted to strategic and military research.²⁰ Certainly other states in the region do not have anything comparable.

These two dozen or so institutions are all connected to specific parts of the government. The most important nonmilitary think tank is the Center for Strategic Research (CSR), which is directly connected to the Expediency Council and the Office of the Supreme Leader. The CSR is currently headed by Khamenei's most senior foreign policy adviser, Ali Akbar Velayati. Hassan Rouhani led the center during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, before Rouhani became president in 2013. The president's office,

most of the major cabinet offices, and the parliament (*majles*) all have their own respective think tanks.

The IRGC's massive Imam Hussein University (IHU) dominates research and education on the military side. In addition to its undergraduate and graduate programs, IHU houses the IRGC Command and Staff College (where Rashid is a professor) and about seven research centers. The most important of these appears to be the Center for Defensive National Security Studies (CDNSS). Four additional doctrinal and military research centers exist directly under the IRGC staff, all likely maintaining education relationships with IHU.

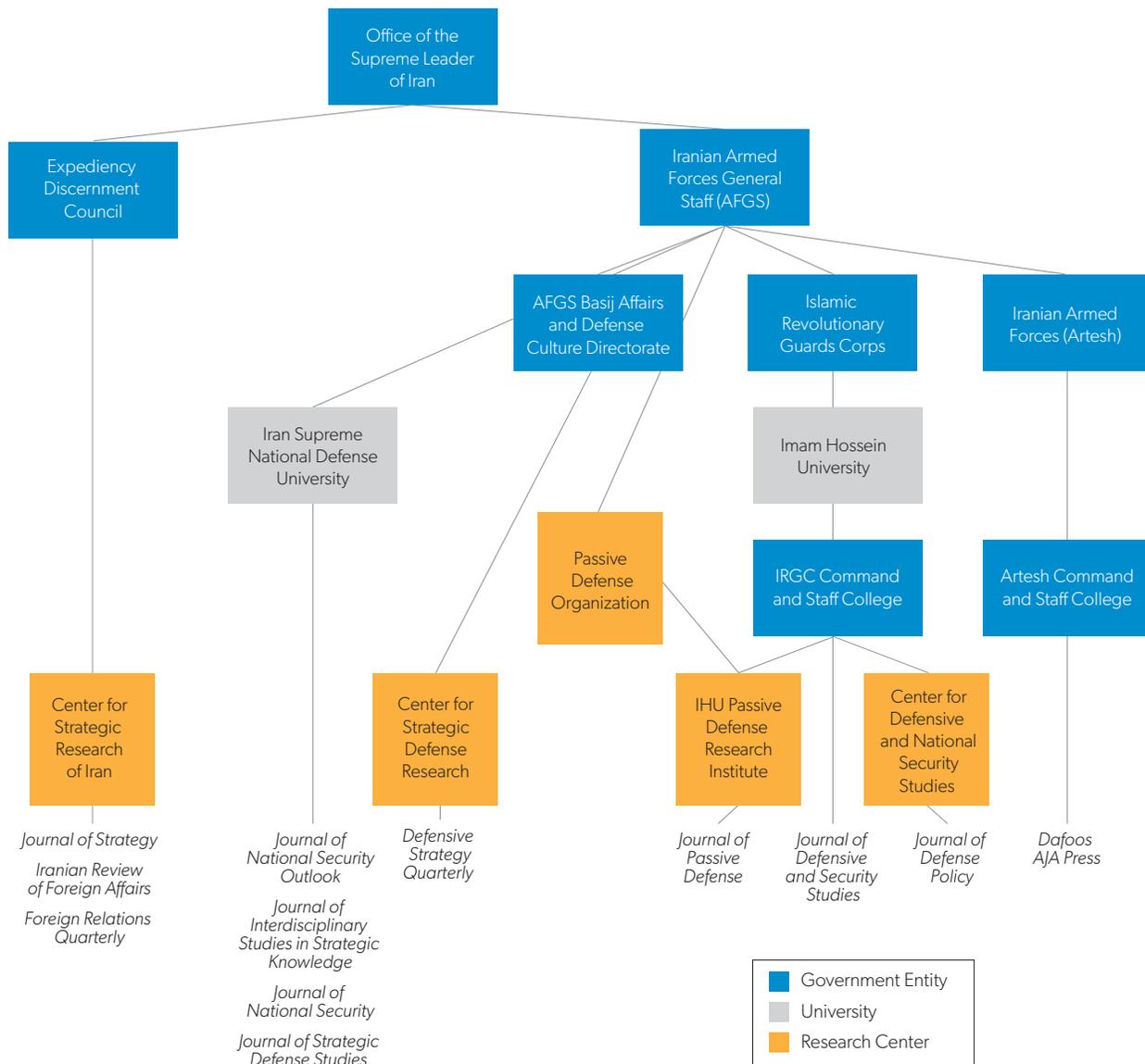
Aside from its Command and Staff College, the Artesh's main think tank is the Center for Strategic Defense Research. The center's director is Ahmad Vahidi, the former defense minister and current chair of the Expediency Council's Security and Defense Committee.

As shown by the experiences of key personalities such as Rouhani, Velayati, and Vahidi, the leadership of Iran's most important research institutions are considered powerful and prestigious positions. Those institutions also play roles similar to US think tanks in providing a place for political leaders to remain part of the game when they are out of power, as Rouhani did at the CSR when he left his senior government positions under President Khatami during the Ahmadinejad period.²¹

Other important figures include these institutions' board members and those authors published frequently in the major journals published by these think tanks. The CSR publishes *Rahbord (Strategy) Quarterly*, *National Interests*, and the *International Foreign Relations Quarterly*. CDNSS publishes the prominent *Journal of Defense Policy*.²² The command and staff colleges publish *Defense and Security Studies* and *Military Science and Tactics*. The SNDU has the *Journal Strategy and Defense Studies*, while the PDO under Gholamreza Jalili has numerous publications for different audiences.

Together, key military and national security leaders such as Rashid, Rouhani, Velayati, Vahidi, and Jalili, along with the most frequent and cited authors at these major journals and think tanks (many of

Figure 2. The IRI’s Military and Strategic Research Think Tank Network



Note: For more information, please see Appendix A.
 Source: The author.

whom were those government leaders’ professors), form a thought oligarchy that reflects and shapes the IRI’s development of military doctrine and strategy. Understanding this collective group’s writings,

theories, and worldview is crucial to comprehending IRI doctrine and helps form the basis of the findings in this study.

