Iran at War

UNDERSTANDING WHY AND HOW TEHRAN USES MILITARY FORCE

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with contributions from

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Executive Summary

The signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was the most profound change in US relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) since 1979. During the next decade, Washington must prepare for potential crises with Tehran and develop effective strategies to deter and respond to a modernizing Iranian military as United Nations conventional weapons sanctions expire. Understanding why and how the Islamic Republic uses force is essential for crafting effective policies and plans for this issue. This report is based on the findings drawn from historical case studies of Iranian conflicts over the past 35 years and from an expert-level crisis simulation of a potential confrontation between the United States and Iran over significant violations of the recent nuclear agreement.

An important initial distinction for evaluating why Iran would engage in a conflict is determining whether Tehran views a conflict as necessary, or rather as an opportunity to further its position, influence, or ideology. Wars of perceived necessity occur when Iran believes it is facing an imminent or looming existential threat. Tehran may conduct wars of opportunity if supporting strategic interests are at stake and if Iran believes the benefits of military engagement outweigh the risks.

Iran generally refrains from the offensive or preemptive use of conventional military force. Perceived existential threats will, however, trigger Iranian use of force. In addition to traditional threats to Iranian territory and strategic assets, risks to Tehran’s proxies, partners, and coopted government structures in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria can quickly become a grave challenge to the Islamic Republic’s ability to deter adversaries and defend its territory. Iran will consider the defense of these an existential state concern.

Unless Iranian territory or assets are directly threatened, Iran tends to limit any use of force to unconventional warfare. Improvements in standoff weapons capabilities—such as cruise missiles, short-range ballistic missiles, and armed drones—will likely increase Iran’s willingness to cross the threshold of employing conventional force.

Recent incidents of cyberattacks and retaliation demonstrate that cyber warfare is becoming a more integral part of Iran’s approach to conflict, deterrence, and retaliation. Iranian cyber capabilities are rapidly improving, cost-effective, and often used in devastating fashion. The Iranian government’s cyber abilities are perceived to be crucial to regime stability. Future cyber campaigns will likely follow patterns similar to Iran’s decision making regarding unconventional warfare.

The weakness of Iran’s conventional military has led it to rely on the fear of retaliation to deter the United States and other adversaries. However, because Iranian leaders fear escalation to conventional military force in any confrontation with the United States, Tehran can be easily deterred by Washington.

Iran has a three-layered asymmetric approach to deterrence. The first layer is strategic deterrence, to dissuade US action by threatening its military positions and allies in the region with missiles and terrorism. The second is an anti-access strategy, dissuading US military operations close to Iran’s borders through increasingly lethal anti-ship weapons. The third layer is a cost-imposing strategy, aiming to make a US invasion of Iran unfeasible. In the post-nuclear-sanctions environment, Iran will seek to improve capabilities in the first two layers, including platforms such as terrorism, cyber, and even longer-range missiles that could target the US homeland.

During conflict, Iran prefers to escalate in more deliberate steps. Iran typically determines whether or when to intensify or de-escalate a military campaign
by weighing the importance of its desired military goals against the perceived intentions and relative power of its adversary. In wars of perceived necessity, the United States—despite overwhelming military superiority—may be able to pressure Iran to de-escalate but still remain unable to force Iran to terminate a conflict. In wars of opportunity, a clear demonstration of US willingness to use force will likely cause Iran to rapidly de-escalate and potentially move toward war termination.

The nature of escalation and de-escalation in a conflict is determined by which party holds escalation dominance. Against a regional or substate power, Iran retains escalation dominance or parity. Against Iran, the United States or any other major power that possesses advanced conventional capabilities and nuclear weapons will have escalation dominance. Consequently, Iran typically employs a pattern of limit testing in conflicts with the United States until it encounters a response it cannot or will not match. In conventional campaigns—in which US dominance is clearer—de-escalation can be quite rapid. In unconventional campaigns—in which US superiority is more diffused on the battlefield—de-escalation can be more measured.

When de-escalating, Iran typically needs to demonstrate it can still defend and retaliate. Tehran actions to restore deterrence and regain leverage may understandably be misinterpreted as an indication that Iran intends to escalate when, in fact, it does not. Iranian government cyber campaigns mirror traditional Iranian threat response and in some cases are viewed as a valuable retaliatory tool to help reduce escalation concerns. Tehran may also focus on the psychological rather than operational impact of any retaliation against the United States. It may look to damage a US vessel or otherwise “save face” by humiliating the United States to compensate for its inability to respond with equivalent force.

Iran almost always retaliates and targets proportionally from its perspective. This preference is driven primarily by fear of escalation and secondarily by a desire to be seen as employing an “appropriate” level of force. The failure to distinguish between attacks on the Iranian homeland and attacks on Iranian personnel, proxies, or assets during conflicts on foreign soil or at sea could lead to serious miscalculation by the United States. Iran may look to balance the retaliation and deterrence equation in the future by improving its ability to strike the US homeland.

Iran has faced ending a conflict without clear success only once since 1979, when it signed the 1988 ceasefire to end the Iran-Iraq War. Given that limited data set, a combination of the following circumstances would likely be necessary for Iran to seek war termination on less-than-optimal terms.

Both the Iranian political and military leadership need to recognize Tehran’s inability to continue a military campaign. The regime’s tendency to blame operational failure on external actors can cloud Iran’s assessment of the military balance of power and hinder the consensual decision-making process. In a war of necessity, Tehran is unlikely to seek to end the conflict without achieving its objectives unless it believes the preservation of the state or its revolutionary form of governance is in mortal danger. In wars of opportunity, a disadvantageous termination of hostilities is tied more to a cost-benefit analysis.

If Iranian leaders believe the United States intends to escalate to a direct military confrontation or if they fear the international community will unite against them, they will likely be driven to end a conflict. Without recognizing that Tehran will likely need face-saving offramps in any conflict in which it is losing, the United States may find it difficult to force Iran to end hostilities.

Finally, as Tehran modernizes its air, naval, and unmanned weapons platforms and becomes more accurate with its missiles and cyber capabilities—or as a new supreme leader comes into power—the Iranian patterns of use of force, deterrence, escalation, proportionality, and war termination will likely shift.
I. Introduction

President Hassan Rouhani likes to boast that the Islamic Republic has not initiated a war against another country since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. There is some truth to this. Iran’s relative conventional weakness and threat perceptions make Tehran a fundamentally defensive state in the standard military sense, as I argued in the first paper in this series, Iranian Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolution. These drivers also push Iran to pursue its more aggressive, and ultimately revisionist, foreign policies through less conventional means such as proxy forces and asymmetric fighting doctrines.

However, Iran’s military capabilities and perceptions of its threat environment can and will change. In thinking through a post-JCPOA world—with loosened arms embargoes and realigned political realities—the United States needs to consider more deeply how and why Iran would use military force.

This report attempts to answer some essential questions about how the Islamic Republic views the nature of war: how it starts, escalates, ends, and is prevented in the first place. Specifically:

- Why does Iran decide to use military force, both unconventional and conventional?
- How does Iran view deterrence against the United States?
- Why does Iran decide to escalate or de-escalate a conflict?
- How does Iran view retaliation and reciprocity in military action?
- Why and how does Iran attempt to end conflict?

The answers to these questions are based on the findings drawn from a hypothetical—but not unrealistic—expert-level crisis simulation of a potential confrontation between the United States and Iran in 2017 and from historical cases studies of major conventional and unconventional Iranian military actions since the Iran-Iraq War.
II. Crisis Simulation: Collapse of the Nuclear Deal

To examine the decision-making process of Iranian leaders during crisis and wartime, a six-hour crisis simulation was conducted. The simulation’s aims, participants, structure, and results are discussed further below.

The Aims

The point of the exercise was not necessarily to predict how such events could unfold in real life, but rather to illuminate the Iranian government’s potential or likely behavioral patterns in a similar crisis with the United States.

The simulation also explored perceptions and misperceptions about Iran’s use, escalation, de-escalation, and termination of overt and clandestine force, as well as how Iran’s consensual decision-making style interacts with more formal processes, such as the Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS) and the armed forces command structures.

Simulation Structure

To better explore the leadership’s threat perceptions and strategic perspectives, five interactive groups of Iranian decision makers were assembled, including teams of individuals representing the supreme leader and his office, the president’s administration and other influential advisers, the Armed Forces General Staff and Artesh (Iran’s conventional military force), the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and key Iranian proxies and allies. Iran’s collective decisions were made opposite a dynamic US team. Other regional and international actors were played by the Control team.

Simulation Participants

Every crisis simulation is in some sense artificial. Even the most well-constructed scenario cannot simulate the effect of lifetimes of lived experience, nor can we condense several months’ worth of evolving crises into six hours without losing some valuable context. Moreover, it is not possible to invite Iranian political and military leaders to Washington, set them against a group of US policymakers, and walk them through a decision-making simulation designed to test their assumptions and responses.

Instead, the simulation included experts from Washington’s think tank community and a large number of Iranian security analysts from within the US government. These individuals have spent careers attempting to understand the decision-making processes of Iran’s leadership, including the goals and relationships of individual personalities.

Simulation Scenario

The simulation was set forward into the early spring of 2017. A new US president entered office in January, having run on a foreign policy platform pledging stronger US international engagement with a particular focus on reexamining existing US policy toward the Middle East. During the campaign, the new president expressed some skepticism of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between the P5+1 and Iran, which was signed in July 2015 and subsequently endorsed by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231.

Although the new US president did not pledge to unilaterally withdraw from the JCPOA, she promised
the American people a thorough review of the deal and publicly stated that she would consider suspending US implementation of the JCPOA—including impending phased sanctions relief for Iran—and reimposing US financial sanctions. The new US administration was designed to be an unpredictable factor that the Iranian players would have to assess and navigate.

Initial Scenario. To test Iranian decision making on the use of force, the scenario pushed toward a point at which force would become an option. This scenario may strike some as hawkish, or even fantastic, but the goal was to better understand what circumstances would compel Iran to use military power.

In an effort to initiate conflict between the United States and Iran, the scenario stated that Iran appeared to have properly reconfigured its enrichment facilities at Fordow and Natanz, reduced its uranium stockpiles, refitted the Arak Heavy Water Facility, and completed other explicit requirements of the JCPOA. However, doubt remained over Iran’s cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the furor over interviews and inspections of Iran’s research centers clouded the credibility of the IAEA’s conclusion. The US team was skeptical of the IAEA’s report reaching the “broader conclusion” that all nuclear fissile material in Iran was currently employed only in peaceful purposes. Ultimately the IAEA reported confidence in its knowledge of Iran’s present operations but was silent on past issues of possible weaponization research.

In accordance with US government predictions, the scenario anticipated that most—although not all—of the initial round of sanctions relief fed directly into infrastructure, construction, and development projects supporting Iran’s ailing economy. Some of the funds, however, were suspected to have supported the operations of Iran’s proxies and allies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

The scenario predicted that the IRGC, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iran’s local militia allies would have maintained a friendly government in Syria and built a new line of resistance on Israel’s northern border. For purposes of the simulation, ISIS was pushed back territorially in Iraq and Syria, but continued to expand its presence in North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Central and South Asia. It persisted as a serious terrorist threat throughout the region.

During the simulation, tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran remained very high, with brief periods when both countries recalled their respective ambassadors. (For contemporary parallels, see sidebar.) Their proxy conflicts in Yemen and Syria ebbed and flowed without resolution, with Iran increasingly asserting itself as the guarantor of security in the Persian Gulf and aggressively patrolling the Strait of Hormuz.

The simulation background included reports that the IRGC Navy fired on and attempted to board Saudi- and Kuwaiti-flagged vessels in early 2017. This triggered a brief firefight between the Saudi and IRGC navies, with Riyadh ultimately backing down. A commercial vessel was later detained by the IRGC Navy and escorted into port at Bandar Abbas.

The scenario did not include Russia’s new interventionist role in the Middle East. Moscow’s reinvigorated alliance with Tehran over Syria in the latter half of 2015 represents a significant shift in the regional security landscape. Further assessments of Iran’s potential strategic behavior given greater Russian backing will be needed.
First Turn: Covert Nuclear Revelations and Tensions in the Persian Gulf. For an initial development, the new US president received an official public request from Saudi Arabia to provide direct US 5th Fleet support for a new Arab collective naval force. The force aimed to deter the IRGC Navy and provide as-needed escort for commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. Word of the Saudi request was met with concern in Tehran, and Iranian leaders were guided to consider how best to prevent the United States from backing out of the JCPOA while deterring a more forceful US military posture in the Gulf.

At this point in the simulation, Iranian actors representing Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and the IRGC were given intelligence that the security of a previously undeclared covert IRGC nuclear facility may have been compromised by Western intelligence. They were not told which power or powers compromised their security or what information may have been divulged. The site was previously unknown to most members of Iran’s leadership, a fact that created tensions between the IRGC and the presidency.

Most of the discussion from the Iranian side during this segment focused on trying to understand the implications of the newly disclosed site for the nuclear deal. Given the untested nature of the new American president, Iranian actors tried to avoid any threatening moves. Individual Iranian leaders contemplated attacks to “shake up the Saudis” or requesting Russian advisers for the recently delivered S-300 anti-aircraft systems to “show seriousness,” but neither proposal achieved consensus.

Instead, Iran held small military exercises with its conventional forces in the northern Persian Gulf area. The United States decided the US Navy would escort civilian shipping through the Strait of Hormuz as necessary, and the New York Times leaked a story that the United States possessed intelligence that showed Iran may have a secret uranium enrichment site.

Second Turn: Escalation of Crisis. The simulation’s next development endeavored to increase the threat perceptions of both sides. To threaten Iran’s regional positions, it was announced that forces of Turkish-backed Jabhat al-Nusra had captured Latakia, Syria, putting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s coastal enclave at risk. (For contemporary parallels, see sidebar.) Additionally, Kurdish and Baluchi separatist forces conducted major operations against IRGC positions within one week of each other.

To advance the threat perceptions of the US side, Israeli Defense Forces in northern Israel were placed on high alert, and Saudi Arabia suffered a significant cyberattack that degraded energy operations in Dhahran for two weeks. Finally, a US naval ship escorting an Italian tanker hit a mine in the Strait of Hormuz.

Iranian Threat Perceptions: Summer 2015

In the present-day conflict in Syria, actions by the United States and regional actors during the summer of 2015 may have raised Iranian threat perceptions in a manner similar to that envisioned in the second turn of this simulation. The establishment of the Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) in March 2015, its capture of the Syrian provincial capital of Idlib on March 28, and its control of the province by late May threatened key regime positions in Latakia. The Jordanian-backed Southern Front alliance captured the Jordanian border crossing at Nasib on April 1.

In July 2015 the first two cadres of US-trained opposition forces entered Syria, and the United States announced an agreement to conduct airstrikes from Turkey’s airbase at Incirlik. On September 16, the United States announced it could authorize US airstrikes if US-trained Syrian opposition forces were attacked by the Syrian regime. Joint Iranian and Russian operations beginning in September 2015 should be viewed in the context of coalition-supported gains by Syria’s opposition throughout the summer.

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Iranian discussions during this segment focused on the need to open negotiations with the United States and an effort to appropriately respond to US moves. Several Iranian actors pointed out that Iran must not fall into the trap of escalating the conflict with Saudi Arabia to the point at which the United States feels forced to intervene. Many mentioned that the supreme leader did not seek, nor could Iran sustain, a multifront conflict. Iran’s leadership tried to avoid any threatening moves. They were still trying to ascertain what the nuclear facility meant for the nuclear deal, and broader regional issues were not significantly discussed.

Proposals for unconventional use of force at this stage were specifically nonlethal. They were intended as warning attacks rather than direct attacks on US forces. IRGC Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani wanted to “shake up the Saudis” but not target US forces in Iraq. Iran’s leadership decided not to take action during the first round, but Soleimani set conditions for escalation in the second round. IRGC Navy Commander Ali Fadavi announced the release of a previously detained commercial vessel, and Tehran formally requested Russian advisers support its new S-300 systems.

The United States decided to deploy the US 5th Fleet into the Gulf, while moving more F-22s and B-2s to regional bases. US special operations forces began operating in Yemen, and no-fly zones and safe zones were established in Syria with Turkey’s assistance. The United States announced its intention of forging a new status of forces agreement with Iraq.

**Third Turn: Use of Force.** In the final development, Iran exercised its first use of unconventional force. As part of a decision to oppose a new status of forces agreement between the United States and Iraq, unknown fighters conducted 81 mm mortar attacks on Iraqi bases from which US forces were operating. This was the culmination of IRGC Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani’s preparations from the previous segment.

At this point, Control noted Iranians’ hesitancy to engage in direct conflict with the United States and decided to force a conventional military escalation.

Upon direction from Control, the IRGC Navy opened fire on Saudi Arabian naval ships operating as part of the new collective naval force. Serious injuries occurred on both sides, although none were killed or captured. Ships on each side were damaged but not sunk. Additionally, Control indicated that US special operations forces advising the Yemeni army under President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi encountered al Houthi forces and IRGC Qods Force advisers operating in southern Marib province. In the ensuing firefight, US and IRGC Qods Force officers were killed.

In an additional unforeseen event, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei died from prostate cancer, and Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi became Iran’s new supreme leader.

Iranian military leaders recognized that casualties among US forces signaled a dangerous escalation of the conflict. They immediately began discussing possible ways of de-escalating the situation. Iran decided to ask Russia to introduce a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) proposal to begin a negotiating process over the nuclear developments. Iran announced that it agreed in principle to allow IAEA inspectors to access the newly exposed nuclear facility within 24 hours, pending negotiation of the details.

In the midst of this round, the United States reacted to continued Iranian harassment in the Strait of Hormuz and damage to the US naval vessel by conducting targeted strikes on Iranian naval mine storage facilities along Iran’s coast. Iran responded with ballistic missile attacks on Al Udeid airbase near Doha, Qatar. This Iranian decision to use force was designed as a proportional response, as the planes that carried out the attack on the mine storage facilities came from Al Udeid airbase. These events constituted the participants’ first decision to use conventional force.

During this round, Iran’s supreme leader announced that only if Iran were treated respectfully and as an equal would he discuss allowing inspectors into Iran. In response to the attacks on Al Udeid and Iran’s refusal to allow inspections, the United States conducted a subsequent round of attacks, eliminating the previously undeclared nuclear facility. The simulation ended at this point due to time constraints.
Simulation Results

The simulation allowed for an examination of the crisis-management process itself. The teams were constructed to reflect the key nodes of security decision making within the Iranian government, including the IRGC Command, the Armed Forces General Staff, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Office of the Supreme Leader, and the SCNS. As outlined in Iran’s Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolution, these organizations operate through relatively complex formal and informal mechanisms as they work to build consensus around key decisions. The simulation, however, could not fully replicate all the personalities and structural dynamics present in the Iranian system.

The exercise was also specifically designed to explore how information flows through the Iranian government during a crisis. Recognizing the tendencies of the Iranian system to compartmentalize knowledge and decision making, certain pieces of intelligence were given only to the IRGC and others only to MOIS. Diplomatic information flowed through the MFA, while other scenario developments were communicated to all the teams through public media announcements. Based on the exercise’s results, Figure 1 demonstrates an improved model of Iranian crisis decision making.

These dynamics inevitably led to certain participants perceiving themselves as out of the loop. The revelation of the IRGC’s covert nuclear program in particular created significant tensions between the IRGC leadership and President Rouhani’s administration, which had been unaware of the secret activity. This frustration further fueled mistrust among the key players and delayed major decisions. Compartmentalizing information likely inhibits Iran’s ability to communicate a coherent message or make timely policy choices in a crisis.

The president’s limited role in national security—he has oversight over the MOIS and MFA and can call SCNS meetings, but he has no power over the IRGC and the rest of the military—was also tested in the simulation. President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif were very active and eager to engage the US team during the exercise, but their limited influence in security decision making made pursuing meaningful negotiations difficult. Those individuals who did have the most control over the security portfolio, such as the IRGC and principal advisers to the supreme leader, had almost no channel to communicate with their US counterparts. This left the US team with little sense of how the Iranians were interpreting US actions or weighing potential responses.

The simulation was designed to force all decisions through the SCNS process and to consciously test how different stakeholders on the council, such as the military or the foreign ministry, would confer among their subordinates and allies before convening. Another important objective was to see how the supreme leader and his inner circle would interact with the SCNS. Normally Supreme Leader Khamenei does not attend council sessions, instead sending a representative. This reflects Khamenei’s approach of remaining somewhat removed from the daily political process. He remains sufficiently engaged with the principal figures to ensure they move toward a mutually agreed upon solution that does not violate his ideological or political limits.

Many of the major players have a direct method to communicate with the supreme leader and are expected to gain a sense of his opinion or guidance separately before the SCNS. The SCNS itself can be seen as a testing ground for ideas. All participants argue their positions, cognizant of where they think the supreme leader’s thoughts and preferences lie. The SCNS proceedings, in turn, inform the perspectives of the supreme leader, who aims to ensure there is ultimately consensus on any final decision. This feedback loop between the SCNS members and the supreme leader, both formally and informally, is the central node in Iranian security decision making.

Re-creating this dynamic during the simulation proved rather difficult. The supreme leader, his chief of staff (representing his office), and other key advisers were physically separated from the other Iranian teams and the meeting space for the SCNS itself. The supreme leader would, however, join and chair the SCNS meeting during the exercise. The anticipated nuanced process of gauging the leader’s thoughts or working multiple informal communication channels...
Figure 1. An Improved Model of Iranian Crisis Decision Making

with him before, during, and after the SCNS meetings to reach a common decision never occurred.

This phenomenon reflects the artificiality and time constraints of the game, as well as the personalities of some key players. The “collapsed” supreme leader–SCNS meetings observed may not provide sufficient evidence to alter the basic assessment of Iran’s security decision-making process. They may, however, provide some useful perspective. The events imagined in the simulation would represent the greatest security threat to Iran since its war with Iraq in the 1980s. It may not be surprising then that the supreme leader, who is commander in chief, became more personally involved in wartime deliberations, just as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was during the Iran-Iraq War.\(^\text{15}\)

**Key Simulation Findings.** The exercise provided numerous insights into Iranian approaches to use of conventional and unconventional force, deterrence, escalation and de-escalation of force, proportionality of targeting, and criteria for ending conflict. These are the most important findings as identified by the simulations’ participants.

**Iran is reluctant to use force.** The most distinctive result is the hesitancy of Iranian leaders to use conventional force against the United States or its allies, primarily for fear of escalating the conflict beyond Tehran’s control. Those playing the US administration especially noted how “tough” it was to get Iran to go to war. As previously noted, the simulation’s Control group was forced to deliberately escalate the military conflict so that Iranian decision making for employing military power could be observed.

**Iran resorts to conventional conflict after it has been subjected to a conventional attack.** Iranian leaders decided to use force during the third round of the simulation, in response to a US airstrike against Iranian naval mine storage facilities. Planes flying from Al Udaid airbase carried out the US airstrike, and Iranian leaders saw their ballistic missile attack on the base as proportional retaliation.

**Iran used unconventional conflict to distract the United States and deter against US presence in the region.** During the simulation, Iranian leaders attempted to dissuade further US-Iraq ties by facilitating 81 mm mortar attacks on bases from which US forces were operating.

**The intent of IRGC clandestine or covert activities can be unclear to US decision makers.** Whether an Iranian proxy group or terrorist attack is a singular event, such as retaliation, or is part of a potentially expanding campaign against US interests can be easily misunderstood. Although mortar attacks on bases from which US forces were operating were the result of a concerted effort by IRGC Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, this event was a sideline in the evolving crisis. It was not clear that US players connected the attacks by an “unknown gunman” to any concerted decision or messaging by the Iranian regime.

**Iranian deterrence efforts include rhetoric, military exercises, and low-level proxy conduct.** During the simulation, Iranian leaders attempted to assert deterrence by holding military exercises in the northern Persian Gulf area. By holding the exercises outside the Strait of Hormuz and not involving IRGC forces, the players attempted to present a deterrent posture that was neither threatening nor escalatory. Unconventional deterrent options that were discussed included vehicle-borne improvised explosive devises (VBIEDs), rocket attacks by proxy forces in Iraq, and increased lethal aid to groups in Syria or Yemen.

**The United States may underestimate the degree of leverage or deterrence it possesses vis-à-vis Iran.** The United States was also hesitant to be the first party to aggressively use conventional force during the simulation. Conversely, the Iranian team increasingly felt fearful of US power and the threat of overstretch if the conflict expanded.

**Iranian escalation moves in discrete steps, not large jumps.** Iranian decision makers were presented with escalatory options during the simulation, but they always selected the less escalatory of the proposed actions. When Iranian leaders finally sanctioned an escalatory operation
in Iraq, it took the form of an ISIS-like prison-breaching attack in Taji, rather than the proposed rocket attacks at the US Embassy in Baghdad.

The location of Iranian covert activity significantly affects US perceptions of escalation. IRGC covert action in areas where its presence is less well entrenched is seen as escalatory, even though that action may occur at a lower level. For example, the US team perceived IRGC advisers in Yemen as a greater threat than mortar attacks on US forces in Iraq.

Iranian de-escalation may occur on a conflict’s periphery. During the simulation, a captured commercial vessel was released as a de-escalatory effort, but—concerned with other decision points—the US team failed to notice the ship had been released. Other Iranian efforts at de-escalation included trying to persuade the al Houthis in Yemen to stand down, attempting to signal willingness to negotiate with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and requesting that Russia sponsor a UNSC resolution to support peaceful negotiations. US players did not interpret these actions as de-escalation, but rather as “weaseling.”

The United States may misperceive Iranian attempts at de-escalation. The US team expected Iranian de-escalation to look like capitulation, but Iranian leaders will go to great lengths to avoid this perception. This suggests that in actual direct conflict, Iran will feel the need to at least symbolically get the “the last punch in” to maintain the pretense of being able to deter and respond to US military power. This may present particular difficulties for US military and political leaders to conclude a war successfully.

Questions of proportionality are frequently misread and misunderstood. Iranian actors considered a ballistic missile attack on Al Udeid proportional because it targeted the facilities that had launched attacks on Iranian mine storage facilities. The United States argued the attack on Al Udeid was disproportional because it was greater in magnitude and an attack on a basing facility rather than a storage depot. This divergence of perceptions could unintentionally escalate conflict.

Ultimatums may not work against Iran. During the simulation, Iran was unable to end the conflict because it escalated more quickly than it could contain. Iran’s leaders felt that they were confronted with an ultimatum and that they could not be seen to back down without inviting more aggressive actions. Iran’s efforts to affect the terms of the negotiation so it could proceed as an equal partner were seen by US actors as attempts to delay or “weasel out” of accountability. This perception led to an escalation, rather than de-escalation, of the conflict.

Next Steps. Despite its inherent artificiality, the simulation captured a broad picture of Iranian behavior in crisis and war. The reluctance to use military power is evident. The preference for resorting to unconventional and proxy force to achieve political or military objectives is clear. The need to restore deterrence and respond to attacks proportionally drives Iranian actions once the fighting starts. The mutual challenges the United States and Iran faced in communicating and understanding each other’s intentions and threat perception prevented successful de-escalation.

The question, of course, is to what degree Iranian behavior in the exercise reflects Tehran’s potential actions in a real crisis. Together, the participants brought some of the most significant US government and nongovernment experience available in analyzing Iranian security and military activities to the simulation. Their observations should be seriously weighed. The following sections will attempt to take these initial assessments and compare them with historical cases to form a working model of why and how Iran employs its hard power.
III. Historical Patterns: Iran in Conflict

Iran’s hesitancy to use its conventional military power across international borders is a defining feature of its strategic behavior. It may be true that Iran has not started a conventional war against its neighbors in almost 300 years. Yet the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has used its ground, naval, and air forces in multiple operations and campaigns since 1979, most notably during the Iran-Iraq War. The IRI has also seriously considered using military force in the region, only to refrain.

From reviewing the Islamic Republic’s historical record and findings from the crisis simulation, what can be discerned as the characteristics of Iran’s decision making to use conventional force? What, in essence, are Iran’s redlines to start a military conflict or initiate conventional operations?

**Conventional War: Only in Response to Existential Threats**

The Islamic Republic of Iran has not initiated conventional military operations against another state or nonstate actor from a “cold start” since 1979. Every overt—as opposed to covert or clandestine—foreign military campaign Tehran has conducted in the past 37 years was either in response to an attack on its territory or an escalation of action within an existing conflict.

This lack of historical evidence makes it difficult to assess when Iran would be the first to use conventional force in a conflict. Such a decision likely has a very high threshold, requiring a vital or existential threat to the Islamic Republic’s safety and survival. Iran’s recent decisions about the conventional use of force bear this assessment out.

**Iran-Iraq War.** Tehran was certainly on the defensive during the first phase of Iran-Iraq War, from 1980 to 1982. The Islamic Republic had little choice but to try to defend the state and recapture territory lost to the invading Iraqi forces. Once those goals had been mostly achieved by the summer of 1982, the Iranian leadership was faced with a dilemma: whether to accept the broad terms of a UN-proposed ceasefire or to continue fighting.

A debate over this decision appears to have occurred within the regime. Ahmad Khomeini, the son of then-Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini, would later claim in an interview that some in the regime had argued for settlement and that Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was serving as speaker of the Majles and de facto overall military commander under Khomeini, had led the camp in favor of continuing the war. In a 2008 interview, Rafsanjani rejected Ahmad Khomeini’s version of events, claiming that military commanders, such as Mohsen Rezaie and Sayad Shirazi, and members of the Supreme Defense Council (SDC), such as Ali Khamenei, Mousavi Ardebili, Mir Hossein Mousavi, and Ahmad Khomeini, collectively determined that while the world powers would not let Iran win the war, it was beneficial to capture strategic territory to force a better bargain with Iraq. Regardless, Rafsanjani’s opinion prevailed, and the regime decided to begin a multifront offensive effort against Iraq (Operation Ramadan) in July 1982.

Although the offensive was technically the extension of an existing military conflict, the decision to execute Operation Ramadan—and to continue the war until 1988—offers potentially valuable insights into when Iran will initiate a conventional war of
opportunity, rather than a war of necessity against another state. Rafsanjani’s memoirs and other interviews given by key Iranian leaders provide a portrait of the factors that brought the senior leadership to this decision.16

First were the domestic factors. The Islamic Revolution was just over three years old, and political power inside the regime could still be considered fluid. The initial upheaval in 1979 that brought Khomeini into power had been animated by political actors across the spectrum, from communists to liberals to Islamists.17 Touchstone events such as the takeover of the US Embassy in November 1979 and the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War in July 1980 served as galvanizing mechanisms for the more radical elements around Khomeini to purge those not fully in line with his policies. Rafsanjani and Khomeini realized that continuing the war could further that process and consolidate power around a core group of clerical, military, and political elites loyal to the supreme leader.

Second were the practical concerns about achieving a strong position to negotiate a settlement with Saddam Hussein. Although the Iranian military had recaptured most of the territory lost to Iraq, some of Saddam’s forces remained on Iranian soil. Rafsanjani feared that a peace settlement with the current disposition of forces would leave Iran vulnerable to continued coercive behavior or renewed fighting from Baghdad. Continuing the war meant gaining leverage in the eventual peace.

Third were the supreme leader’s ideological ambitions: Khomeini still saw the potential for Saddam’s regime to fall to Islamic Revolutionary forces and hoped continuing the campaign in Iraq would bring about new Arab governments modeled on Iran’s political system.18 Rafsanjani may have had a more realistic perspective on the Iranian military’s ability to conquer Iraq, but likely took advantage of appealing to the supreme leader’s grand aspirations. Continuing the war meant Khomeini’s grandest visions could still be achieved.

Rafsanjani’s argument likely succeeded because it resonated with Khomeini’s own desires to see the defeat and possible overthrow of Saddam Hussein and helped assuage most of his other advisers’ very realistic fears that dragging on the war would be very costly and ultimately unsuccessful. If Operation Ramadan was the beginning of a war of opportunity, it was only because of an extraordinary combination of domestic political, military, strategic, and ideological factors.

Tanker War with the United States. The IRI’s engagement with the United States during the Tanker War is another inflection point that illuminates decision making about Iran’s use of force. Before 1987, the IRGC had refrained from attacking US vessels directly, instead targeting Iraqi, Saudi, and Kuwaiti vessels and other shipping that supported Saddam’s regime. After the United States decided to enter the conflict more directly in July 1987 with Operation Earnest Will, ref Flagging 11 Kuwaiti vessels with US colors and pledging to protect oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz regardless of their flags, Iran was faced with the decision of whether and how to attack these ships.19

Mohsen Rezaei, then-IRGC commander, advocated for continuing Iran’s small-boat strikes against these vessels even though they were now under American protection.20 Rafsanjani believed such a move would be too escalatory and would risk direct war with the United States. In a television interview he argued, “If Iraq does not attack our ships, we will not respond aggressively toward any [of their] ships, whether they are flagged by the US or by any other country. Of course, we see this act as reprehensible, we oppose it, and we condemn any country that flags their ships with a US flag.”21

Rafsanjani won the argument again. The IRGC focused instead on a mine-laying campaign in the Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf targeting Iraqi-allied shipping, including those reflagged by the United States.22 Although less attributable than direct assaults, mining is still considered an act of war. This IRGC campaign can be considered Iran’s first, and so far only, decision to use conventional force against the United States. It also points to several key factors that are likely to endure in any future choice to initiate a direct campaign against the American military.
Iran weighed the necessity of continuing a crucial line of operation in the war—pressuring Iraq’s ability to sell oil—against the fear of outright conflict with a superpower. The leadership believed it needed to risk limited escalation with the United States. Too much was at stake if Iran was going to be able to continue the conflict against Saddam to simply stand down after the United States began reflagging ships.