Historical and Ideological Influences on IRI Doctrine

In the prerevolutionary period, the Iranian state developed from the Persian Empire through the Islamic conquest, the Shia conversion during the Safavid dynasty, and the humiliation and weakness of the Qajar dynasty, which produced a military under the Pahlavi shahs in the 20th century that struggled with its relationship to modernity and its religious and political nature. Most of these insecurities and unresolved issues carried over into postrevolutionary era, even as new ideological concerns became dominant and Iran faced two external existential threats—Iraq and the United States. The IRI’s unique structure and current military thinking are arguably reactions to these overlapping factors.

Historical Literature. As noted in *Iran’s Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolution*, there is not a defined canon of Iranian military thought or doctrine.²³ Historical influences, especially pre-1979 influences, on IRI doctrine are certainly still present, although their effect on modern thought is not always obvious.

Part of the reason there is no clear Persian analogue to Sun Tzu or Carl von Clausewitz, authors whose works are taught in modern classes on military strategy in the Western world, is that Persian traditions of military strategy were mostly oral. Few written works were passed down to modern times.²⁴

This does not mean historical conflicts are not cited in modern Iranian military research and doctrine. Specific battles and campaigns of the Islamic wars of the seventh century, for example, are discussed in recent PME works, along with well-known battles in Western history, to explore useful operational concepts, tactics, techniques, and procedures.²⁵

Religion. Islam has clearly had profound effects on the Iranian worldview since the seventh century. Discerning the exact scope of religion’s impact on modern Iranian strategic thinking before the Islamic Revolution is difficult. Although the faith permeates the culture, the Quran itself is not well suited to guiding operations and tactics. However, the role of divine will and religious devotion as the most important contributor to military victory was a recurring theme in Iranian military history before 1979, although perhaps more on the margins than inside the imperial army itself.

The fabled Assassins of the 12th and 13th centuries were an Ismaili Shia political-religious sect in Persia and Syria whose fighters, the original *fedayeen* or “those willing to sacrifice themselves for God,” were motivated by promises of paradise and a desire to fight Christian crusaders and unjust Islamic rulers. The idea of *fedayeen* would reoccur several times in Iran during the 20th century, with groups such as Fadayan-e Islam, which opposed the more secular direction of the Iranian state and targeted opposing politicians for assassination during the 1950s.

The continuation of the ethos and aesthetic of the *fedayeen* in Iranian culture into modern times is likely tied to the elevation of martyrdom in warfare in Shiism. Since the conversion of the Persian Empire to Shia Islam in the 16th century under the Safavid dynasty, the reverence paid to Muhammad’s grandson and the third Imam in Shia Islam, Hossein ibn Ali, for his sacrificial death at the Battle of Karbala (680 CE) is a central tenet on Iranian religious thought and political rhetoric. The veneration of the martyr challenging the more powerful foe is also a recurring theme in IRGC rhetoric since its founding, manifest

in the first modern suicide bombers in the IRGC's proxy group Lebanese Hezbollah in the early 1980s and the language used to describe Iranian and allied casualties in the current conflict in Syria.

Related to *fedayeen* is the emergence of *mujahideen* groups, or those who fight jihad, at times in Persian history. The most famous of these periods was during the first part of the 20th century when a group of Persian nationalists, angered by the decrepit rule of the waning Qajar dynasty and the heavy-handed imperial behavior of Russia and the United Kingdom in the state, began organizing themselves into *mujahideen* in several cities. These groups not only fought to resist British or Russian domination in their respective cities but also became central players in pushing for reform during the 1906 constitutional revolution. Several groups during the 1970s revolutionary period also were called *mujahideen*. Fighting jihad would later become a central concept in the IRGC's strategic thought and approach to warfare, especially in its proxy wars abroad.

Dual Militaries. Persian and Iranian leaders have historically struggled to not only establish effective national security forces but also subsequently modernize those forces. This was especially true in the 19th and 20th centuries. At the heart of the problem was the central leadership's inability to raise and control a large standing army without those forces still ultimately being beholden to the tribes or cities from which they originated. The shah was normally forced to compromise with local notable and warlords to maintain and direct the imperial army. These circumstances also created significant distrust between the king and his army, frequently leading the shah to establish smaller elite forces—larger than what might be typical for a praetorian guard—that could be effectively trained and would remain loyal to him alone.

The most well-known of these more elite forces was the Persian Cossack Brigade. Established in the 1870s, the unit was modeled after the Imperial Russian Cossack Brigade and led mostly by imported Russian officers, with some Iranian officers. Reza Shah, who led a coup against the last Qajar shah in 1921 and

then founded the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925, was a powerful officer in the Cossack Brigade.

The Gendarmerie's creation is another example of Iran's struggle to modernize its military structures. The postrevolutionary government established the Persian Gendarmerie in 1910 to guard roads and protect cities, absorbing mostly the locally oriented *mujahideen* units. Given the traditional armed forces' inability to maintain domestic stability, Reza Shah later integrated the Cossack Brigade (Iran's most effective fighting force) and the Gendarmerie (Iran's most trusted fighting force) as the foundation of his new imperial army.

The continuation of the ethos and aesthetic of the *fedayeen* in Iranian culture into modern times is likely tied to the elevation of martyrdom in warfare in Shiism.

This pattern of dualing militaries, only one of which enjoys the trust of the national leadership, continued through the 1979 revolution, with Ayatollah Khomeini creating the IRGC as a force loyal to him and the Islamic Revolution. However, Iran's conventional army (the Artesh) was retained because entirely disbanding the shah's army would have left the state almost defenseless from foreign enemies.

Foreign Influence. The internal political and military weakness of the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties left them constantly vulnerable to the machinations of the European empires, especially Britain and Russia. Iran's encounters with modern European armies

exposed how far behind militarily the Persian army had become. In addition to the Russians that led the Cossack Brigade, various shahs would bring in officers from Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, and the United States during the 20th century to train, organize, and sometimes even lead their forces.

The US influence on the Iranian army after World War II was, of course, dominant. Regardless of any need to draw from Iran's historic or religious heritage, the desire to modernize quickly drove Mohammad Reza Shah's wholesale adoption of US and other Western training, equipping, and advising. From 1946 to 1979, the United States military assumed a substantial role in training and equipping Iran's military forces.²⁶

The US effort occurred first under the US Army Mission Headquarters (ARMISH) and then under the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in 1950. Under ARMISH and MAAG, the United States was almost entirely responsible for training and equipping Iranian armed forces.²⁷ The training included not only weapons transfers and education but also translations of US Army military manuals and regulations and assistance in designing war plans. Equipment transfers included US armored vehicles, self-propelled artillery, TOW missiles, M-47 tanks, M-60 tanks, and four US I-HAWK SAM battalions, along with 220 US helicopter gunships and nearly 400 other helicopters.

The shah invested heavily in his air force, acquiring not only F-5 Tigers but also F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers and F-14 Tomcats. Some members of the shah's military—especially the air force—defected following the 1979 revolution, taking with them the knowledge and skills they had gained from US and foreign trainers. However, the new Islamic Republic did retain some knowledge and kept much of the equipment operational. For instance, the F-4 Phantom fleet, although significantly degraded, retains some operational capability, as witnessed in late 2014, when the Artesh's F-4 Phantom fighter jets conducted several airstrikes in Diyala, Iraq.²⁸

Legacy of the Islamic Revolution and Iran-Iraq War. The Western war-fighting techniques and doctrines the Artesh possessed were largely retained

after 1979, but the force was relegated mostly to defending Iranian territory. Most senior officer corps and other leaders were also systemically purged, especially after the Nojeh coup attempt in 1980 by the Iranian air force.²⁹

From 1946 to 1979, the United States military assumed a substantial role in training and equipping Iran's military forces.

The postrevolutionary Artesh was in a state of complete flux when Saddam Hussein invaded in 1980.

The IRGC, on the other hand, was a brand-new organization thrown together when the Iran-Iraq War broke out. Its first mission was to defend the regime from counterrevolution, not to engage a regional military power like Saddam's army.

Although the corps possessed the revolutionary passion to endure hardship and persevere, they possessed little to no doctrinal traditions. There were no foreign military advisers and little international assistance. The IRGC acquired even basic offensive and defensive tactics through trial and error. If there were ideological factors that drove why the IRGC fought, there were few limitations on how they fought as long as their actions could be justified as meeting revolutionary or state security objectives.

The IRGC also lacked a culture of strategic planning. This limitation was highlighted by former IRGC Commander Mohsen Rezaei, who noted that the overall commander Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani never asked for military plans for Iranian victory over Iraq from 1982 until shortly before the war ended in 1988.³⁰

Because of these limitations, the IRGC—supported by a weakened Artesh—took an ad hoc doctrinal

approach during the eight-year conflict. In the aftermath of the war, the IRGC would found numerous journals, think tanks, and other educational institutions dedicated to understanding the lessons of the war. It is hard to underestimate the degree to which the Iran-Iraq War seared itself into the memory and worldview of the IRI's leadership. The military's subsequent cementing of its doctrinal focus around three main axes—proxy warfare, asymmetric warfare (especially naval defense), and ballistic missiles—in addition to internal defense can be directly traced to the experiences of the conflict. These three main axes are discussed in more detail below.

Proxy Warfare. The Iran-Iraq War drove the IRGC to find new ways to fight conventional foes such as Iraq and the United States and promulgate its ideological mission to expand the Islamic Revolution's reach to the rest of the Muslim world. The IRGC began its intervention in the Israel-Lebanon War in 1982, working with Syria's Hafez al-Assad partly to help show it should lead the Islamic fight against the Jewish state but also to help secure Syria as backdoor pressure on Iraq.

Originally, the IRGC wanted to pursue a more conventional intervention, asking to deploy IRGC brigades into Syria and then Lebanon. When Assad refused an overt presence of Iranian forces on his territory, the Iranian leadership turned toward an advice and support mission to the Syrian army. The IRGC also began working with some of the existing Shia militia groups in Lebanon to build Lebanese Hezbollah, a formidable guerilla loyal to the Islamic Revolution's ideals and created to fight Israel and expand Iran's ideological influence.

Based on Lebanese Hezbollah's success, the IRI found a path forward with proxies and by using terrorism (including suicide bombing) to advance its foreign policy goals. As noted before, the IRGC and especially its elite Quds Force drew from the ideals of the *mujahideen* and *fedayeen* in its emerging concepts of proxy warfare. Never before, though, had guerilla-type warfare been the focal point of the Iranian state's projection of power, as opposed to something that exists on its margins.

The formation of proxies in the form that Lebanese Hezbollah and subsequent regional groups took was also distinct from the *mujahideen* and *fedayeen* of old. These organizations appear to share a lot more characteristics with the Maoist and Marxist guerilla groups of the 1960s and 1970s and with the Afghan *mujahideen* fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. The IRGC's absorption of these models into its proxy warfare doctrines would not be surprising given the IRI's ideological sympathies with such groups and its practical approach to adopting whatever appears to work best. This theory merits further historical examination.

The psychological effect of Iraqi missiles, though, ensured that Iran would continue to focus on its missile program as the centerpiece of its conventional military power long after the war ended.

Asymmetric Warfare. As discussed more extensively in *Iran at War*, the conflict between the United States and the IRI during the Tanker Wars (1987–88) pitted a nascent IRGC naval force consisting of small speedboats, mines, and cruise missiles against the US Navy's power. The Artesh Navy also engaged but was quickly outgunned, losing almost half of its capital ships. The IRGC's approach, in facing such a formidable foe, proved to be more resilient and difficult for the United States to defeat, even though the IRGC forces were not victorious in the end. The IRGC's

asymmetric warfare would be cemented as the primary offensive and deterrent doctrine for Iran.

Ballistic Missiles. Saddam Hussein initiated the war of the cities in 1984 by sending ballistic missiles into western Iranian cities to terrorize the population. The Iranian leadership eventually responded in a similar manner but struggled to develop a missile production, launching, and targeting capability on par with Iraq's. The psychological effect of Iraqi missiles, though, ensured that Iran would continue to focus on its missile program as the centerpiece of its conventional military power long after the war ended.

The Artesh's inability to maintain an effective or modern air force after the revolution also left Iran with missiles as its primary option to overtly strike its distant adversaries, such as Israel, if needed. The program is now the centerpiece of Iran's retaliatory deterrence and is considered an existential element of Iran's defenses.

The Impact of the United States. Iraq aside, no power has threatened the IRI's existence like the United States has. The Persian Gulf War in 1991 and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 solidified the supremacy of American conventional power in the minds of Iranian military thinkers. These wars also instilled the centrality of developing doctrines to defend against, dissuade, and undermine the inherent advantages of the American way of war.