Iran also understood that it did not have escalation dominance. The United States would always be able to increase the employment of its military power to counter anything Iran attempted. Iranian forces, whether the IRGC or the Artesh, were simply no match against the American Navy. The decision to mine was a calculation to blunt the new US threat in the Persian Gulf without provoking a broader confrontation. As the US response showed, however, Iran lost its gamble to manage escalation, as will be discussed in later sections.

**Afghanistan in 1998.** One of the events most useful for understanding Iranian use of conventional force is when the Islamic Republic almost went to war with the Taliban in 1998. The rise of the Sunni Islamic extremist group in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s pushed the Iranian government to back the Northern Alliance, the Taliban’s strongest rival.

When the Taliban threatened Iran’s eastern borders in 1996, the Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS) reportedly voted to invade and capture the western Afghan capital of Herat.23 The decision was rescinded once threat of the Taliban crossing the Iranian border abated. Then, in August 1998, the Taliban killed nine Iranian diplomats when the group overran the Northern Alliance’s capital of Mazar-e-Sharif. The Iranian leadership was outraged and worried the Taliban would escalate further.

According to then-IRGC Commander Yahya Safavi, the military quickly deployed two divisions with air support on the border. Safavi drafted an operational plan to advance those forces to, in his words, “annihilate, punish, eliminate them and return.”24 The rest of the SCNS’s members agreed with Safavi. Supreme Leader Khamenei, however, did not support such action and overrode the consensus of the council. He feared an invasion was not warranted since the Taliban had not threatened or attempted to take Iranian territory. Khamenei felt he was also preventing “the lighting of fire in this region which would be hard to extinguish.”25

The IRGC forces instead only conducted a series of significant deterrent live-fire exercises during September.26 When the Taliban attacked an IRGC outpost near the border in early October, Iran repelled the raiders and retaliated in kind by destroying several Taliban camps.27 The crisis did not escalate further.

The contrast between the supreme leader’s decision and the SCNS’s consensus points to the larger question of the personalization of Iran’s use of force calculus. Khamenei’s sensitivity to reciprocity of action—the Taliban did not invade our territory, therefore we should not invade theirs—and fears of escalation that restrained his use of force were obviously not shared across the Iranian leadership. If Khomeini had still been alive, for example, Iran may very well have invaded Afghanistan in 1998. These are important considerations for the coming post-Khamenei era.

**Iraq in 2014.** The IRGC’s campaign with its Iraqi proxies to augment the Iraqi armed forces in defense of Baghdad after Mosul’s fall to the Islamic State (IS) in June 2014 was initially strictly unconventional. As IS began to directly threaten the Islamic Republic’s borders, however, Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Hassan Firouzabadi and Artesh Ground Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Pourdastan mobilized a defensive line in western Iran and threatened to conduct decisive action in Iraq if IS came within 40 kilometers of the border.28 In November 2014, the Artesh is believed to have conducted artillery fire in support of Iranian proxy operations in the Iraqi province of Diyala.29

The most remarkable move, however, came when the Artesh’s F-4 Phantom fighter jets conducted several airstrikes in Diyala.30 Use of the F-4s outside
Iran’s borders for the first time since the Iran-Iraq War punctuates the seriousness of the danger Tehran faced and gives perspective to subsequent reports that Iran conducted interdiction sorties, reconnaissance, close air support, and combat air patrols from mid- to late-November 2014 in support of Kurdish and Iraqi efforts to retake the cities of Jalula and Saadía.\textsuperscript{31}

Once IS’s advance in Iraq stalled and the potentially existential threat eased, Iran refrained from using conventional force. Instead, the unconventional campaign led by Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani continued with vigor.

The events during the summer of 2014 and the fall of 1998 drive home the consistent theme that the Islamic Republic has not initiated conventional force beyond its borders unless faced with a perceived existential threat, at least since the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Khamenei’s actions arguably demonstrate that any significant military operations should be proportional to the adversary’s actions and should avoid unnecessary escalation. It is more challenging to weigh Khomeini’s decision making about the use of conventional force during the Iran-Iraq War.

Although the war was originally a defensive one triggered by Iraq’s invasion of Iranian territory, the two choices to shift to an offensive campaign in 1982 with Operation Ramadan and then to enter into a direct confrontation with the US Navy in 1987 by mining the shipping lanes in the Persian Gulf reflect more complex calculations by Khomeini, Rafsanjani, and other leaders to escalate an existing conflict. The ideological fervor that helped fuel Khomeini’s desire to push to Baghdad in 1982 is unlikely to be present at the same level in the future. Iran’s willingness, though, to escalate at great risk on the battlefield to improve negotiating leverage or defend a critical line of operation likely remains.

### Unconventional and Clandestine War: In Defense of Vital National and Ideological Interests

Proxy or covert campaigns have been Iran’s most common type of conflict since 1979. As discussed previously in *Iran’s Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolution*, Tehran’s preference for unconventional rather than conventional warfare is clear.\textsuperscript{32} Iran’s lack of traditional conventional military prowess plus its need to minimize the risk of escalation with regional or world powers drives Iran to place others, rather than its own soldiers, on the frontlines.\textsuperscript{33} Key questions remain, though, as to the drivers and redlines for Iran’s initiation of an unconventional campaign.

In examining Iranian unconventional warfare, this study does not consider the IRGC’s day-to-day operations. These day-to-day activities include fulfilling the IRGC’s external mission of promulgating Islamic Revolutionary ideas and building Iran’s cultural, political, and military influence in regional countries through creating, arming, and training indigenous proxies or paramilitary groups. Neither does this study weigh discrete acts of terrorism, retaliation, or assassination committed by the IRGC, the MOIS, or their proxies.

The study will also not address Iranian efforts through the IRGC and MOIS to aid nonideologically aligned partner groups solely through funding, arms supply, training, or political support. The IRGC’s historical efforts with Hamas in Gaza or the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan are good examples of this phenomenon.

All these activities are valuable for discerning Iranian foreign policy and security objectives but are not necessarily relevant for understanding when Tehran decides to initiate an unconventional war. This study examines only instances of the IRGC directing—or having a significant role in directing—operational decisions in a sustained campaign by its proxies and partners to use force against Iran’s adversaries. Reviewing the historical record, six IRGC campaigns fully meet these criteria: against Iraq in the Iran-Iraq
War, against Israel in the Lebanese Civil War, against Serbian-backed forces in the Bosnian War, against the US-led coalition in Iraq after 2003, against opposition groups in the Syrian civil war, and against the Islamic State in Iraq beginning 2014.*

Iran’s calculations for initiating unconventional conflict can be divided into two broad categories: decisions motivated predominantly by opportunity to advance key foreign policy objectives and those driven predominantly by strategic necessity, at least from Tehran’s perspective. Decisions driven by opportunism include actions related to advancing Iran’s goals of leading the Muslim world and spreading its Islamic Revolutionary ideology. Decisions driven by necessity reflect fears that an adversary may pose an existential threat to either the Iranian state or regime.

The construct of unconventional campaigns motivated by either opportunism or necessity is not a mutually exclusive one. Ideological goals and regional power aspirations can infuse the IRGC’s decision making even in wars of necessity, and wars of opportunity could eventually place so many of Iran’s national interests at risk that they become almost existential. Iran rarely acts with only one motivation. However, discerning the predominant trigger or redline at the beginning of these six campaigns is an important distinction to make.

**Unconventional Wars of Opportunity: Lebanon.** The IRI’s decision to conduct its first unconventional war, the IRGC’s engagement in the Lebanese Civil War, which led to the creation of Lebanese Hezbollah, was the result of a choice not to pursue a conventional war against Israel in Lebanon. On June 6, 1982—one day after Israel invaded southern Lebanon—a delegation consisting of the Iranian defense minister, the IRGC commander, and the Artesh commander flew into Syria to meet with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad.

Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati confirmed on June 9 that the Iranian meeting with Assad was to assess the amount of assistance Syria required and to offer to enter the war if Syria and Lebanon requested it. He stated that the fight against Israel was “part of the strategic aims of the Islamic Republic.”

However, an operation of this scope and scale never materialized because Iran’s calculation for intervention became intrinsically linked to the decision to ultimately execute Operation Ramadan and continue the war with Iraq.

On June 11, five days after its invasion into Lebanon, Israel announced a unilateral ceasefire. The same day, Iraq announced a ceasefire and offered to withdraw its forces from Iranian territory. Syria accepted the Iraqi offer, although it lasted only a few days, and initially passed on the Iranian proposal of a large force deployment. Iran responded to the Iraqi offer by demanding free transit of Iranian troops through Iraqi territory to aid the fight in Syria and Lebanon.

The Iraqis accepted, but the Iranian senior leadership remained initially undecided about what to do in either theater.

Khomeini and Rafsanjani, as discussed in the previous section, wanted to continue prosecuting the
Iraq War and make the Syria-Lebanon front a secondary one.36 Others, such as President Khamenei and most of the military leadership, wanted to end the Iraq conflict, concentrate on domestic rebuilding and stability, and focus external revolutionary and military activities more toward Israel and the Levant.

After a crucial June 22 meeting of the SDC, Iran announced it was committed to the downfall of the Iraqi Baathist regime and that it would not send a large military force to Lebanon until the war with Iraq was won. However, Tehran still wanted to contest Israel in Lebanon and exploit the opportunity to build a political and religious movement among the Lebanese Shia modeled on Islamic Revolutionary principles. So instead of IRGC and Artesh brigades, Iran sent approximately 1,500 IRGC officers to Lebanon with Syrian permission to help build and direct a Shia militia proxy force to fight the Israelis, the origin of Lebanese Hezbollah.37

Multiple factors drove Iran’s decision to pursue this course of action. An intervention in Lebanon presented the new Islamic Republic’s first opportunity to directly challenge Israel. Fulfilling a key tenet of the regime’s revolutionary ideology, anti-Zionism, was an essential symbolic action if Tehran wanted to be seen as the leader of the Islamic world. Secondarily, establishing a foothold in the Levant would help Iran strengthen and manage its new alliance with Syria against Iraq and allow Iran to project power and deter Iraq’s regional partners. Some form of war made sense.

However, Iran opted for an unconventional rather than conventional deployment. Assad’s resistance to a large Iranian military footprint obviously limited options for a conventional deployment, but Khomeini’s personal motivations also kept him from taking the less risky path of settling with Saddam Hussein to focus on challenging Israel. Khomeini’s desire to exact retribution from Baghdad for its original invasion, his overconfidence in Iranian military capabilities after the successful 1982 spring offensives, and his belief that establishing an Islamic republic in Iraq was feasible and necessary overrode the prudent objections of his military leaders and advisers.

Perhaps the most crucial factor, though, was that Israel’s invasion of Lebanon and the potential risk to Assad’s regime did not existentially threaten Iran. Iraq was, and remains, of higher strategic importance, and it will always pose the greatest threat to Tehran if governed by a hostile regime. If Syria and Lebanon were of existential importance, Iran may have overcome Assad’s resistance and deployed fighting units in addition to trainers and advisers.

Unconventional Wars of Opportunity: Bosnia.
The IRGC’s decision to conduct an unconventional campaign in Bosnia during the 1990s followed somewhat similar calculations. After violence broke out in 1991, Bosnian Muslim fighters were under assault from Serbian- and Croatian-backed paramilitaries. Iran had another opportunity to demonstrate its willingness to defend Islam.

Through the mid-1990s, the IRI shipped approximately 14,000 tons of weapons to Bosnian Muslim units, valued at between $150 and 250 million.38 More importantly from an operational perspective, US military officials reported approximately 200 IRGC troops in Bosnia as of early 1996 and possible more than 200 in 1997.39 Although there were some indications that the IRGC personnel operated as independent units, the Iranian forces’ primary mission was training, equipping, and advising the Bosnian forces.

The Iranian presence in Bosnia also gave the IRGC and proxies such as Lebanese Hezbollah a potential base for future clandestine or covert operations in Europe. A major IRGC task was assisting and integrating with the Bosnian government’s intelligence operations. This reflects a pattern seen at a much larger scale in Iraq after 2003 and Syria after 2011 of an Iranian objective to build a “deep state” loyal to Iran inside a partner country’s security apparatus. The IRGC’s penetration of the Bosnian government also had another crucial role: to infiltrate and gather intelligence on US and NATO operations.

In summary, both Lebanon and Bosnia were wars of opportunity for Iran, driven by ideology first and strategic considerations second. In Lebanon, the conflict was kept below the conventional threshold by the absence of an existential threat and the supreme
leader’s personal perspectives. In Bosnia, the opportunity to expand the Islamic Republic’s ideological influence in Europe was supplemented by Iran’s chance to improve its military intelligence capacity against the United States and its allies while gaining an operational foothold on the continent. However, Bosnia did not represent any kind of existential or even strategic threat to Iran, and there was no impetus for conventional or even significant unconventional deployments. Bosnia was a war of opportunity, albeit a small one.

**Unconventional Wars of “Necessity”: Iraq.** The most important of the Islamic Republic’s unconventional wars over the past 35 years occurred in Iraq and Syria and at a larger scale than the opportunistic campaigns in Lebanon and Bosnia. The fights in Iraq and Syria were in response to perceived threats that placed the Iranian regime at risk. Ideological considerations, while important, were secondary in Tehran’s decision making. Unsurprisingly, the strategic calculations for these wars of perceived necessity were much more straightforward.

During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran’s new offensive campaigns against Iraq after the proposed ceasefire in 1982 (beginning with Operation Ramadan) failed to achieve most of their objectives. Supreme Leader Khomeini had overestimated the Artesh’s and IRGC’s capacity to continue the fight into Iraqi territory, and the Iranian military was soon bogged down on almost all fronts.

Facing a difficult and bloody stalemate, the IRGC turned to recruiting—or even forcing—the Iraqi Shia in their prisoner of war (POW) and dissident refugee camps to become guerilla fighters. Many in the dissident camps were members of the Iraqi al Dawa Shia Islamist party or their new offshoot party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which had adopted Iranian revolutionary ideology. In February 1983, IRGC officers began organizing these disparate groups and guerillas into what would eventually become the Badr Corps and placed them under the command of SCIRI’s leader, Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim.

These irregular forces initially numbered around 500 personnel and would be sent to fight on the frontlines with the IRGC or to conduct subversion and sabotage inside Iraq. Their first reported engagement was in June 1983 during the campaign against the Iraqi city of Basra, where they served for three months under the command of an Iranian general.

The IRGC continued to recruit or coerce POWs and dissidents through the remainder of the Iran-Iraq War, growing the corps to a reported 6,000 personnel within four divisions, two brigades, and other units. However, the Badr Corps’ supporting campaigns under the IRGC had only limited effectiveness on the battlefield or in its attempts to destabilize Saddam Hussein’s regime.

Despite its relative lack of operational success during the 1980s, the Badr Corps would become a crucial long-term asset for Iran in its unconventional and clandestine strategies in Iraq. Its creation in 1983 and subsequent growth were driven by a sense of necessity as Iran faced an increasingly impossible war of attrition. Tehran also viewed Badr—as the military wing of its main Iraqi political instrument, SCIRI—as crucial to its ideological goal of eventually establishing an Islamic Republic in Baghdad. SCIRI and Badr were developing characteristics of an Iraqi version of Lebanese Hezbollah.

In February 1991, up to 5,000 Badr operatives—under IRGC control and supervision—entered Iraq as SCIRI tried to commandeer the Shia uprising in southern Iraq following the end of US coalition–led Operation Desert Storm. Iran’s exact role in initiating and guiding the Badr operations in Iraq is unclear. Badr’s efforts, though, were crushed between the effectiveness of the Saddam Hussein’s internal security forces, Iraqi suspiciousness of Tehran’s control of the corps, and the lack of sufficient external support from Iran or other foreign powers.