The most notable of these are passive defense, developed after the Persian Gulf War to deny US air

and missile power the ability to effectively identify and destroy critical Iranian targets; mosaic defense, developed after the Iraq invasion to withstand an invasion and mobilize a large dispersed guerilla force, *fedayeen*-style, to retake the country; and the IRGC Navy's focus on expanding the risk envelope from missiles and submarines for US maritime operations further into the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and Arabian Sea, typically referred to as anti-access area denial (A2AD) by American strategists.

Recognizing US military superiority is also evident in the prolific citation of American strategists and doctrinal writers in Iranian journals. Understanding, learning, and adopting from one's adversary remains vitally important to the IRI leadership.

Historical memories and ideological concerns shape the IRI's approach to war and military doctrine, but they do not determine them. Certain legacies appear to have lasting impact and will continue to shape the Iranian military for at least the next generation, including the need for dual militaries, concepts of martyrdom, and the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War.

Other factors could diminish in importance in coming years as ideological zeal may wane and Iran's threat perceptions change, especially if fighting lower-intensity regional wars, rather than confronting the US, becomes the IRI's more dominant focus. While Tehran's worldview will never escape history, the IRI military has its own legacy of pragmatically adopting new approaches when necessity demands.

Key Characteristics of IRI Doctrine

Based on these key historical influences and formal processes, as well as a review of available IRI doctrinal materials, relevant senior leader statements, and major Iranian military exercises over the past five years, some broad conclusions can be made about the characteristics of Iranian doctrine.

IRI doctrine does not generally descend from revolutionary ideology and Islamic morality.

The Iranian approach is largely pragmatic, with most doctrine developed from lessons learned in previous conflicts or observation of successful military operations by other countries. One cannot simply study the Quran or Ayatollah Khomeini's writings to discern how the Iranian military will fight in future conflicts.

Some exceptions include the religious influences and historical legacies of the *fedayeen* and *mujahideen*, which have shaped the activities of the Quds Force and strategies such as mosaic doctrine. The IRI's preference for asymmetric operations may also be related to the Shia sense of minority and victimhood and the esteem given for a righteous but weaker force standing up to a powerful but immoral state. However, the relative strength and exact source of the preference for asymmetric warfare remains a key unknown in predicting longer-term trends in Iranian military capabilities and thinking.

Formation of specific IRI doctrine aims to find more effective, pragmatic solutions to security challenges within the framework of the state's ideological objectives. Since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the increasing formality and complexity of the IRI's system for strategy and doctrinal development show a degree of sophistication and

deliberateness. Most doctrines, however, are still likely more ad hoc in nature, developed in response to each successive security challenge. For example, the Quds Forces' development of ideological proxies and hybrid warfare techniques in Iraq and Syria point to a mixture of religious and geostrategic motivations tailored to the crisis in each theater.

There is explicit incorporation of the best of foreign doctrine, especially US doctrine.

As ideologically opposed as Iran is now to the United States and the West in general, there appear to be few if any prohibitions to adopting doctrinal lessons from American or European military sources. Similarly, there is little restriction on employing effective foreign military technologies in war-fighting concepts. This follows almost 200 years of Iranian military tradition of sanctioning the adoption and subsequent Iranianization of anything proven to be effective in war.

Ideological and moral justification for any doctrine are essential for the IRI military.

Despite an overall practical approach, anything developed as military techniques or war-fighting concepts still requires some level of ideological approval from the state. Under the religious authority of the supreme leader and his representatives in the military chain of command, these ideological justifications are often provided ex post facto. A large portion of the professional education and writings from the IRI's staff colleges, think tanks, and military education efforts is devoted to morality of fighting and morality of the soldier.

Ideology and morality can provide the framework or boundary of IRI doctrine. Revolutionary

ideologies or Islamic moral considerations may not produce Iran's current war-fighting concepts, but they can provide the objectives for Iran's foreign policy and the IRGC's objectives in conflict. There is an open question as to whether revolutionary ideology restricts the development of IRI offensive conventional doctrines, but it does provide at minimum a working framework for the organizational structure and mission for the IRGC, especially the Quds Force.

Although IRGC operations in Syria continue to exhibit conventional characteristics, such as the deployment of unmanned aerial vehicles in support of operations, the IRGC appears hesitant to cross the line of defensive, deterrent, and asymmetric warfare. Islamic moral considerations on retaliation, for example, also generally limit the IRI leadership's willingness to employ force in a manner considered disproportionate, at least with conventional power, missiles, and cyber.³¹

Competing military structures will remain an inherent feature of Iranian doctrine and strategy. The structural reasons for the IRGC and the Artesh to exist, as discussed above, are unlikely to go away as long as the current regime's ideology remains

largely intact. The IRI leadership appears to be engaging in stronger efforts to improve interoperability, driven particularly by the increasing need for Artesh support in the IRGC's wars in Syria and Iraq. Distrust between the two services remains relatively strong, and the IRGC's political strength in the system will likely remain or deepen, especially as Iran transitions to a new supreme leader. The IRGC will likely take on more conventional aspects, and the Artesh will continue to be the subordinate force.

Iran sees warfare in 360 degrees. As a revolutionary state constantly worried about instability and counterrevolution triggered by its adversaries in conflict, the IRI sees war as being simultaneously fought on domestic and foreign fronts. Doctrine often addresses internal defense and external deterrence and offensive and defensive requirements simultaneously. This is a constant theme in IRI strategic writings and senior military leadership statements. Artesh and especially IRGC doctrines for air power, cyber, ballistic missiles, and naval power reflect a blending from defense to deterrence to power projection. This idea is key to understanding IRI doctrine holistically.

A Model of IRI Doctrine

Based on these assessed and observed characteristics in Iran's strategic and military thinking, a general conceptual model for Iranian doctrine can be built. The most important distinction between most Western doctrines and the IRI's is that the division between internal and external operations is more fluid or permeable.

Because Iran sees warfare in 360 degrees, the front lines of the conflict are expected to open almost anywhere. Tehran anticipates its adversaries may attempt to undermine the government or its hold over the population when engaged in conflict with Iran or its proxy forces. Similarly, Iranian leaders suspect instability at home will be either caused or exploited by Iran's enemies, requiring potential retaliation or covert engagement abroad.

As both the defender and exporter of Iran's revolution, the IRGC is designed to fight at home and abroad simultaneously. Most of its major components have roles in internal defense and foreign operations, save the naval and ballistic missile services, which are focused on external conflict. The doctrines that the IRGC Ground Force or Air Force employ to fight insurgents or prepare to repulse a potential invasion can be modified to aid the IRI's proxy and partners abroad, as seen in their deployment of counterinsurgent specialists, employment of drones, and use of artillery in Iraq and Syria. The mobilization, indoctrination, and paramilitary capabilities of the IRGC's Basij, which is designed to secure the population in crisis, are being directly exported into Iraq and Syria by deployed Iranian basiji fighters and by newly formed local forces created to emulate them.

The Artesh is more traditionally structured, of course, with territorial defense and power projection doctrines, although the latter have withered since 1979. However, given Iran's doctrinal focus on the potential invasion or major military operations by

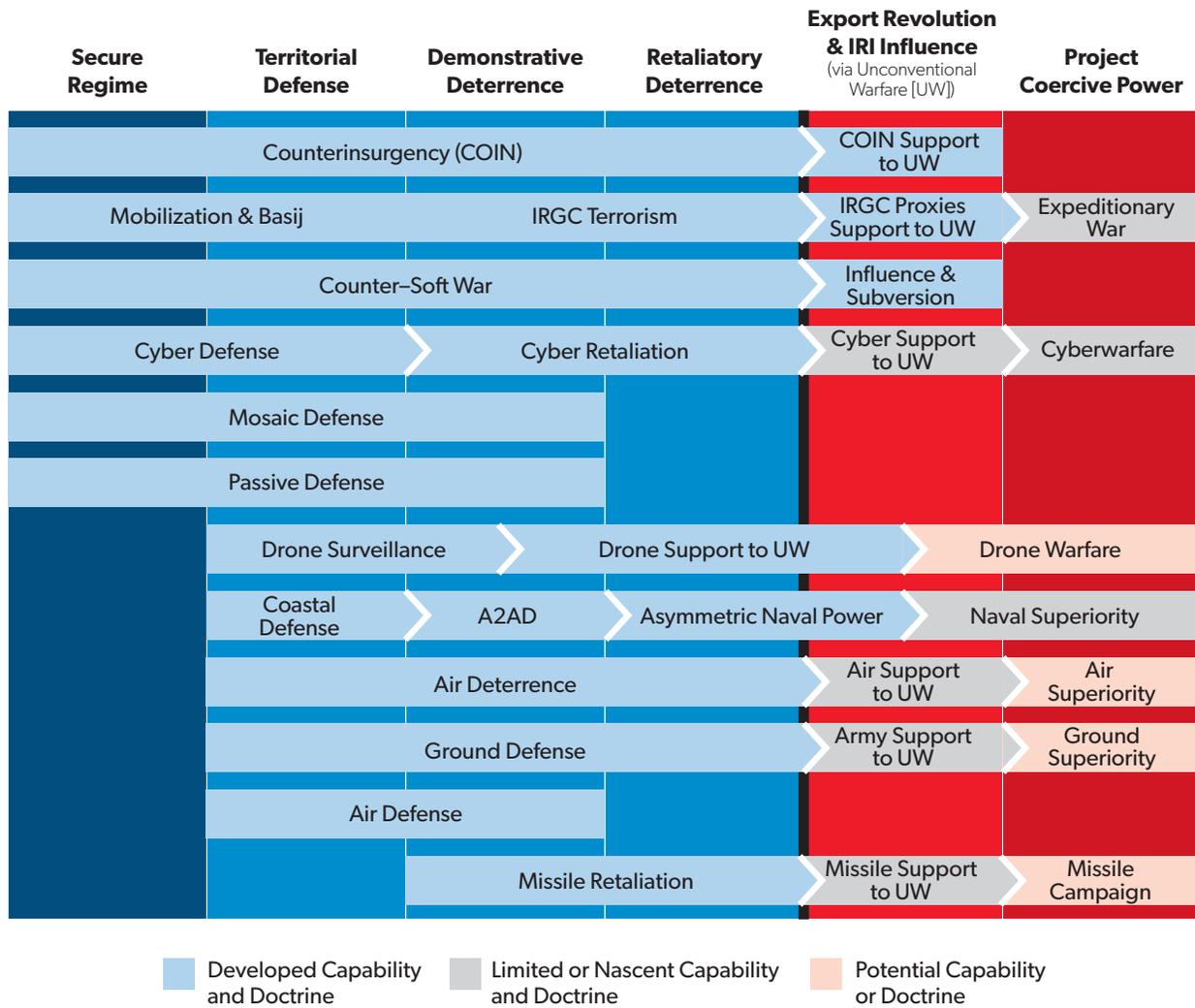
the US, Artesh forces can be expected to support the IRGC in absorbing and repelling a force that attacks Iranian soil. The Artesh ground and air forces, including special forces, have also begun supporting IRGC operations in a similar manner in the Iraq and Syria conflicts.

To better understand the current landscape and potential evolution of Iran's military capabilities, it is useful to examine more specifically how its major strategic doctrines align across the spectrum of the IRI's concepts of defensive and offensive warfare. Figure 3 displays the IRI's major doctrines as they support (or do not support) Tehran's objectives for defense of the state and regime or the leadership's desire to project its ideological influence and strategic power. Most importantly, Figure 3 helps reveal what is distinctive or notably absent in current Iranian strategy and capabilities, especially offensive doctrines. The figure also helps visualize the permeable membrane between IRI offensive and defensive operations.

Defensive Doctrines. Since Iran remains a fundamentally defensive state militarily, it is not surprising there are greater investment and diversity in its defensive doctrines. For the IRI, these doctrines are designed around four primary objectives:

Securing the Regime. All states seek their own survival. As a state constantly guarding against counterrevolution, Iran must also protect the nature of its government, not simply its territory and leadership, against threats from within its own population and subversive activities of its enemies. The IRI has created specific organizations such as the Basij for domestic mobilization and has tasked elements of the rest of its military and security forces to protect the 37-year-old revolutionary system of governance and to secure the Iranian people above all.

Figure 3. Categories of IRI Doctrines



Source: The author.

Territorial Defense. Physically defending the Iranian homeland is a straightforward mission through its air, ground, and maritime defenses. However, the significant conventional power imbalance between Iran and its most feared adversary, the United States, has driven Iran to create passive and mosaic defense doctrines to provide cost-imposing deterrence strategies in addition to more creative physical defenses. Even the IRGC Navy’s focus on growing A2AD capabilities should be understood in this context. These doctrines aim to dissuade Washington from using major or even

regime-threatening military force against Iran by making such operations appear too costly.