Why Iran did not more effectively back its Badr proxy in 1991—despite the opportunity to finally achieve a major strategic goal of establishing a politically and ideologically aligned government in Baghdad—remains uncertain. US intentions to support the uprising were unclear, and Iranian leaders were likely deterred by potential regional backlash from Sunni Arab states. Tehran’s perception that Saddam Hussein was severely weakened also likely contributed, as
a teetering regime in Baghdad did not present the sort of existential threat that would have necessitated Iranian action.

Recognizing the combat operational limitations of the Badr Corps, the IRGC focused in the next decade on growing the force into a more sophisticated clandestine organization, running infiltration, sabotage, and other operations into Iraq to destabilize Saddam's regime and increase Iran's reach in the country. After the September 11, 2001, attacks, the IRGC and Badr reportedly began to plan for a new unconventional campaign against Iraqi government forces in anticipation that the United States might attempt to overthrow Saddam. The United States had kept open a degree of communication with SCIRI since the First Gulf War, which allowed for some coordination between Washington and the Badr Corps—in addition to other Iraqi exiled groups in Iran—when Operation Iraqi Freedom commenced in March 2003.48

The IRGC did not choose to fully exploit the opportunity presented by the Shia uprising in 1991, but the possibility of a sustained US presence or extension of the conflict into Iran led Iran to believe in 2003 that it had little choice but to conduct an unconventional campaign in Iraq. IRGC operations in Iraq from 2003 to 2011 can be divided into three phases: removing Saddam Hussein and regime components, ensuring dominant Iranian influence in the new Iraq, and deterring and driving out US and coalition forces. In each phase, Iran was pursuing what it believed were existential goals to help ensure the Islamic Republic’s survival, supported by the opportunistic objectives of continued expansion of Iranian influence, power, and ideology. This analysis focuses on Iran's unconventional and clandestine use of force throughout this period, although the IRGC campaign also incorporated significant political and even economic components.

In the first phase, the IRGC guided and supported Badr Corps operations to help overthrow Saddam Hussein, with some coordination with US and coalition forces.49 Following Saddam's fall, Badr personnel also conducted an assassination campaign against former senior Baathist figures, especially those who had held military or intelligence leadership roles.50

The IRGC decision to send in Badr Corps was a logical and opportunistic one, created and facilitated by US actions.

Existential motivations, however, ultimately drove the IRGC's calculations once it was clear that the coalition was committed to the invasion. The fall of Saddam would be a significant boon to Iranian strategic interests, of course, but the regime that emerged in his wake would matter dearly to Tehran. The threat Iraq posed to Tehran could go from bad to worse if the Baathists found a way to return to power or if they were replaced by a regime aligned with Iran's traditional adversaries, especially if the new government was backed by the United States. Iran had no choice but to play as strong a role as possible in filling the vacuum left by Saddam's departure.

These calculations drove the next phase of the IRGC campaign, shaping the new Iraq. With US support, SCIRI and Dawa became part of the new Shia-dominated political power structure in Baghdad. Badr transitioned into a predominantly political organization, attached to SCIRI, and began to integrate its leadership within the emerging Iraqi security forces. As Badr “normalized” and deep Iranian influence was increasingly secured in Baghdad, the IRGC needed to use different proxy and clandestine organizations to fight opponents of the new Shia-led government and also apply external pressure on that government when its polices threatened Iranian interests.

Iran's primary partners in this mission were the large Iraqi nationalist Shia militia Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) and its more elite offshoots, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Kata’ib Hezbollah (typically referred to as special groups), which were more directly aligned with the IRGC and Iranian ideology. These organizations helped fight the Sunni insurgency and al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), defended Shia populations during the sectarian civil war in 2006–08, contested Baghdad's attempts to centralize power, coerced the Iraqi population before key elections, and conducted the third phase of the IRGC's unconventional campaign: driving out US and coalition forces.

Although Iran originally needed the coalition's military power to overthrow Saddam, it certainly feared the potential threat of having 150,000 US
troops on its western border and the strong Western military positions in Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf. Tehran’s memorandum to the US State Department in 2003 offering to halt its nuclear program and reframe the US-Iranian relationship, if considered authentic, would be a testament to the Iranian leadership’s existential dread after the invasion. However, as the Sunni insurgency bogged down the coalition, fears of any regime threatening attacks from US forces in Iraq would have subsided in Tehran. Still, a large, potentially permanent US troop presence in Iraq still represented an unacceptable risk to the Iranian government.

The IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah began in earnest to train and equip their new partners in Iraq to slowly bleed coalition troops. The campaign’s first major push occurred during the summer of 2005, featuring the Shia militias’ first extensive use of explosively formed projectile (EFP) weapons. Future waves of attacks against US and coalition troops often preluded major elections or Iraqi government decisions addressing how long the coalition forces would stay in the country. In the course of the campaign, nearly 500 US military personnel were killed or injured because of Iranian activities, with 196 US personnel killed and 861 injured in EFP attacks. With the departure of the last coalition troops at the end of 2011, the IRGC had completed its three primary objectives: toppling Saddam Hussein, establishing an aligned government in Baghdad that was deeply penetrated by Iranian proxy actors, and ensuring the United States had no permanent combat power in the country.

Throughout this conflict, the opportunity to create a friendly Iraqi government deeply influenced by Iranian political, ideological, and security interests was a crucial supporting driver for Tehran’s decisions to use force. There was, however, no apparent desire to risk a conventional confrontation with any adversary in Iraq after 1988. This is an understandable position given the ravages of the Iran-Iraq War and the fear of contesting American military superiority.

An Iraq under either Saddam or American dominance represented an existential threat that must be addressed, but neither Saddam nor the United States directly threatened to militarily attack Iran during this period. Thus, while the danger may have been existential from Tehran’s perspective, it was not imminent. A complex, unconventional proxy war tailored to evolving political and military circumstances was Tehran’s solution.

**Unconventional Wars of “Necessity”: Syria.** The March 2011 uprising against President Bashar al-Assad risked all of what the Islamic Republic had built in the Levant since the revolution. While Tehran’s original intervention in 1982 and alliance with Syria was primarily driven by opportunity, preserving its most important proxy created from that war—Lebanese Hezbollah and the infrastructure and political cover provided to it by Damascus—had become an existential problem. Iran now depended on Lebanese Hezbollah and Syria to deter Israel and its Western allies and provide strategic depth. Secondly, if Tehran lost its ability to effectively support Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian opposition groups, it would also lose perceived legitimacy to lead the Islamic-world opposition to Israel and Zionism.

Given these factors, Iran would go to almost any length to preserve its interests in Syria. The IRGC deployed advisers to Damascus by May 2011 to help the regime suppress the protests. Over the past five years, Iran escalated its campaign in Syria as Assad’s efforts to regain control of his country continued to fail. However, as Lebanese Hezbollah fighters and even Russia strike aircraft intervened in Syria, the IRGC strove to keep its involvement below the threshold of its units engaging direct combat.

Why Iran did so is an interesting question. One likely factor is Iran’s usual preference to have its proxies and partners do the fighting for it whenever possible. This minimizes risk and avoids potential escalation with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other actors in the region.

Another possible reason is that, just as Hafez al-Assad’s government resisted a full Iranian military intervention during the Syrian and Lebanese conflict with Israel in 1982, members of Bashar al-Assad’s regime may have opposed more overt assistance from the Islamic Republic. Damascus needed Tehran’s
assistance, but military officers may have resented an overt Iranian takeover of the fight.58

A third part of the explanation for Iran’s behavior lies in Iran’s apparent need to manage both domestic political support and internal leadership consensus for its efforts in Syria. During the first two years of the conflict, Tehran attempted to hide the IRGC’s growing activities to support Damascus. As the funerals back home for IRGC officers and volunteers slain in the war steadily increased—and as Lebanese Hezbollah conducted its major deployment into Syria in May 2013—Iran began to publicly embrace its role.59 The Iranian media and the IRGC couched the mission as advising Assad in fighting foreign-backed terrorists and as defending the Sayyidah Zaynab shrine in Damascus, which holds the tomb of Prophet Muhammad’s granddaughter and is holy to Shia Muslims.

Domestic opinion typically affects Iranian foreign policy minimally. The mounting death toll of IRGC officers helping to manage frontline forces of Shia militias, Syrian government, and Lebanese Hezbollah fighters has resulted in the highest casualty rate among Iranian military personnel since the 1980s. Continuing casualties in an open-ended conflict would certainly be weighing on Khamenei and other elites who are cognizant of how vanishing public support helped force an end to the Iran-Iraq War in 1988. Tehran’s commitment to preserving its position in Syria is unwavering, but there are significant incentives to avoid a more conventional military intervention if at all possible.

It is important to understand the February 2016 reports that the IRGC has conducted its first armed drone strikes in Syria in this context.60 Such operations (attributable strikes executed by Iranian forces on foreign soil) would constitute Iran’s first clear use of conventional military force in the Syrian conflict. Iran, like the United States, likely finds drone strikes a relatively risk-free use of conventional force, jeopardizing few if any Iranian lives and minimizing the potential for escalation. The IRGC still wants to avoid deploying actual combat units or manned aircraft at this point. If the war continues to intensify, though, Iran may finally be willing to cross the threshold into a full conventional military intervention. Preserving Tehran’s position in Syria remains existential.

The fall of Mosul in 2014 to the Islamic State put Iran into an immediate state of crisis.61 Since US troops departed Iraq in 2011, the IRGC had been focused on deepening its influence at all levels of the Iraqi government and security forces. With the Islamic State’s advance, not only was Tehran’s grand project in Iraq now at stake, but also Iran’s own borders were at risk from a Sunni extremist army. Within days, the Iranian leadership decided to launch a major unconventional campaign, sending IRGC officers into Iraq to assist the Iraqi security forces in defending Baghdad; reactivating their primary proxy groups, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata’ib Hezbollah; and helping the Iraqis organize a large number of militias into the umbrella Popular Mobilization Forces.62

As noted earlier, the IRGC and the Artesh also made clear their intent and willingness to launch a conventional campaign to repel ISIS if it directly threatened Iran’s territory. Several Iranian F4 airstrikes and artillery barrages conducted while defending Diyala Province (between Baghdad and the Iranian border) backed up this deterrent message.

The calculus for Iran was very clear. ISIS presented an existential threat to Iran, and the most immediate challenge was protecting its position in Iraq. Tehran decided to pursue an immediate and aggressive unconventional campaign, while preparing to escalate to a conventional one if necessary.

Iran also demonstrated how it strategically prioritizes Iraq over Syria. The IRGC redeployed a number of the Iraqi Shia militias and proxy groups sent to support Assad back home to augment the new Iraqi campaign. Subsequently, in early 2015, as Assad’s military situation deteriorated and the front against IS in Iraq stabilized, the IRGC shifted some Iraqi groups back to Syria.

Iran’s relatively conservative approach to using conventional and unconventional force should not be confused with having a pacific foreign policy. Quite the contrary. The IRGC’s day-to-day development of proxy groups, arming of partners, cooption of states, and expansion of terrorist or retaliatory capabilities worldwide is a major, if not primary, source of
instability and sectarian violence in the Middle East. As these efforts mature, the groups and governments under Iran’s sway can become strategically vital to preserve Iranian security and, in turn, new casus belli for Iran if threatened.

Lebanese Hezbollah was originally the product of an elective war for Tehran. Now, maintaining the ability to support the group, which is the bedrock of the IRI’s “axis of resistance” in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, is the primary reason Iran felt compelled to conduct a complex unconventional campaign to keep Assad in power. The IRI’s effort to retain its position in Syria fueled a catastrophic civil war that unleashed sectarian conflict, birthed the Islamic State and other Salafi jihadi groups, and created a new army of regional paramilitary groups under the IRGC’s umbrella.

Policymakers should keep this cycle in mind, especially in theaters such as Yemen. The first priority should be to prevent Iran from building these groups and partner capabilities in the first place.

An Emerging Iranian Cyber Doctrine?

In addition to its conventional and unconventional military capabilities, Iran has found great utility in conducting various cyber activities to bolster its national security agenda and enable it to respond to perceived existential crises. Iran is typically considered one of the more sophisticated states with regards to cyber activities, behind the United States, China, Russia, and Israel.

Major Iranian cyber activity began in earnest in the early 2000s, typically in the form of hacktivism and nationalist-focused website defacements. Iranian hacking abilities have rapidly improved in the ensuing decade and have been used in devastating fashion on at least three occasions: the 2011 Comodo and DigiNotar certificate authority thefts, the 2012 “Shamoon” attack on Saudi Aramco, and the 2012 distributed denial-of-service attacks on US banking institutions. The last received significant press coverage in March 2016, following the US Department of Justice’s announcement that it had indicted seven hackers associated with the Iranian government.

Like most nations, the Islamic Republic does not maintain a clearly defined strategy for when it engages in cyber operations, but campaigns that have been attributed to Iran can serve as data points to better understand how and why it engages in such activities. While the conventional defense of the Islamic Revolution remains a key focus of Tehran, exploring these three examples of Iran using cyber activities in retaliation for economic, political, or covert attacks on the regime can help elucidate the evolving direction of the regime’s war-fighting policy.

“Twitter Revolution” of 2009 Reveals True Threat: The Iranian People. Iran’s 2011 Comodo and DigiNotar certificate authority thefts are rooted in the context of the Islamic Republic’s contested political sphere. The June 2009 protests in opposition to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s fraudulent election revealed perhaps an even greater threat to Iranian national security than the United States: the Iranian people.

Across Iran, Ahmadinejad’s 63 percent landslide reelection was widely perceived as being achieved through fraud and election tampering, leading thousands of Iranians to take to the streets in protest of having their vote effectively stolen by the Iranian government. “Where is my vote?” quickly became more than just a rallying cry for the hundreds of thousands of Iranians; it became an Internet meme.

The Iranian government quickly learned just how effective social media platforms such as Twitter, Gmail, and YouTube were for coordinating protests, rallying the disenfranchised, and fomenting dissent against the Iranian government. The protests and activities became such a problem for the regime that it resorted to the tailor-made tool of all dictatorships and shut down Internet access throughout the country.

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After control was regained throughout Iran after the Green Revolution, the regime realized it had a major problem. Simply limiting Internet connectivity throughout the country was no longer sufficient, and outright denying a modern society access to social media could lead to problems in its own right. The regime had to find a way to covertly monitor its citizens’ perceived seditious activities.
A major virtue of Internet communication is that provocative conversations occurring via email and private messages are not easily monitored. Groups of people can easily foment dissent through the written word. Without the ability to see these private conversations, the Iranian government had to find a creative way to spy on its citizen’s private online communications. This effort would be led by an individual, or a group of individuals, going by the name “Ich Sun.”

On March 15, 2011, the certificate authority (CA) Comodo announced that it had fallen victim to an intrusion originating from Iran. CAs such as Comodo serve as authorities that confirm a website’s legitimacy to those trying to access it. CAs issue secure signing certificates to websites so users can be sure they are accessing their intended destination, rather than an imposter website. Typically, web browsers will alert a user when they go to a website that does not contain a legitimate signing certificate or if a website signs its own certificate.

Ich Sun claimed to be able to infiltrate a CA’s hardware security module and issue legitimate signing certificates for websites that look like Gmail, Facebook, Twitter, and Yahoo, but are really controlled by the Iranian government. In the case of Comodo, nine secure signing certificates were fraudulently issued for Google, Gmail, Yahoo, Skype, and Mozilla. By September 2011, it was revealed that 500 additional signing certificates were stolen from the Dutch CA DigiNotar.

The Dutch Security firm Fox-IT estimated that because of the Comodo and DigiNotar thefts, more than 300,000 Iranians citizens had been unknowingly exposed to man-in-the-middle spying efforts by the Iranian government before the fraudulent certificates were revoked. Even after the certificate revocations, these Iranian citizens would still be vulnerable to the regime’s espionage because of the almost-certain compromising of username and password information.

This massive spying effort can be viewed as the Iranian government’s recognition that repelling modern technological threats to the regime requires a significant investment in defensive and offensive cyber capabilities. This prioritization of the internal threat of sabotage and subversion posed by foreign powers from so-called “soft war” over conventional attacks is reflected in frequent comments by the supreme leader and key military commanders, as well as manifested in the Islamic Republic’s new Five-Year Development Plan for 2016–2021.

**Stuxnet, Shamoon, and Effects on Iranian Cyber Strategy.** The Islamic Republic believes that from 2007 to 2011 the United States conducted one of the most sophisticated and unprecedented cyber campaigns the world has ever seen. Specifically designed to target the industrial control systems of the Iranian nuclear program, the Stuxnet virus is considered one of the most elegant and physically destructive computer viruses ever launched at a rival nation.

Stuxnet was designed to specifically target a subset of industrial control systems known as supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) systems. SCADA systems function by collecting operating information for industrial systems to allow remote control for networks of industrial processes. These types of processes are found all throughout modern societies, including in waste management systems, electrical networks, manufacturing industries, oil and gas companies, and nuclear power plants. Stuxnet operated by collecting valuable intelligence about the Iranian nuclear program and destroying specific types of centrifuges used in Iranian nuclear facilities.

The never-before-seen nature of the Stuxnet attack caused shockwaves within the network security and world communities. Because the United States was the prime suspect for launching Stuxnet, many in the network security community believed the floodgates were opened to a new type of cyber conflict in which nations would use cyberattacks to physically damage infrastructure and possibly lead to a loss of life. Retaliation for Stuxnet was inevitable, although it was widely feared the retaliation would be in kind and that America’s critical infrastructure was a prime target.

But the Iranian reaction was not to launch a wave of SCADA attacks against the United States. This is likely the case for several reasons, including the marginal cost for such an attack, the unlikelihood of gaining access to American critical infrastructure,
and the inevitable risk that a Stuxnet-like retaliation could escalate into an uncontrollable conflict. It is assumed that Stuxnet cost the United States hundreds of millions of dollars, entailed years of development, required deep knowledge of the Iranian nuclear infrastructure and individuals associated with the program, and demanded the development of several novel methods for delivering a virus into Iran’s industrial network.

The Iranians realized that launching a large-scale yet totally covert SCADA attack as a response to Stuxnet was unnecessary. Instead, they responded with a more conventional cyberattack. On August 15, 2012, the virus known as “Shamoon” was deployed against Aramco, Saudi Arabia’s national oil company. By the time the threat was totally mitigated, Shamoon had taken control of and effectively destroyed more than 30,000 computers used in Aramco’s day-to-day operations.

The manner in which the Iranians obfuscated their Shamoon retaliation for Stuxnet is particularly interesting and parallels the Iranian preference for plausible deniability in its more holistic military actions. Shamoon contained components similar to Flame, another piece of malicious code deployed against Iranian oil and nuclear assets. Flame was first discovered in mid-2012 by Iran’s Maher Center. As Iran’s national Computer Emergency Response Team, the Maher Center likely boasts some of Iran’s most skilled government-sponsored hackers, who would likely be able to deploy aspects of Flame in any campaign.

In addition to containing portions of the Flame virus, the attack was claimed by a group purporting to be an Arab organization opposed to Saudi Arabian meddling in Syria and Bahrain. But deep inside the Shamoon code laid a clue as to the organization’s true intention: a picture of a burning American flag.

**A Cyber Response to Conventional Means of Persuasion.** Throughout late 2012, major US banking institutions fell victim to persistent denial-of-service attacks causing major disruptions at JP Morgan, Citigroup, Wells Fargo, and Bank of America. A previously unknown hacking organization named the Cyber Fighters of Izz ad-din Al Qassam claimed credit for the attacks. The purportedly Arab organization offered an odd justification for their attack, the movie *The Innocence of Muslims.*

The intensity and persistence of the denial-of-service attacks led many cybersecurity experts to conclude that only a nation-state could be the true culprit. Soon after, it was determined that Iranian hackers with government support were behind the banking attacks in retaliation for US-led banking sanctions that targeted Iran’s nuclear program. With this pronouncement, Operation Ababil, as it was called by the Qassam Cyber Fighters, became a major Iranian retaliation for real-world actions against the Islamic Republic.

**Broader Implications.** It is unclear if Operation Ababil suggests a doctrinal change in Tehran indicating that cyber responses are a part of an appropriate response to what it perceives to be aggressive adversarial activity, but it did share many hallmarks to how Iran responds to malicious activity: plausible deniability, a clearly defined target where a message would be well understood, and basic obfuscation efforts to dissuade retaliatory actions. Almost certainly, if Iran had responded to US-led banking sanctions with a terrorist attack by one of its proxy organizations, the United States would be forced into a kinetic response that could quickly spiral into a larger conflict.

Iranian cyber strategy is still nascent. The concepts driving Tehran’s cyber defense approach, if it has any such explicit strategy, are likely straightforward. Iran has made clear that it needs to prioritize cyber defense and internal control, as it continues to fear US and Israeli covert operations and perceived seditious behavior in the Iranian population. Given fears of regime stability, especially in the wake of greater openness to world markets following the implementation of the JCPOA, we should expect Iran to invest significant resources in protecting and monitoring its cyber infrastructure.

Tehran’s emerging cyber offensive doctrines appear to be more nuanced, but they fit within the larger framework of how Iran sees the use of covert or clandestine force. Cyber is clearly a valued tool for
retaliation, especially when it can provide a perceived effective response that does not risk the same level of escalation that a conventional or terrorist attack would. Iran also sees the need for cyber to be a component of deterrence from clandestine or covert attacks from either the cyber or noncyber realms. The difficulty is Iran’s cyber capabilities are still insufficient to really match those of the United States, Israel, Russia, or China. We should expect Iran to focus on bringing its cyber warfare capacity up to world standards and, most concerning, to continue efforts to demonstrate its improving cyber power.
IV. Escalation and De-Escalation in Conflict

Once Iran begins either a conventional or unconventional campaign, the most important decisions involve how much and what kind of force the military should employ to achieve Tehran’s goals. The calculations of whether or when to intensify or scale back a campaign are tied closely to the importance of the desired military objectives, weighed against the perceived intentions and relative power of the adversary Iran is fighting at the time.

With a peer regional or substate opponent, such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq or the Syrian opposition, restraints on escalation are necessarily less and appear to be driven largely by relative progress on the battlefield. Against a more powerful regional actor or global power, such as Israel or the United States, the calculations will be different. States with more advanced conventional capabilities, and especially those that possess nuclear weapons, retain escalation dominance in any conflict with Tehran. Iran recognizes that a fight with a technically superior opponent can go only so far, especially when a nuclear power is involved.

The IRI’s escalation and de-escalation behavior in conflicts with the United States is predominantly tied to perceptions of Washington’s intentions and willingness to employ greater levels of force. This tends to create a pattern of continual limit testing as Iran conducts a campaign, either conventional or unconventional, until the United States escalates in a way that Iran is unwilling or unable to match. Iranian de-escalation can be quite rapid after that point.

Iran’s hesitancy to provoke the full conventional power of the United States was on stark display during the crisis simulation. That behavior can also be seen in the two most relevant historical case studies, the Tanker War in 1987–88 and the Iraq War in 2003–11. The Syrian civil war, from 2011 to the present, offers an alternative example of steady escalation driven by Iran’s nearly unconditional commitment to preserving an allied regime in Damascus and enabled by the lack of a militarily equivalent or superior opponent. These are perhaps the most useful examples to understand Iranian decision making through the arc of conflict.

The US-Iran Tanker War

When the United States began reflagging Kuwaiti ships in July 1987 as part of Operation Earnest Will, it was an escalation of American involvement in the Iran-Iraq War, although not of military force. The IRI was faced with a stark choice of whether to maintain its campaign against Iraqi-allied shipping and risk US military action against its interests and territory or to stand down and let Iraq sell its oil and resupply unmolested. In essence, Iran had to escalate or de-escalate. Tehran chose the former, but with careful calibration.

IRGC Commander Mohsen Rezaei advocated for continuing direct attacks against Kuwaiti, Saudi, or other Iraq-allied ships, even if the United States reflagged them. De facto overall military commander Ali Rafsanjani advocated for a more indirect campaign by mining the shipping lanes in the Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf. Supreme Leader Khomeini agreed to Rafsanjani’s less provocative course, although this did not stop Rezaei from eventually directing the IRGC to attack ships, possibly without Rafsanjani’s permission.

As Figure 2 shows, Khomeini’s decision in July 1987 began a steady three-month escalation of force...
between Iran and the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Mining international shipping lanes is an act of war, and Washington reacted accordingly. The US capture and scuttling of an Iranian minelayer on September 21, 1987, was not sufficient to alter the Iranian mining campaign. On October 8, a US helicopter successfully deterred a 45-vessel IRGC naval attack on Saudi
Arabia by sinking a small Iranian boat.\textsuperscript{87} Eight days later, however, the IRGC launched a Silkworm missile on a reflagged Kuwait tanker, injuring the American shipmaster and crew. This time the US response had a more significant impact. The day after the missile attack, American destroyers and Navy SEALs destroyed one Iranian oil platform, damaged another one, and began to overtly conduct minesweeping operations in the Persian Gulf.\textsuperscript{88}

For approximately the next five months, Iran continued its campaign against shipping, but much less intensely. Then in April 14, 1988, the guided missile frigate USS \textit{Roberts} struck a mine in the Gulf. The US retaliation four days later, Operation Praying Mantis, was decisive. The Iranians lost two platforms, four smaller boats, one frigate, and at least 56 personnel during nine hours of fighting.\textsuperscript{89} When a second Iranian frigate was damaged, Tehran de-escalated quickly. Losing any more of its limited surface combatant fleet would have devastated Iran’s ability to deter or defend against any future naval attacks.

After Praying Mantis, Iran discontinued its use of missiles against US-flagged shipping and limited its small-boat harassment operations for the rest of the war. Khomeini, Rafsanjani, and Rezaei decided, however, that they needed to at least resume the mine-laying campaign, albeit at much lower level.\textsuperscript{90} The leadership feared that without doing so, they would have no deterrence against potential US military action on Iranian territory or assets.

This decision likely represents a typical characteristic of Iranian de-escalation. When faced with a superior and determined foe, Tehran’s moves to exit a conflict cannot be seen as too weak lest their opponent believe they can act against Iran with impunity in the future. Laying mines—even though Iran had no desire to extend the conflict with the United States—should be viewed therefore as an effort to restore deterrence.

This type of action can be confusing to US decision makers and a source of miscalculation. As observed by participants on the US team during the crisis simulation, Iranian counteractions—even when seeking de-escalation—can create the perception that Iran is “weaseling” out of a confrontation rather than simply surrendering.

When the USS \textit{Vincennes} accidentally downed an Iranian commercial airbus on July 3, 1988, whatever remaining willingness Iran had to continue its confrontation with the United States quickly evaporated. Despite American explanations, Tehran perceived the action as an intentional use of force and a signal that the United States could escalate to a level well beyond Iranian expectations. Not only did the Tanker War end at this point, but also the airbus incident pushed Khomeini to conclude the Iran-Iraq War itself a month later, believing US willingness to weigh in militarily on the Iraqi side would only increase further.

The Iraq War, 2003–11

Iran’s unconventional campaign in Iraq aimed to ensure a friendly government and security apparatus in Baghdad while preventing a permanent US presence. As mentioned earlier, these goals were considered existential, and Tehran would go to whatever feasible lengths necessary to achieve them. As with the Tanker War, the degree of escalation or de-escalation by Iranian proxies was calibrated to perceptions of Washington’s intentions and willingness to employ greater levels of force. Iran regularly tested US limits until a culminating point was reached at which Iran determined that further escalation would risk an unacceptable response.

A key difference between the Iraq campaign and the Tanker War was that the unacceptable US response Iran feared was a direct confrontation between American forces and IRGC personnel that could escalate into a full-scale conventional war against IRGC positions and assets in Iran. Recognizing that the United States retained escalation dominance, and given the large deployment of superior US force so close to its western border, Iran sought to avoid a conventional conflict at all costs.

Another crucial difference was in the motivations for escalation or de-escalation. During the Tanker War, parallel military developments in the broader Iran-Iraq War often drove the calibration of the use of force. In Iran after 2003, the calibration of force was frequently tied to political events that Iran thought
would most affect Washington’s decision making, such as elections. The smaller scale and plausible deniability of unconventional war allowed Iran to more carefully tailor its use of force to achieve its desired political outcome.

Iran’s campaign began in earnest in September 2005 with a major wave of EFP attacks conducted by militias and Iranian proxy groups. (See Figure 3.) These attacks primarily targeted coalition forces leading up to the first Iraqi parliamentary election in December. The elections went relatively smoothly, eventually seating a Shia majority parliament and selecting Nouri al-Maliki as prime minister, an outcome acceptable to Tehran. However, the IRGC’s de-escalation after December was short-lived.

Two factors drove the next steady escalation from March 2006 to January 2007: AQI’s bombing of the holy Shiite Mosque in Samarra, which triggered a sectarian war in Baghdad and central Iraq, and a continued US presence, now in its fourth year, with no indication the US would be extracting itself from Iraq after the first parliamentary elections.91 Both issues threatened Iran’s primary objectives in Iraq, and the IRGC responded. In May 2006, the IRGC began using Lebanese Hezbollah to train the Shia militias.92

As Iran’s campaign accelerated through the fall of 2006, there was limited direct coalition response against the IRGC, Lebanese Hezbollah, or leadership of the key Iranian Shia proxies. Then on December 21, 2006, US forces raided a home connected with suspected Shia “death squads” operating against the Sunni population in Baghdad. To their surprise, the US personnel found in the house Brigadier General Mohsen Chizari, head of the IRGC’s Qods Force (QF) operations in Iraq; several other Iranian officers; and a prominent senior Iraqi Shia political leader.93 Under political pressure from Iraqi government leaders, the US released the Iranians within a week.94

On January 11, 2007, US forces raided the Iranian consulate in Irbil, Kurdistan, and detained five members of Iran’s Qods Force.95 Iran was quickly getting the picture that the United States was willing to escalate and go after its people. In response, the IRGC tightened security at all of Iran’s diplomatic facilities in Iraq and pulled back most of their Qods Force operatives.96 This was a swift de-escalation, not unlike the Iranian retrenchments after punitive US strikes during the Tanker War.

That Iran was likely in a de-escalatory mode makes its next move potentially difficult to understand without context. On January 20, 2007, the IRGC special-group proxy AAH raided the US joint command center in Karbala, killing five American soldiers.97 On the surface this appears a daring escalation on Tehran’s part, but in fact, the operation appears to have gone awry. The five US soldiers (one seriously wounded) were initially bound and removed from the command center, hustled into five vehicles, and rushed away. One soldier died of injuries, and the others were subsequently executed as the coalition response team closed in on the fleeing perpetrators.

Had the operation been designed to produce US casualties, it would have been less dangerous and costly for AAH to execute the soldiers at the base. A more likely motivation for the raid is that the IRGC wanted the US soldiers captured in retaliation for the US Irbil raid, to be subsequently leveraged to gain the five Iranian officers’ release and restore deterrence against the coalition targeting its officers in the future.98

Further indicators that Iran may have been trying to de-escalate during this period include a moderate reduction in EFP and other attacks against coalition forces by Iranian proxies for the next three months.99 There were multiple reasons for this. Iran was digesting the implications of the recently announced surge of US forces, and the coalition focus on countering Iranian activity in Iraq specifically was also increasing.100 The Iranian leadership may have seen Karbala as a mistake, further driving the need for a lower profile, at least in the near-term.

Iran was also running into the crosswinds stemming from its parallel campaign of shaping the Iraqi political and security landscape. The IRGC’s broad arming of multiple Shia organizations and paramilitary groups during 2006 was fueling intra-Shia conflict, especially in southern Iraq. The expanding
Figure 3. Conflict Escalation: Iraq, 2003–11

1. ** Late 2003–Spring 2004  
   Iran ramps up support for Moqtada al-Sadr’s JAM militia.

2. ** October 2004  
   Iran-supported Badr Corps try to assassinate Saddam-era intelligence figures and members of newly constituted National Intelligence Service.

3. ** September–November 2005  
   First wave of EFP incidents begins.

4. ** March 2006  
   Escalation of sectarian violence following the February 26 bombing of the al-Askari mosque in Samarra. Second wave of EFP incidents begins.

5. ** May 2006  
   Lebanese Hezbollah militant Ali Musa Duqduq meets with Abdul Reza Shahlaei, deputy commander of the Qods Force’s Department of External Special Operations, in Tehran. Receives orders to oversee the training of militiamen in Iraq.

6. ** December 21, 2006  

7. ** January 11, 2007  
   United States raids Iranian consulate in Irbil and detains five suspected IRGC Qods Force members.

8. ** January 20, 2007  
   Asa’ib Ahl Al-Haqq (with Iranian cooperation and likely direction) raids US PJCC Karbala and kidnap and kills five US soldiers.

9. ** Late January 2007  
   US announces the “surge” in Iraq, IRGC begins a period of consolidation, expanding training and supply to Iraqi militia fighters. The United States begins aggressively targeting IRGC and proxy actors.