Demonstrative Deterrence. The IRI also conducts more standard deterrence operations to display its willingness to use force in defense of the state or its critical interests. These typically include shows of force through military exercises, equipment displays (which are frequently faked), missile tests, and of course, threatening propaganda from either Tehran or one of its proxies. Many of the IRGC Navy’s frequent

aggressive activities against US naval forces or civilian shipping in the Persian Gulf aim to remind the IRI's opponents of its increasing asymmetric or A2AD ability to disrupt their maritime operations. These capabilities and operations should also be considered as part of the IRI's demonstrative deterrence defensive doctrines. Those familiar with US doctrine will see similarities here to Flexible Deterrent Operations.

Retaliatory Deterrence. The centerpiece of the IRI's deterrence strategy is responding to any attack with appropriately painful retaliatory actions that can convince an enemy either not to initiate conflict in the first place or to de-escalate quickly. Iranian military leaders often refer to this doctrine as Threat in Response to Threat.³² The terrorist and asymmetric war threat posed by the IRGC Quds Force and its proxies and partners, the so-called axis of resistance, is the most important capability in this category. Missile forces are a close second, which compensate for a lack of effective long-range air power. The continuing relative inaccuracy of Iran's ballistic missiles means they are still mostly terror weapons incapable of deliberately taking out an enemy's critical military nodes, although the IRGC's cruise missiles increasingly help close this gap. The IRI is increasingly developing cyber as a third major prong for retaliatory deterrence. Those familiar with US doctrine will see similarities here to Flexible Response Operations.

Offensive Doctrines. The IRI's offensive doctrines are far less varied and developed in comparison with its defensive ones. These doctrines are designed around two primary objectives.

Exporting the Islamic Revolution and IRI Influence. The IRGC or its proxy forces, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, conducts unconventional or asymmetric warfare, including information operations, cyberattacks, and covert activities, against its opponents in support of Tehran's regional and global foreign policies. The limited or nascent capabilities in the fifth column of Figure 3 are relatively new developments driven in part by the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. The need to preserve IRI proxies and interests in these theaters has

driven a whole new development of cyber, air, army, drone, special forces, and counterinsurgency support in the Artesh and the IRGC.

In its exercises or strategic writings, the Iranian military has not demonstrated an ability or focus on establishing air or naval superiority or capturing and sustainably controlling territory beyond Iran's borders.

Projecting Coercive Power. The IRI's offensive doctrines have remained almost entirely unconventional, save for the noted trends visible in the current conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and some legacy capabilities in the Artesh. Conventional elements such as openly attributable Iranian personnel, drones, artillery, transport flights, and limited air strikes are increasingly integrated into what amounts to IRGC-led expeditionary warfare.³³ As creative and complex as some of these capabilities are, their emergence was driven by the insufficiency of the IRGC's more typical advise, equip, and local proxy formation doctrines. Although these doctrines proved effective in Iraq after 2003, they have not turned the tide for President Bashar al-Assad's forces in the Syrian civil war or successfully rolled back ISIS in Iraq. Iran did not necessarily want to pursue this doctrinal path at the outset and may pull back from it if the conflict begins to resolve.

Regardless, the IRGC and even the Artesh have created new, more advanced asymmetric operational capabilities that will inform and drive further expansion of offensive asymmetric, unconventional, and possibly conventional warfare doctrines.

IRGC Navy Commander Admiral Ali Fadavi has recently reinforced Iran's intentions to increase both its defensive and offensive abilities in the maritime arena following the introduction of the new high-speed catamaran that can carry 100 personnel and a helicopter.³⁴ Artesh Navy also retains the ability to project at least limited power as it conducts antipiracy missions in the Arabian Sea and attempts to expand its operational range into the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea.³⁵ The IRI's cyberattack abilities have so far been used predominantly for retaliatory deterrence. Those same capabilities have been used in support of unconventional warfare and could easily be employed for offensive coercive goals.³⁶ More so than other domains of warfare, this is more a choice of doctrine and political will than of capability.

Overall, however, the IRI continues to lack classical offensive doctrines to project conventional military power aiming to coerce an opponent; seize ground, air, or maritime space; or destroy an enemy's forces. In its exercises or strategic writings, the Iranian military has not demonstrated an ability or focus on establishing air or naval superiority or capturing and sustainably controlling territory beyond Iran's borders.

Its missile forces, as mentioned above, are still designed to deter, retaliate, and terrorize. They remain too inaccurate to be an effective or reliable component in an offensive campaign to achieve discrete military objectives, such as taking out Saudi Arabian air defense, command, and control centers. Iran's cruise missile force, which has greater accuracy than its ballistic force, could be used in support of offensive unconventional or conventional warfare.

However, the gaps in IRI offensive capabilities and doctrines remain stark. The next sections explore why this may be and whether it will change.

Conclusion: IRI's Evolving Military

As UN sanctions on Iran's military imports expire over the next decade, US defense planners and policymakers are faced with key questions: Will Iran's approach to the development and use of its military change as the IRGC and Artesh begin modernizing? Will Iran become a more balanced or conventional military, like its neighbors Turkey and Pakistan, and revive a focus on its offensive capabilities and doctrines?

To answer these questions requires understanding how many of the drivers and internal tensions that form IRI's doctrines also shape its decision making about its future force. Four factors will likely dominate the Iranian leadership's debate over military modernization, particularly regarding any major shift into offensive conventional capabilities.

Increasing Resources. Since 1979, Iran's economic limitations and restricted access to many modern military technologies have hampered any ability to compete with its regional rivals, let alone the United States or other world powers. Building and maintaining a modern blue-water capacity from the remnants of the shah's old navy has been a near-impossible task, especially after the United States sunk almost half the IRI's capital ships during the Tanker Wars. Tehran's air strike capacity is severely limited after going for decades without consistent access to spare parts on the international market. However, the IRI's ingenuity to develop weapons indigenously and reverse engineer platforms from China, North Korea, and Russia has been impressive.