10. ** March 2007  
    Qais Khazali, leader of Asa’ib Ahl Al-Haqq, captured by US forces.

11. ** August 29, 2007  
    Moqtada al-Sadr calls for a ceasefire after brutal fighting between JAM, Badr Corps, Iraqi government, and US forces in Karbala.

12. ** March 2008  
    Iraqi security forces begin “Charge of the Knights,” aimed at quelling violence in Iraq’s southern province of Basra. Concurrent increase in violence and EFP attacks, but conscious decision by Iran to stand down some of their more closely controlled militia groups and allow Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki to regain control of the country.

13. ** May 2008  
    Final wave of EFP attacks peaks and then begins to decline in preparation for Status of Forces Agreement negotiations.

14. ** August 2008  
    Reports suggest that Iranian-backed militias are struggling to finance operations.

15. ** December 2008  
    US Lt. Gen. Thomas Metz reports that the number of explosive devices entering Iraq from Iran has decreased.

16. ** June–July 2011  
    A final wave of Iranian-directed attacks hit US troops in Iraq, designed to ensure that forces depart as scheduled.

Source: Authors.
violence caused fears of greater instability, along with resentment among Shia elites of Iran’s heavy hand in the country. In November 2007, Iraqi Shia political and tribal leaders signed a petition asking Iran to reduce its support for its proxies.101

Even if the IRGC feared that further escalation would lead to unwanted direct confrontation with the coalition and more active resistance from the leadership in Baghdad, Iran’s fundamental mission to shape Iraq’s government and security apparatus to its favor and deter a permanent US presence remained unchanged. The IRGC spent the post-Karbala period recalibrating its profile in the country, evaluating new US intentions and capabilities for the surge, consolidating its influence in Iraq’s security apparatus, expanding its training of its proxies with Lebanese Hezbollah, and supplying Iraqi Shia militias.102

The United States, however, continued its efforts to target the IRGC and Shia militia proxies. During a March 2007 raid in Basra, a task force captured Qais Khazali, the leader of the AAH; his brother Laiith; and Ali Musa Daqduq, Qais’ adviser and Lebanese Hezbollah liaison. Daqduq had in his possession the joint planning documents prepared with the IRGC for the Karbala raid, confirming for the United States—and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki—Iran’s role in the operation.103 As the United States intensified its campaign against Iranian proxies, the IRGC responded in kind, with EFP attacks reaching their highest level so far from April to August 2007.104

The intra-Shia conflict also peaked in August 2007. Brutal fighting that month near the holy Shia shrine in Karbala among JAM, Iraqi government forces, coalition forces, and some Badr and special-groups elements was the culminating point in this cycle. Moqtada al Sadr called a ceasefire for JAM, which largely held until March 2008. The IRGC appears to have decided to be much more careful in supplying and training Shia groups, focusing only on the most trusted organizations, specifically special groups, such as AAH.105 The de-escalation of violence against coalition forces between August and March 2008 was significant. However, how much of this was due to}

IRGC decision making is difficult to parse out; Sadr’s ceasefire and successful surge and task force operations certainly contributed.

The final cycle of intense attacks against US forces occurred from March to May 2008 as US and Iraqi forces jointly attempted to break the hold JAM and other Shia militia groups maintained over the JAM-dominated Sadr City neighborhood in eastern Baghdad, Basra, and other southern cities. These campaigns should be seen as a purge effort by the Shia political leadership to regain control over the remaining Shia paramilitary and political groups that had—with IRGC backing—grown too independent. The Iranian leadership did not oppose this effort in general, as Qods Force Commander Qassem Solemani negotiated the ceasefire among the groups in southern Iraq.106 Tehran recognized that the IRGC’s previously indiscriminate support of so many organizations had undermined Iran’s campaign to create a relatively stable government in Baghdad under its influence.

US casualties from fighting with Shia militias were at their highest ever during the spring of 2008, but Iran’s responsibility for the majority of these incidents was likely one level removed, given Soleimani’s role in aiding Maliki’s campaign to rein in the paramilitary groups. Iran’s policies in Iraq had armed, trained, and funded these groups originally, setting the stage for the American deaths in the period. At this point, the IRGC had shifted focus to regaining some form of control over the militias, but it returned to primarily targeting US forces by the summer of 2008, albeit at a lower level.107 Most of the violence during this period was the result of previous Iranian policies and not directed by the IRGC itself.

Major decisions on a long-term US presence were also being made during 2008, including negotiations over a status of forces agreement between Baghdad and Washington.108 Iran was placing significant pressure on Iraqi politicians to make no such agreement. However, continued instability was a primary argument for the US to stay, and Iran appeared to recognize this. If the level of violence remained too high, it would threaten the IRGC’s campaign to drive out the American military.
Iran’s special-group proxies therefore pursued a campaign of comparatively moderate violence for the next three and a half years, with a final wave of attacks in the summer of 2011 before the US forces departed in December. Tehran calibrated this de-escalation by balancing three objectives: erode US will to stay in Iraq, limit Iraqi political will to keep US forces, and be able to claim responsibility for the eventual US departure.

The IRGC’s effort to deter the US and prevent a permanent American presence in Iraq—while simultaneously trying to ensure Iran’s dominant influence in the country—was at the time its most complex unconventional campaign since 1979. Discerning inflection points for escalation and de-escalation is a challenge, given the intertwined campaigns and multitude of proxies and other actors engaged, not all of which Tehran could control.

The Karbala attack is the closest the IRGC came to employing attributable, conventional force against the United States, and January 2007 was arguably the peak of the conflict’s escalation—the closest the conflict came to crossing the threshold of unconventional force. As seen during the Tanker War, Iran restrained its most provocative actions—deploying notable numbers of IRGC Qods Force officers in Iraq—once it encountered a forceful response from the United States. Instead, Iran recalibrated its operations to continue the campaign in a less risky manner, even as the special groups expanded their targeting of coalition forces in the spring and summer of 2007, when the conflict reached its greatest intensity in terms of scale.

Attempting to drive the United States out of Iraq is something that Iran felt it had to do, and arguably it achieved this goal. The United States always retained escalation dominance, however, and Iran had no desire to trigger a conventional confrontation. Due to these conditions, Iranian understanding of US intentions was the primary influence on the “curve” of escalation and de-escalation. Even greater US forcefulness in targeting Iranian personnel would arguably have made the “slope” of de-escalation even steeper and therefore less lethal for coalition forces. Iran’s view of this campaign as an existential one, however, meant it would never have stopped entirely until the United States departed Iraq.

The most important secondary influence on Iran’s operations is the host country’s level of tolerance for Iranian activities. This is a typical challenge in the IRGC’s unconventional campaigns, as seen with Hafez al-Assad’s moderation of Iranian operations in Lebanon in 1982 and later with Bashar al-Assad’s role in limiting direct Iranian intervention in Syria in 2011. Policymakers concerned about disrupting or restricting the IRGC’s activities in places such as Syria, Iraq, and even Yemen and Afghanistan should note that Iran can be highly sensitive to pushback from resentful local political leaders and to direct action against IRGC personnel.

**Syria Campaign, 2011–Present**

The IRGC’s unconventional campaign to save Bashar al-Assad’s regime is a much more straightforward narrative of steady escalation than the Iraq conflict. It does share a key characteristic: preserving Iran’s position in Syria is viewed as existential for the senior leadership in Tehran. There is almost no limit to what Iran would be willing to do to secure its interests in Syria, unless a campaign was no longer viable. As requirements to keep Assad afloat increased, Iran has continually stepped up its investment.

However, other characteristics of the conflict that are distinct from the IRGC’s experience in Iraq have both encouraged and restrained escalation in Syria. Iran’s opponents—the Syrian opposition and Sunni Islamic extremists the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra—do not possess conventional military capabilities that match or surpass what the IRGC can bring to bear on the battlefield. Iran, in short, has escalation dominance in Syria and has not faced the threat of direct intervention from the US, Israel, or another major power so far.

An unrelenting will—and need—to succeed, combined with militarily inferior opponents, could have easily produced dramatic escalation. Instead, as Figure 4 shows, the IRGC has increased its campaign at a steady pace. Iran avoided admitting its officers’ presence in Syria until September 2012 and took pains—at
Figure 4. Conflict Escalation: Syria, 2011–Present

1. **MAY 9, 2011**
   Western diplomats report that Iran has deployed IRGC to Syria to help Assad suppress protests against his regime.

2. **MARCH 2012**
   Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA), a Shiite militia umbrella organization with extensive links to AAH, the Badr Corps, and KAH, is formed. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei frames the conflict in Syria as a battle against “a grand Western-Takfiri alliance.”

3. **SUMMER 2012**
   In response to opposition gains around Damascus, Iran deploys IRGC commanders experienced in urban warfare to provide guidance for Syrian military operations. The Qods force sets up “operations rooms” to coordinate operations among the IRGC, Syrian forces, and Hezbollah. Hezbollah fighters appear in combat for the first time.

4. **AUGUST 5, 2012**
   Syrian opposition captures 48 Iranian nationals, reportedly IRGC members.

5. **SEPTEMBER 14, 2012**
   IRGC Commander Maj. Gen. Mohamad Ali Jafari announces that members of the Qods force are present in Syria. Reports emerge that Brig. Gen. Hamedani, the IRGC commander who led the crackdown against the Green Movement, has been tasked with transforming Assad’s Shabeha militia into a Basij-like force, the National Defense Force (NDF).

6. **FEBRUARY 12, 2013**
   Brig. Gen. Hassan Shateri is assassinated in Syria while returning from Damascus to Beirut. The circumstances of his death indicate that Iranian strategy was shifting toward using Lebanese Hezbollah to advance against the opposition.

7. **SPRING 2013**
   Syria begins to send Shiite militias to Iran for training. Iraqi Shiite militias openly announce that they are operating in Syria under the direction of Lebanese Hezbollah.

8. **MAY 2013**
   The Lebanese Hezbollah planned and led assault on the Syrian opposition stronghold of Qusayr represents a crucial success for Iran’s new strategy to use Hezbollah and Iraqi proxies for offensive operations to halt opposition advances. Following the operation, Hassan Nasrallah formally announces Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria.

9. **JULY 2013**
   Reports emerge that Liwa’a ’Ammar Ibn Yasir, a militia associated with the movement to protect Seyyid Zeinab shrine, is operating in Aleppo. This deployment suggests that Iran assessed that the Syrian military needed additional militant support to push back opposition advances.

10. **JANUARY 2014**
    Ramadi and Fallujah fall to ISIS in Iraq. Iran, its proxies, and its allies temporarily shift focus to the more serious threat in the Iraqi theater.

11. **FEBRUARY 2014**
    Reports emerge that Iran is surging its military involvement in Syria with the deployment of hundreds of Qods force advisers supported by “thousands of Basij paramilitary volunteers.”

12. **MARCH 2015**
    Iran delivers 10 SU-22 fighter-bombers to Syria.

13. **MAY 27, 2015**
    Reports claim that 7,000 to 15,000 foreign fighters entered Syria from Iran to take up positions around Damascus and Latakia.

14. **SEPTEMBER 2015**
    Russia enters the conflict in Syria.

15. **OCTOBER 2015**
    As many as 2,000 Iranian and Iranian-backed militia fighters have reportedly deployed to Syria in concert with Russian air power to support a regime offensive.

16. **LATE NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 2015**
    Iran’s Shahed 129 UAV conducts two strikes southwest of Aleppo. These strikes mark evidence of Iranian operations crossing a confirmed, attributable, conventional threshold.

17. **MARCH 2016**
    Iran deploys special forces from its conventional army, the Artesh, to support operations in Syria.

18. **JUNE 9, 2016**
    Iran holds a “strategic meeting” with Russia and Syria in Tehran to discuss regional developments and Iran’s position on Syria. Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan, Syria Defense Minister Fah Jassem al-Freij, and Russia Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu were present.

Source: Authors.
least until late 2015—to not cross the threshold of conventional warfare. This relative restraint in escalation likely has several motivations.

As much as Damascus is dependent on Iranian support, some in the Syrian leadership resent having Tehran rescue them. The IRGC’s frustration with how poorly Assad conducted his response to the uprisings in 2011 and subsequent campaign against the opposition are well-known, but the Iranian leadership always tries to portray its role in Syria as something done at Damascus’ request. Just as in 1982, elements of Assad’s regime have likely been resistant to more explicit military intervention by Iran.

Tehran, similarly, would prefer its effort in Syria to not be seen as a takeover of the country. Such a perception would further undermine Iran’s moral and ideological standing in the Muslim world and potentially invite stronger military intervention by Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, or the United States.

There are also domestic considerations. Throwing a seemingly unending amount of financial and military resources into a foreign conflict while Iran was suffering under severe economic pressure from nuclear sanctions was concerning to the country’s elites. These tensions may have lessened since the JCPOA was implemented, and fears of the Islamic State have bolstered public support for the IRGC’s fights in Iraq and Syria, even as military casualties and expenses remain high.

In a certain sense, the IRGC’s unconventional campaign can also be seen as conservative and defensive. Before 2011, Iran had what it needed in Syria to securely support Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and deter Israel with fairly minimal cost. After 2011, the IRGC would have to wage a costly fight for the position it once enjoyed in the country. Each escalatory step Iran took from 2011 until 2014 was arguably a minimal response based on the requirements necessary to keep Assad’s regime from falling.

In 2011, the IRGC mainly sent a small number of advisers to help suppress protests. When that was insufficient, Iran began establishing Shiite militia groups in Syria modeled on—and with ties to—Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran’s proxy groups in Iraq. When that could not keep the opposition from making significant gains against Damascus by the summer of 2012, the IRGC and LH sent military officers experienced in urban warfare to embed with the Syrian military command and began bringing in LH fighters. The IRGC established the National Defense Force, a Basij-like Syrian paramilitary force, to serve with Assad’s regular army. The Syrian regime was still faltering by 2013, however, prompting a difficult decision for LH to intervene directly.

Lebanese Hezbollah’s entrance into the conflict helped stabilize most of the fronts for Assad. Government forces began to make gains throughout the year. By 2014, the opposition was pushing back again. Iran reportedly sent hundreds of QF advisers and thousands of Basij paramilitary volunteers.

Then Mosul fell to ISIS in June 2014, and Baghdad came under threat. The IRGC needed to move many of its Iraqi proxies and militias back to Iraq, prioritizing the fight there. This was Iran’s only de-escalation of the Syrian war so far, and it is more properly viewed as a recalibration.

By the spring of 2015, Iraq had stabilized, but key Syrian regime areas, such as Latakia along the Mediterranean coast, were at risk of falling. As requirements to sustain Assad became more desperate, Iran took on new levels of escalation. Tehran delivered 10 Su-22 fighter bombers and sent 7,000 to 15,000 foreign Afghani and Pakistani militia fighters to positions around Damascus and Latakia in May 2015. Then, in its riskiest move yet, Iran contacted Russia.

Moscow’s intervention dramatically changed the conflict, but Russian air power came with the requirement of a new IRGC posture on the ground. Iran deployed as many as 2,000 IRGC personnel and Iranian-backed Shia militias to Syria in this “surge.” Although the militias provided most of the frontline combat power, Iran created a new, more aggressive model of support and direction to the pro-Assad forces. The IRGC apparently began deploying the majority of a brigade or battalion officer complement from two or three divisions at a time, along with a few enlisted personnel, to integrate and lead the hybrid amalgam of militia and proxy forces. This riskier means to drive its unconventional campaign led to a high rate of IRGC
causalities tied to cyclical unit deployments. The approach was more effective, however, as pro-Assad forces have been able to recapture crucial territories in northern and southern Syria.

This surge also saw the first clear use of Iranian conventional force. The IRGC’s Shaheed 129 unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) conducted at least two strikes near Aleppo. These were the first confirmed uses of an armed drone beyond Iran’s borders, and Iran’s first confirmed instance of crossing the threshold of attributable force (Iranian ordnance fired by an Iranian operator from an Iranian platform hitting an enemy target) in the Syria conflict. However, the drone strikes thus far remain limited. Iran’s campaign in Syria can still be characterized as unconventional, although it now exhibits conventional characteristics.

Between the expeditionary-style IRGC personnel deployments and armed UAVs, Iran is becoming less conservative, its more adventurous posture moving beyond simply meeting perceived requirements. This willingness to escalate to a higher degree is due in part to the increasing demands on Iran to keep Assad in power. It is also likely related to Iran’s increased capacities, whether finally perfecting its UAV capabilities or developing superior expeditionary unconventional warfare doctrine. Russia’s intervention elevated Iran’s sense of escalation dominance on the ground, since any greater conventional military threat in Syria by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, or the United States was more firmly deterred, but it has cost Iran some strategic control over the situation.