More resources and technology will go to the Iranian military after the JCPOA sunsets. The big questions are how much will be allocated and to which types of programs. Tehran faces the standard guns-versus-butter debates, and President Rouhani has tried, and failed, to keep the current year's defense

budget from increasing significantly to focus on other tax and domestic issues.³⁷

Regardless, the IRGC has extensive off-the-books financial sources. If something is important to the IRI military leadership, there are likely ways to fund it somehow. However, it will be impossible for the Iranian leadership to simultaneously bring its air, air defense, intelligence surveillance reconnaissance systems, naval, and armored ground forces up to modern standards in the next few decades. Modernizing Iran's air force could cost tens of billions of dollars, yet the current budget allocates only \$5.3 million to refurbishing the air force fleet.³⁸ If Tehran decides to move into offensive capabilities in a significant manner, it can likely choose only a few domains of warfare.

Growing Artesh Confidence. The Artesh historically possessed Iran's offensive conventional capabilities. Since 1979, however, the IRI leadership's sustained distrust and political marginalization of the Artesh have contributed to the relative atrophy of most of Iran's classical air force, army, and navy. Although the IRGC has also acquired conventional weapons over the years, aside from its ballistic and cruise missiles, these capabilities are not yet in sufficient numbers to likely be used in offensive military campaigns.

One path for Tehran if it wants to become an offensive conventional power is for the IRGC Air Force, Navy, and Army to shift their focus from internal stability and unconventional conflicts abroad to a more classical military posture. This would further sideline the Artesh and be a fairly fundamental change for the corps. Another path is to simply start prioritizing investment in the Artesh, but this would unacceptably alter the political balance with the IRGC. Rather, the IRI will likely push for greater integration of the two forces, growing the Artesh's firepower while deepening its assimilation with and subordination to the

IRGC. However, unless there are significant ideological changes in the regime, the IRI is likely stuck with its dual military problem for the foreseeable future, impeding modernization.

Relaxing Ideological Limitations. Post-1979 resource and capability limitations certainly factor into the weakness of Iran's air, land, and sea power and absence of offensive doctrine. However, these limitations are arguably insufficient to explain the overwhelming prioritization of defensive and unconventional war.

There is evidence ideological considerations may underpin the IRI's aversion to offensive conventional warfare. Despite being a revisionist power trying to reshape and lead the Islamic world, the IRI always seeks to change another state from below through influence and proxies rather than alter foreign regimes through overt coercion or military power. This likely reflects, in part, a perception that driving revolution from the ground up is more outwardly authentic and sustainable.

The IRGC takes great pains to avoid perception of Iranian direct intervention or boots on the ground in Syria and Iraq, which would undermine its political narrative and diplomatic leverage. Unlike Russia, the United States, and other traditional powers, Iran has historically not established military bases in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, or other places it has extensive operations.

Khameni also rebukes anyone who speaks of Persian power or empire as being reactionary or un-Islamic.³⁹ Although some Iranian leaders undoubtedly possess aspirations to re-create the state's historical reach, there is great resistance among the political orthodoxy in Tehran for the IRI being seen as an imperial power like the shah or the United States. Such objectives would counter their revolutionary image and principles and emphasize divisions between Persians and non-Persians in the Islamic world the IRI seeks to lead.

Offensive conventional warfare in itself may also threaten the Iranian leadership's perceived moral high ground. Many IRI leaders like to emphasize that Iran has not invaded another country since the early 18th century.⁴⁰ However, even if traditional offensive

conventional warfare is not ideologically compatible with the IRI leadership's current philosophies, Khamenei or the next supreme leader could change that.

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Changing Threat Perceptions. The wars in Syria and Iraq are currently the primary engine for recent doctrinal change. The challenge Iran faces in preserving allied regimes in Damascus and Baghdad demonstrates the inadequacy of the IRI military's doctrine and capabilities. The Iranian leadership's dominant investments since the Iran-Iraq War have been in the IRGC's asymmetric warfare capabilities, the ballistic missile program, and A2AD to meet the US and Israeli threat. These capabilities are mismatched, however, with contemporary challenges of regional insurgencies, failing states, and extremism.

Tehran cannot afford to lose the two wars it is currently engaged in, so it continues to escalate its involvement and deepen the complexity of its force presence in Syria. To a lesser degree, this is also true for Iraq. This emerging hybrid and expeditionary unconventional warfare, which combines increasing conventional elements and Artesh involvement, is certain to expand and improve given the stakes for

Iran, regardless of the new resources and potential strategic directions available after the JCPOA. The Iranian military's involvement with Russian forces in Syria will likely also have lasting effects on IRI doctrine, as each side learns from the other's offensive tactics and approaches to hybrid operations.⁴¹ The deep embarrassment of being dependent on Russian and US close air support in Syria and Iraq, respectively, is undoubtedly pushing the IRI military to examine ways to rapidly improve its longer-range fixed- and rotary-wing capabilities.

Whether threats such as Saudi Arabia and Sunni extremist groups will take precedence over the United States and Israel for Iran is the larger question. For the time being, that does not appear to be the case. However, if the JCPOA holds, Tehran will likely view Washington as a declining threat, at least from a traditional hard power perspective. US policymakers should keep in mind the dominant role American intentions and military capacity play in the IRI's long-term calculations. The IRI built its unique configuration of security forces as a means to target US weaknesses and deter US actions through the fear of painful retaliation. The IRI military's modern form is an arguably rational choice by the leadership in Tehran given the Islamic Republic's resource limitations and ideological commitment to opposing the United States.

Likely Courses. The most probable scenario is that improving capabilities during and after the JCPOA will encourage offensive conventional creep into IRI war fighting but not a wholesale shift to a more classical military posture typical of major regional powers. If decisions on recent military procurement have been driven more by capability and resource constraints, then modernization will lead eventually to increased investment in offensive doctrines and capacities for air, land, sea, and missile power. If past decisions are based more in political or ideological preferences, then modernization will lead predominantly to investment in capabilities and doctrines—either conventional or asymmetric—which improve deterrence and support unconventional warfare. The IRI military would look largely the same as it does now, just better equipped.

Commitment to past patterns could also reflect a rational decision that deterrent and asymmetric power provides most of the capabilities the Iranian leadership needs to achieve its security and political objectives, which have been dominated by the need to deter and disrupt the United States' ability to coerce or even overthrow the regime in Tehran. However, the perception of a diminished US threat from an existential military attack may free up Iranian decision makers to focus on investment in more conventional capabilities suited to combating its regional enemies. The Iranian military may also grow into certain conventional capabilities as they have increased access to technology and resources, but they continue to prefer the cost-effectiveness and strategic advantages afforded by asymmetric and unconventional capabilities.

US policymakers should keep in mind the dominant role American intentions and military capacity play in the IRI's long-term calculations.