The political and resource constraints that have kept Iran from sending full military units into Syria will likely remain. If Iran believes such a direct deployment is needed to preserve its interests, though, a conventional intervention cannot be ruled out. The creation of this hybrid international Shia army of IRGC cadre, proxies, and militia willing to use conventional force is something new that must be studied further. It could put Iran in a stronger position in the region than ever before. As Iran gains greater confidence and capacity, will we see it more readily employed?

**Understanding Contours of Iranian Escalation**

The Islamic Republic perceived all these conflicts as part of an existential fight. To understand how Iran will escalate, one needs to understand how the leadership perceives its requirements in a conflict. In the conventional fight of the Tanker Wars, Iran felt it was facing an increasing involvement of the United States and other Western powers on Iraq’s side. As long as Tehran was committed to continuing the overall war with Iraq, it felt it had to push back against and deter any further American intervention.

Iran also underestimated US military capabilities and willingness to use force. Each escalatory step can be seen then as a test of Washington’s willingness and ability to fight. Once the US limits were reached and a harsh reaction was elicited, Iran de-escalated quickly. Had Iran not wanted to end the war with Iraq, it would have likely continued its mining operations and other actions against Gulf shipping at a much lower level. Iran will recalibrate and continue a campaign it believes is essential for its security and interests, at whatever level is sustainable against its adversary.

Requirements also drive escalation in costly, but existential, unconventional campaigns. Escalation will be steady if Iran has escalation dominance, as we see in Syria. Iran will be much more sensitive and reactive if it does not have escalation dominance, as we saw against the United States in Iraq. Testing limits and recalibration, but not cessation, of campaigns appears to be the normal escalation pattern when Iran faces militarily superior opponents.

The United States may face a real dilemma when Iran’s desire to prevent an adversary from believing it is relatively defenseless during de-escalation causes a miscalculation “loop.” Iran will not allow an enemy to believe it can attack with impunity. Its efforts to restore deterrence and regain leverage—such as when the IRGC re-mined after Operation Praying Mantis in 1988 or when Iran’s direct proxy conducted the botched kidnapping of five US soldiers at Karbala in 2007—may understandably be misinterpreted as an indication that Iran intends to escalate when, in fact, it does not.
To successfully end a conflict with Iran, the United States may need to recognize these de-escalatory yet deterrence-restoring actions for what they are, or otherwise remain stuck in a retaliatory cycle. Allowing Iran to “get that last punch in” not only presents actual danger to US personnel, material, or interests in the region but also will always be a public-relations challenge for any US administration. The United States will need to make difficult choices as to how much coercion or force it would be willing to use to ensure the IRI ends conflict without resorting to face-saving measures harmful to US interests. Washington will not need to take the “last punch” if it can recognize the game that Iranian military leaders are playing.

**Proportionality and Retaliation.** In general, the IRI has a sense of proportionality—staying within a certain type of target set and within a kind of conflict—in response to enemy actions. If attacked conventionally, Iranian leaders most often will respond conventionally.

Tehran will also respond unconventionally to conventional attacks if it feels a conventional response is not sufficient to demonstrate effective retaliation or restore deterrence. This was observed in the crisis simulation, when the IRGC Qods Force and its partners launched terror attacks against US interests in the region in addition to overt military actions. The approach was a typical feature of Iran’s campaigns against Iraq and its allies during the Iran-Iraq War, which involved IRGC-backed subversive and proxy activity augmenting Iran’s main military operations. Iran has also frequently invoked the threat of proxy terror in the Levant to supplement a conventional response to a military strike on its nuclear program by Israel or the United States.

There is little to no evidence of the reverse—responding to an unconventional attack with conventional military action or a different type of unconventional use of force, such as retaliating for a cyberattack with terrorism. This is certainly true at least since the Iran-Iraq War, when the comingling of conventional and clandestine campaigns sometimes blurred the lines of Iran’s retaliation and response to Iraqi and allied actions.

The covert campaigns against Iran’s nuclear program triggered overt reactions: the cyber sabotage against Aramco, the Saudi state oil company, in 2012 for the Stuxnet virus that infected Iranian centrifuges and Lebanese Hezbollah terror attacks against Israeli tourists for the assassination of Iranian scientists. Iranian denial-of-service attacks against US banks in 2012 were retaliation for newly imposed nuclear financial sanctions. Western and Arab operational support to Syrian opposition groups has also not been met by Iran with a direct conventional response against Washington, Riyadh, Doha, or other allied governments.

Both Khomeini and Khamenei have shown a general reluctance to target disproportionately within crises or during the conventional and unconventional campaigns they oversaw. This strategic tendency appears to be partly driven by fear that Iran does not possess the capabilities to match further escalation with its opponents and partly by a sense of proportional use of force in conflict, especially when fighting other Muslim nations.

During the Iran-Iraq War, Khomeini’s decision to invade Iraq in 1982 for Operation Ramadan was a choice to continue and escalate the fight, partly shaped by a misunderstanding of Iraqi military power. Even with that decision, Khomeini was concerned about minimizing harm to regular Iraqi citizens and ordered the military not to target large population centers. Iranian responses to Iraqi missile salvoes during the “war of the cities” were proportional or smaller, often because Iran did not possess the missile quantities Iraq did. Iran was hesitant to respond to Iraqi chemical attacks in the later stages of the war with chemical weapons of its own, and Tehran’s eventual responses occurred at smaller levels.

When Iraqi attacks damaged Iranian ships at Larak Island in May 1988, Rafsanjani told the military to retaliate without provoking the Americans. From a US perspective, mining shipping lanes in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz during the Tanker War was certainly an escalatory and disproportionate response to the US commitment to protect freedom of transit through the region. Khomeini and Rafsanjani, however, saw the US actions as direct involvement in the
Iran-Iraq conflict and termed mining an appropriate—and comparatively less provocative—response to direct conventional engagement.\textsuperscript{122}

The IRGC’s Operation Hajj against Saudi Arabia during the Iran-Iraq War may be an exception. Saudi Arabia National Guard forces, acting on intelligence that the IRGC had infiltrated groups of Hajj pilgrims to stage some type of attack in Mecca, fired on the suspected Iranian groups on July 31, 1987, triggering a stampede. Two hundred seventy-five people, mostly Iranians, were killed in the incident.\textsuperscript{123} IRGC Commander Rezaei received approval from Khomeini for what would become Operation Hajj, two failed attempts to conduct assaults on Saudi energy and desalinization facilities.\textsuperscript{124}

This was a conventional response to an unconventional interaction, but there are caveats, and the actions must be placed in the context of the ongoing Tanker War. Rezaei had long advocated for attacking Saudi energy and other critical infrastructure in response to its support of Iraq. Until the events in Mecca, the supreme leader had denied Rezaei. But this decision triggered an escalation in the conflict. US efforts to foil the IRGC attacks sparked the IRGC’s first Silkworm missile strike against Iraqi-allied shipping a week later, to which the United States retaliated on October 19, 1987, with strikes on Iranian oil platforms.\textsuperscript{125} These disproportionate responses are perhaps more tied to the emotional sensitivity of Iranians deaths during the Hajj and not necessarily representative of Khomeini’s more typical proportionality calculations.

Khamenei has demonstrated a similar approach, if at times a more conservative one than that of his predecessor. Iran pulled back from invading Afghanistan in 1998 after the Taliban killed nine Iranian diplomats, primarily because the supreme leader, over the consensus of military advisers, believed an invasion was not equivalent to the Taliban’s actions.\textsuperscript{126} As with mining during the Tanker War, the IRGC’s proxy campaign against coalition forces in Iraq was not militarily proportionate to any initial US actions against Iranian interests. The Iranian leadership, however, justified its actions as necessary to deter and attempt to remove the perceived US threat along Iran’s borders.

Once the coalition began targeting IRGC and proxy activities directly, Iranian intended responses remained relatively proportional and conscious of not risking direct US military action. Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq’s botched hostage taking of five US soldiers at Karbala was a notable parallel to the coalition’s previous capture of five IRGC officers in Irbil, despite its tragic ending.

During the Syrian civil war, Iranian leaders have expressed their frustration and discomfort with Assad’s heavy-handed repression of the initial uprising in 2011 and his forces’ continued use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs in large population centers under opposition control, in contrast to how they would have more appropriately and effectively responded. The killing of Lebanese Hezbollah figure Jihad Mugniyah, an IRGC brigadier general, and several other LH leaders in an Israeli helicopter gunship attack on January 18, 2015, prompted a small-scale Hezbollah rocket strike on Israel a week later and an ambush the following day that killed two Israeli soldiers.\textsuperscript{127} The clashes are evidence of an apparent escalation of the IRGC’s campaign to build a new front against Israel in the Golan Heights. Given the high rank of the IRGC officer killed and the prominence of Mugniyah—his father, Imad Mugniyah, was Lebanese Hezbollah’s most important military commander and was assassinated in 2008—there was speculation that the initial reaction may have been partly a face-saving action and that Iran or Hezbollah may eventually attempt a more high-profile retaliation against senior Israeli military figures.

A distinction should be made as well between reciprocity for strikes on Iranian territory and attacks on Iranian personnel, proxies, or assets during conflicts on foreign soil or at sea. There have not been any attributable hostile conventional military actions by a foreign actor on Iranian territory since the end of the Iran-Iraq War.\textsuperscript{128} Consequently it is difficult to estimate the proportionality of a potential retaliation for a foreign military operation against the target inside Iran, such as an Israeli or US strike on the Iranian nuclear program or other strategic targets.

The Iranian leadership will have a much greater threat perception when their homeland is targeted rather than their positions in Iraq, Syria, or elsewhere.
Such military action may be viewed as a prelude or part of a potentially larger campaign that could directly threaten the regime. Tehran possesses the capability to target Israel with ballistic missiles and with rocket and terrorist attacks from Hezbollah and other proxies. Iran certainly can strike American military assets and bases in the region, but it does not have similar capacity against the US homeland.

This strategic asymmetry—that Washington can strike downtown Tehran, but Tehran cannot strike downtown Washington—is crucial for US policymakers and military planners to understand. For example, an Iranian attack on a US ship or base in the Persian Gulf may not be considered a sufficiently proportional response to a US operation hitting logistical or command and control nodes in Iran. Iran’s retaliation for such an operation may be more severe and disproportionate than the United States would expect, even though it would reflect Tehran’s sense of reciprocity. Because the United States will retain escalation dominance in almost any conflict with the IRI, such reciprocity calculations are important for managing escalation but should not themselves deter US actions against Iranian targets.

Another manifestation of this asymmetry is Iran’s probable emphasis on the symbolic effect of damaging US assets during a conflict. Tehran may focus on the psychological rather than operational impact of hitting a naval vessel or other platform in the hopes of better publicly evening the score, humiliating the United States, restoring deterrence, and possibly weakening Washington’s desire to sustain a campaign.

A greater challenge is what Iran may do in the future to establish a more symmetrical retaliation and deterrence capacity against the United States. The need to balance the scales will likely drive Lebanese Hezbollah or the Qods Force to increase their ability to conduct terrorist attacks in the United States, drive further development of an intercontinental ballistic missile, and expand Iranian cyber warfare efforts.

Finally, US analysts and policymakers should also recognize that some of the most crucial retaliation decisions reflect the supreme leader’s personal restraint at the time more than his military leaders’ preferences. Iranian sense of proportionality may shift after Khamenei passes, depending on who the next supreme leader is and the relative power dynamics between the IRGC and the rest of the leadership.

**Deterring the United States.** Given the IRI’s strategic isolation and defensive military weakness relative to the United States and other global powers, Iran places special value on deterrence. From Supreme Leader Khamenei on down through the Iranian military leadership, there is a consistent, clear message about deterrence for any opponent considering attacking Iran or Iranian interests: threat will be met with threat. Instilling a fear that retaliation will be as painful as possible is a central driver to how Iran has developed its strategy and doctrines and built the majority of its conventional and unconventional military capabilities.

The Islamic Republic’s approach to deterrence is also shaped by the fact that it must defend simultaneously its physical territory and its core politico-ideological interests: principally its revolutionary form of governance and secondarily the “axis of resistance” of regional proxy forces and partners the IRGC has built to project Iranian power and influence. The vulnerability of each of these elements to US and allied military power drives Iran to seek a layered approach to deterrence.

The first line of defense attempts to dissuade US military action far beyond Iran’s borders. This strategic deterrence is built around the IRGC’s theater ballistic missiles, proxy groups, and terrorist organizations. These forces are aimed mostly against US positions and allies in the region. Given Tehran’s limited capacity to strike the American homeland or match US conventional power, threatening allies such as Israel or the Gulf states through missiles, terrorism, or its proxy groups’ unconventional capabilities appears to be a primary means to prevent Washington from initiating major military action.

Iran, however, is not satisfied with its ability to strike the United States from afar. The IRGC will continue to focus on increasing its ability to strike the United States through cyber warfare, terrorism, and likely even intercontinental ballistic missiles. The current centrality of theater ballistic missiles and the
“axis of resistance” in deterring the United States and its allies also helps explain why Iran will go to great lengths to preserve those capabilities. Tehran’s continuing development of more advanced ballistic missiles in defiance of UN and US sanctions and the extent of its investment in Syria to preserve Bashar al-Assad’s regime are testaments to Iran’s fear of losing either deterrent.

The second line of defense attempts to deter potential US operations near Iran’s borders, particularly via maritime approaches. The IRGC is steadily increasing the range and lethality of its coastal defense cruise missiles, submarines, mines, and other counter-naval platforms in what can be described as an anti-access, area denial (A2AD) strategy, not unlike the strategy China and Russia have pursued in recent decades. Even if Iran cannot match US naval power head-to-head, the growing risk from these A2AD weapons could force Washington to rethink operations within the Persian Gulf or Gulf Oman.

Iran also has the further advantage of its constric- tive maritime geography. Already the IRGC’s most advanced cruise missiles are within range of almost all of the Gulf, let alone the Strait of Hormuz. Tehran will continue to extend the distance in which it can potentially strike enemy vessels, perhaps seeking over-the-horizon radars and advancing the accuracy of its short-range ballistic missiles, similar to China’s “carrier-killer” DF-21.

If Iran feels more confident in deterring US naval operations close to its territory, the same is not likely true of US air operations. Tehran’s air defense capability significantly lags behind its main regional rivals and the United States. This is why Iran has been attempting for almost a decade to receive the S-300 missile system from Russia and may eventually pursue the S-400. The April 2016 delivery of S-300 components will begin addressing some gaps in air defense coverage, but Iran will still remain vulnerable to superior US and allied airpower.

Tehran’s third and final line of defense is to dissuade any invasion attempt by making it cost-prohibitive. After seeing how quickly the United States was able to oust Saddam Hussein over a few weeks in 2003, Iran knew it had to rethink its internal defense strategies.

Before he took over as IRGC commander, Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari developed the Mosaic Doctrine, which he implemented once in position. This doctrine realigned most IRGC divisions to the provinces and attached the Basij paramilitary organizations to them. It allows for a more decentralized IRGC structure that can better absorb a decapitating strike and invasion and then reconstitute an insurgent army to push the enemy out.

Mosaic Defense is also tied to Iran’s Passive Defense doctrine, another reaction to the American way of war seen during the First Gulf War. Passive Defense helps ensure critical military and civilian infrastructure can survive precision-guided weapons strikes and defeat superior US intelligence and reconnaissance through physically hardened vulnerable targets, redundant systems, extensive use of tunneling, and deception. All these efforts attempt to tell Washington: any effort to overthrow the Islamic Republic will simply be too difficult.

Iran is constantly concerned that its threat of retaliation is, or could become during conflict, insufficient to deter the United States. This anxiety frequently results in exaggeration—sometimes comically—of military capabilities, such as publicly displaying fake weapons or Photoshopped missile launches. As discussed more extensively elsewhere in the report, this fear also drives a need to demonstrate restored deterrence during conflict. Iran believes it must show it can still retaliate and hurt the United States even as Tehran attempts to de-escalate.

The Iranian military likely believes, despite its leadership’s bravado, that it must improve its conventional and unconventional capabilities significantly before Iran can ever sufficiently deter the United States. Tehran appears, however, to see any US intention to employ hard power against the regime as more recently diminished.

Iranian leaders have stated that Washington has given up its desire to overthrow the regime through hard power—due to military deterrence abilities, naturally—and instead is attempting to do so through covert subversion and cultural influence, or so-called “soft war.” Since the nuclear agreement in July 2015, Supreme Leader Khamenei has sanctioned a
campaign against Western influence, or nafooz, triggering greater crackdowns on media and political expression.\textsuperscript{134} He fears that Washington’s real aim in trying to reintegrate Iran into the global economy is to erode the Islamic Republic’s political, ideological, and cultural foundations.