Risk of Path Dependency. The IRI's involvement in the region's sectarian wars and the opportunity to expand its conventional capabilities as weapons restrictions ease may not be enough for Iran's leadership to pivot away from their decades-long focus on ballistic missiles, A2AD, and asymmetric warfare. Some analysts have argued that the IRI is a victim of path dependency.⁴² The government has developed such vested institutional structures and ingrained strategic mindsets, particularly in the IRGC, that it will be extremely difficult to reprioritize its defense industrial base and weapons acquisition programs.

Regardless of why Iran has chosen this path, it runs the risk of being stuck on it.

This path dependency could be especially salient if moderate stability comes to the Syrian and Iraqi fronts, thereby removing a major incentive for Iran to accelerate its conventional doctrinal evolution. However, expediency—within appropriate ideological frameworks, of course—has been the unstated mantra of the Iranian military since the Iran-Iraq War. If Iran's threat perceptions demand further growth and sophistication in expeditionary warfare and a major modernization of its largely decrepit conventional forces, it will likely find a way to shift over time. It will not be easy, though, or necessarily successful.

Indicators of Change. What would indicate a shift in Iranian strategy as international restrictions loosen? More military exercises focused on anti-access strategies and retaliation capabilities (such as ballistic missile tests) would indicate continued preference for Iran's traditional asymmetric and defensive posture. Conversely, the appointment of more Artesh officers to key decision-making positions or exercises focused on ground maneuvering or Artesh-IRGC combined operations could signal a move toward offensive conventional capabilities. Deep structural changes in Iran's defense industry organizations, such as the MODAFL, to provide sustained production of new types of armaments would also be required for Iranian strategy to change course.

Because the IRGC dominates the senior military leadership and the state's overall strategic direction, shifts in the IRGC's leadership and public messaging could be indicators of a new military posture. For example, IRGC Commander Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari will likely retire in the near term. His replacement and subsequent appointments could be indicative, especially if newly promoted officers come from the IRI's more conventional air, naval, or ground forces branches rather than from the IRGC's Quds Force, missile units, or intelligence services.

Other indicators could include direct IRI unit intervention in Syria, Iraq, or even Afghanistan. Seeing all-Iranian uniformed military formations operate overtly would be a distinct change in the

military's standard posture. The recent announcement of possible Iranian bases in Syria and Yemen would be a particularly notable shift in military posture and ideological orientation. Exercises focusing on complex or long-range air, sea, or ground campaigns would be a clear sign of a desire to expand capabilities for conventional power projection. This would be especially true if these events are accompanied by a change in the supreme leader's and military leadership's rhetoric on using military force. Rhetoric from those offices appearing to justify conventional force-on-force confrontation with other regional powers would be a key signal that the IRI has changed its current doctrinal approach.

Rhetoric from those offices appearing to justify conventional force-on-force confrontation with other regional powers would be a key signal that the IRI has changed its current doctrinal approach.

The most telling indicator will likely come in spending. Iran's real military budget is difficult to decipher, but current estimates place the defense budget at \$15 billion, and off-the-books funds may double that.⁴³ Regardless, the IRI still spends only around 3 percent of its gross domestic product on the military,⁴⁴ leaving the state reasonable room to grow expenditures.

The larger question is prioritization. Notable efforts on defense industrial base reorientation, logistics improvements, acquisition of larger numbers of air and ground systems, and research and development for conventional military platforms and weapons would indicate the regime has chosen to modernize its forces along more traditional, conventional lines.

An Inflection Point in 2016? Some of these signs of a potential shift to a more conventional force are already appearing. In addition to the presence of the Artesh and conventional Iranian weapon use in Syria, the July 2016 reshuffling of AFGS was the most significant military personnel change since the end of the Iran-Iraq War. The new AFGS chief, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, is considered the godfather of IRGC intelligence and likely represents a move toward a more professional, integrated, and interoperable armed forces.⁴⁵ His early priorities appear to be furthering the capabilities of the Basij, the Quds Force, and cyber forces, while increasing intelligence operations and extending Iran's naval reach into the Indian Ocean.⁴⁶ Emphasis on less traditional aims such as advancing cyber capabilities and developing conventional blue-water naval power may show the Iranian military is ready to take a different direction, although not quite a full transformation.

More interesting changes happened below Bagheri. Rashid was moved to head the newly reestablished Khatam-al Anbiya Central Headquarters. Khatam-al Anbiya played a significant role in the Iran-Iraq War by coordinating operations between the IRGC and Artesh and has been referred to as one of the most prestigious positions in the military.⁴⁷

Deeper Artesh integration was a larger theme in the reshuffle, with an Artesh general taking over Rashid's former deputy position at AFGS and the Khatam-al Anbiya deputy position given to an Artesh commander as well. The AFGS deputies for logistics and interservice coordination were also replaced. The full motives for these decisions are unclear, but the need to better manage Artesh-IRGC joint operations abroad is a likely factor. These moves may also indicate the regime is placing increasing trust in the Artesh.

Perhaps most significantly, IRI rhetoric about its

military capabilities has begun to change. In September 2016, Supreme Leader Khamenei stated that Iran's development of defensive and offensive capabilities is "an unalienable and clear right."⁴⁸ As noted earlier, Iranian leadership has demonstrated a distinct aversion to describing their military as being offensively oriented. Khamenei's language has been seconded by several military, security, and religious leaders, reinforcing the statements are likely reflective of a real shift.⁴⁹ The IRI's changing threat perceptions, especially the inadequacies of the IRGC and its proxies' abilities to fight in the region, and perhaps its diminishing need to focus so predominantly on reacting to US military power in the coming years, are likely the strongest drivers for this change.

Iran's current unconventional asymmetric military and proxy armies already provided sufficient challenges to the United States and our allies. Adding more traditional capabilities will only compound the regional security challenge, even though there may be an upside. US planners may find a more familiar military threat easier to predict and deter. A long-term competitive conventional arms race with Iran is one the United States should be fairly confident of winning, certainly much more so than with a country such as China or Russia.

However, there are additional risks for the United States if Iran takes this path. Increased capabilities in air, missile, naval, and ground power projection may diminish the strong deterrent effect of US military strength in the region and lower the threshold for the IRI's willingness to employ force, especially against our allies. Given Iran will likely follow a more mixed conventional and unconventional course, the United States will need to develop an even more tailored and nuanced approach to deterrence in the Persian Gulf.

About the Author

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