While Iran’s defensive campaign against the perceived soft war is clearly emerging, how Tehran intends to deter the United States and its Western allies from conducting it is uncertain. Increasing arrests of reporters and Iranian-American businesspeople; threats to walk away from the nuclear deal; and potential coercive use of economic incentives to dissuade Western states from funding media or other cultural organizations pursuing pro-democracy, freedom of expression, and human rights agendas could all be features of an emerging soft deterrence strategy.

\textbf{War Termination.} Since the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, the Islamic Republic has not ended a conventional or unconventional conflict other than on terms it perceives to be to its advantage. The IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah worked together with Syrian support, until Israel finally withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000, despite a period of policy and prioritization disagreement between Tehran and Damascus over the campaign in the second half of the 1980s.\textsuperscript{135} Iran’s campaign to defend the Bosnian Muslims was eventually overshadowed by NATO’s intervention, but Tehran could still see a victory for its efforts in the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords and in building a long-term platform of influence in southeastern Europe. The IRGC effort to ensure the United States did not retain a permanent presence in Iraq arguably succeeded, with the last American combat forces leaving in 2011. US and Iraqi domestic factors certainly played roles in the decision, but pressure from Iran and its proxies on Iraqi politicians and security leaders was essential. The story of the Syrian intervention has not yet concluded.

To understand why Iran would end a conflict under duress or without achieving its primary objectives, we are left to examine the concurrent conclusion of the Tanker War and the Iran-Iraq War in the summer of 1988.

The war had still been largely a stalemate in 1987, but Iran’s position began to deteriorate fairly rapidly in early 1988. In February 1988, Iraq escalated the “war of the cities” by debuting new Scud missiles, which had double their previous range.\textsuperscript{136} Saddam could now hit Tehran and Qom from sites near Baghdad. Iraq offensives against Iranian-aligned Kurdish cities and positions in the north began to employ significant use of chemical weapons, most notably with the atrocity at Halabja on March 16, 1988, which killed almost 4,000 civilians and struck fear of such attacks in the Iranian population.

Believing the United States to be increasingly involved in the conflict, Iran laid a new minefield in the Gulf on April 13, which the USS \textit{Roberts} struck the next day. Iran lost half its surface warships during the US retaliation (Operation Praying Mantis) on April 18.\textsuperscript{137}

The previous day, Iran suffered an almost equally damaging blow when Iraq launched a long-planned surprise attack to retake the al-Faw peninsula, which Tehran had held since March 1986. The peninsula guards Iraq’s only access to the Persian Gulf and is perhaps the most strategically important territory for either side during the war. Despite these losses, the Iranian leadership remained committed to the conflict. It was not until Saddam’s army continued to make major gains on the northern front and recaptured almost all critical positions in the southern Iraq by the end of June, shortly followed by USS \textit{Vincennes’} downing of the Iranian Airbus on July 3, that Tehran began to seriously consider accepting a United Nations ceasefire under the proposed Security Council Resolution 598.

An examination of key decision makers’ interviews and writings during this period shows some conflicting perspectives but generally consistent themes about both the process and the reasoning behind Khomeini’s eventual acceptance of the ceasefire. The most interesting debate occurs between Mohsen Rezaei, commander of the IRGC, and Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was the overall commander of the war, a close adviser to Khamenei, and speaker of the parliament.

After the IRGC’s setbacks on the ground in the
spring of 1988, Rezaei asked for more ammunition, equipment, and personnel to invade Baghdad and end the war. Rafsanjani and the other senior members of the SDC then requested a full plan for what the IRGC would require for such an operation. Rezaei complied and wrote a letter to the council detailing a five-year plan for what he would need in provisions, training, and preparation to effectively execute such a campaign, and he delivered it to Rafsanjani.\textsuperscript{138} Rafsanjani then took the letter to Supreme Leader Khomeini, along with another memorandum prepared by the finance minister and central bank director stating that Iran had met economic “red lines” and could no longer support both the war and basic welfare for the people.

Khomeini was extremely reluctant to accept the ceasefire but was convinced by Rafsanjani, then-President Khamenei, and other senior SDC members—save Rezaei—that Iran simply could not continue the war. All agreed that UNSC Resolution 598 would not be accepted, though, without Saddam being named the aggressor in the conflict and being forced to pay significant war damages. Khomeini then directed that the clergy leadership and other political notables be brought together, where he would make the announcement of the ceasefire to ensure unity within the government.

Rezaei was angry that his letter had been taken directly to the supreme leader. He thought it would be an internal memo for Rafsanjani and would have written it differently if he knew it was going to Khomeini as well.\textsuperscript{139} The IRGC commander in fact did not want to end the war and claimed to be sincere in planning for a five-year effort. Rezaei felt instead that Rafsanjani, Khamenei, and others in the political leadership desired to end the war and had used the letter to outmaneuver him.

Rezaei also makes important points about civil-military relations and the Iranian leadership’s decision making during the war. Rafsanjani’s letter request, according to Rezaei, was the first time the political leadership had asked for such a military strategy or plan from the IRGC or Artesh since Iran recaptured Khorramshahr and pushed most of the Iraqi forces out of Iranian territory in 1982. Rezaei thinks that, beginning with Operation Ramadan, Iran’s military operations were directed by the government’s political leadership primarily to secure a better settlement. He claims the military was never allowed to seriously consider what it would take to invade Baghdad and defeat Saddam. Rezaei argues Khomeini’s proclamations that Saddam must be eradicated were only “slogans,” and Rafsanjani and other political elites never believed them. The IRGC commander argues that Saddam, other Arab countries, and the world powers began to understand that Iran’s military operations were just “political tools” and used this knowledge against Tehran both on the battlefield and during negotiations.\textsuperscript{140}

Why then did Rafsanjani, Khamenei, and other political leaders seek to end the war in 1988? They understood that the military was exhausted and that Iran would likely not be able to economically support a continued conflict. Rezaei’s letter likely finalized their opinion on the feasibility of further warfare, although they probably had already come to that conclusion beforehand.

Rafsanjani, unlike Rezaei, was also increasingly concerned about the US role in the fight. He believed that Washington had entered into an “undeclared war” with Iran through sanctions and naval actions in the Gulf and that Washington was the real reason behind Iraqi successes on the battlefield in 1988.\textsuperscript{141} Iraq’s new capabilities from Russia, such as the longer-range Scud missiles and MIG 29s, and Iraq’s use of chemical weapons without significant international condemnation convinced Rafsanjani that Iran was truly isolated diplomatically. The downing of the Iranian Airbus was likely the final piece of evidence that the political elites needed to conclude the Islamic Republic could be facing an unwinnable war, with the United States and other world powers arrayed against it.

Iran’s representative to the UN at the time, Ali Akbar Velayati, echoed many of Rafsanjani’s perspectives, especially that recent Iraqi successes were mostly due to US support.\textsuperscript{142} Not surprisingly based on his position, he places even greater importance on the role of the superpowers, believing a decision between the United States and the Soviet Union drove the war to conclusion.\textsuperscript{143} Velayati was also extremely
focused on ensuring UNSC Resolution 598 label Iraq as the aggressor. Clearing Tehran’s name was of great importance to the Iranian negotiating team.

The Iran-Iraq War was a unique and extreme situation for the Islamic Republic. Iran’s battle with Saddam Hussein was an existential one, at least until 1982. After 1982—as IRGC Commander Rezaei would argue—Tehran’s objectives were less clear and were likely driven by more political goals of gaining leverage in negotiations, retribution, and ensuring the Islamic Republic’s international honor and status. Such conditions are unlikely to be repeated in future conflicts, but if the IRI finds itself opposed by a unified front and a clear imbalance in military power, Tehran will likely sue for peace without achieving its primary objectives.
Predicting behavior in future crises is far from an exact science, if possible at all. There is no grand theory of redlines for when Iran goes to war, no algorithm to determine how Tehran will decide to use military force.

Discerning patterns in the historical record and testing concepts of Iranian decision making through simulation are arguably the best methods available for determining effective strategies to deter or fight Tehran when needed. Examining case studies did support most of the key findings observed in the wargame. If there are no clear predictors of Iranian actions in war, there are certainly tendencies and parameters that can aid analysts, planners, and policymakers.

Why Does Iran Decide to Use Unconventional and Conventional Military Force?

The crisis simulation demonstrated Iran’s strong reluctance to employ force against the United States, especially conventional force, unless it was attacked first. Tehran was much more willing to use unconventional force against American assets in the region, although the United States was often challenged in understanding Iranian intent through its use of proxy warfare. From the historical perspective, there are also notable distinctions in decision-making calculations between when Iran views a conflict as a necessary one versus an opportunity to further its position, influence, or ideology. Based on these findings, here are principal characteristics for when Iran decides to use conventional or unconventional military force.

Iran refrains from the offensive or preemptive use of conventional military force. There is no evidence of what would cause Iran, under its current regime, to initiate a conventional military campaign against another state from a “cold start,” with the possible exception of Ayatollah Khomenei’s decision to continue the Iran-Iraq War in June 1982 because of his ideological aspirations and misperceptions of military strength. A major factor for Iran’s hesitation is the weakness of the Islamic Republic’s conventional military relative to its neighbors. Expect Iran to remain deterred from starting an offensive war unless Tehran perceives that the regional balance power has decidedly swung its way.

Perceived existential threats will trigger Iranian use of force. Iran is certainly not unique in that it will employ force if it believes its survival is threatened. The complication is understanding how Tehran views existential threats.

Iran has invested significantly in building military capacity, proxies, partners, and coopted government structures in Syria, Lebanon, and now Iraq. These three states represent Iran’s strategic depth and primary means of regional power projection. Threats to them, and especially major proxy groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah, can quickly become a grave challenge to the Islamic Republic’s ideological foundations or its ability to deter adversaries and defend its territory.

Improvements in standoff weapons capabilities likely increase Iran’s willingness to cross the threshold of employing conventional force. Standoff weapons typically include cruise missiles and short-range ballistic missiles and are designed to attack a target while limiting the immediate risk to personnel. The IRGC’s new ability to fly armed UAVs in missions supporting its unconventional campaign in Syria demonstrates not only an expansion of Iran’s willingness to use conventional force but also a new addition to its standoff capabilities. UAVs are
attributable but carry a much lower risk of conflict escalation.

Iran tends to limit any use of force to unconventional warfare unless Iranian territory or assets are directly threatened. As the campaigns to defend Iraq and Syria show, Iran appears to strongly prefer keeping warfare unconventional. The relatively brief use of air and artillery power to stem and deter the Islamic State's advance toward the Iranian border in 2014 reinforces this point. The Iran-Iraq War campaigns, including the Tanker Wars, are the only sustained uses of conventional force since the Islamic Revolution. Armed drone campaigns may prove to be an exception, although at least in Syria, IRGC operations remain overwhelmingly unconventional.

Opportunities to achieve ideological gains may trigger the use of force if supporting strategic interests are at stake and if the supreme leader believes benefits outweigh the risks. Ideological objectives are almost always subordinate factors in Iran's decisions to go to war. The Lebanon intervention in 1982, Bosnia in the 1990s, and possibly Iran's invasion of Iraq in 1982 remain Iran's only wars of opportunity, in which the leadership was motivated more by ideological than strategic concerns.

These decisions were also heavily influenced by the supreme leader's perception that potential benefits would outweigh the risks. However, no such campaigns have been initiated by Tehran since the mid-1990s. Iran under Khamenei may have become more risk averse and somewhat less ideologically driven in the past two decades.

The IRI's efforts to exploit the conflicts and grievances in Yemen, Bahrain, and elsewhere in the region have not yet crossed the threshold into an IRGC unconventional campaign. The potential loss of influence in these theaters is not an existential challenge to the regime, nor have the potential benefits of an outright campaign outweighed the downsides of the Gulf States' likely response to such actions.

Iranian cyber capabilities are rapidly improving, are cost-effective, and are often used in devastating fashion. Iranian cyber capabilities have rapidly improved to the point of being an effective weapon of choice against its adversaries. Most notable, its response to Stuxnet was an attack on Aramco that destroyed more than 30,000 of the oil company's computers. Operation Ababil was likely viewed as an uncostly yet paralyzing response to US financial sanctions against Iran's nuclear program.

Recent incidents of cyberattacks and retaliation demonstrate cyber warfare is becoming a more integral part of Iran's approach to conflict, deterrence, and retaliation. Future cyber campaigns will likely follow patterns similar to Iran's decision making regarding unconventional warfare.

Iranian government cyber abilities are perceived to be crucial to regime stability. The Iranian government perceives domestic sedition plots as legitimate threats to regime stability, especially in the wake of the 2009 Green Revolution. Improved cyber capabilities are utilized to monitor private online communications of Iranian citizens who may be plotting with their fellow citizens or even foreign governments. The attacks on Komodo and Diginotar were highly sophisticated intrusion sets and served as a means of violating the Iranian people's privacy in the name of regime stability.

How Does Iran View Deterrence Against the United States?

The simulation demonstrated how easily US conventional military power can deter Iran. This is largely borne out historically in the Iranian leadership's consistent unwillingness to risk triggering a significant US conventional response in almost every scenario. Tehran's anxiety over its relative military weakness and the vulnerability of its revolutionary form of governance makes deterrence against the United States central in its strategies and military planning. Iran's views of deterrence, though, may evolve as Iranian threat perceptions change.

The weakness of Iran's conventional military has led to a three-layered asymmetric approach to deterrence. The first layer is strategic deterrence, to
dissuade US action by threatening its military positions and allies in the region with missiles and terrorism. The second is an anti-access strategy, dissuading US military operations close to Iran’s borders through increasingly lethal anti-ship weapons. The third layer is a cost-imposing strategy, aiming to make a US invasion of Iran unfeasible. In the post–nuclear sanctions environment, Iran will seek to improve capabilities in the first two of these layers, including platforms such as terrorism, cyber, and even longer-range missiles that could target the US homeland.

Iran uses rhetoric and military exercises to deter the United States. Tehran often seeks to convey its dissuasive message to Washington through provocative statements, missile launches, and similar actions. The United States should be cautious, however, in interpreting these displays of military power and strong rhetoric as indicative of Iran’s true intentions. Tehran’s military capabilities or willingness to escalate a confrontation frequently do not match the IRGC’s symbolic demonstrations.

Iranian low-level proxy conflicts can be an attempt to deter the United States or its allies. One of Iran’s longest and most complex unconventional campaigns—the IRGC’s proxy war against coalition forces in Iraq from 2005 to 2011—was conducted largely to deter the United States from using Iraq as a base for operations against Iran.

Shifting threat perceptions of the United States may drive Iran to find ways to deter “soft war.” Iran sees the risk of a US conventional attack as diminishing, especially since the nuclear agreement. Tehran currently fears more the threat posed by potential covert activities and Western influence from reintegration into the international economy. Iran will likely seek new ways to coerce or threaten foreign governments, international firms, nongovernmental organizations, and media to prevent entry of ideas and consumer goods that could subvert the government’s hold on power.

Why Does Iran Decide to Escalate or De-Escalate a Conflict?

Iran resisted the fast escalation of the confrontation during the crisis simulation, which was mostly forced by the game’s time constraints. At each point that the United States attempted to demonstrate its intention to use stronger force, Iran attempted to de-escalate, although the American team did not always perceive this accurately. These tendencies reflect more typical historical patterns in which Iran prefers to escalate in more deliberate steps.

Iran typically determines whether or when to intensify or de-escalate a military campaign by weighing the importance of its desired military goals against the perceived intentions and relative power of its adversary. In wars of perceived necessity, the United States—despite overwhelming military superiority—may be able to pressure Iran to de-escalate without being able to force Iran to terminate a conflict. In these perceived existential conflicts, Iran will go to any lengths to achieve its goals. In wars of opportunity, a clear demonstration of US willingness to use force will likely cause Iran to rapidly de-escalate and potentially move toward war termination.

Against a regional or substate power, Iran retains escalation dominance or parity. During the Iran-Iraq War and in the post-2011 Syrian campaign, few restraints appeared to be placed on escalation as long as no larger power was entering or threatening to enter the conflict. Without potential US or other major conventional power, Iran feels little pressure to de-escalate.

Against Iran, the United States or any other major power that possess advanced conventional capabilities and nuclear weapons will possess escalation dominance. Tehran recognizes this imbalance and will approach escalation more cautiously. US policymakers should recognize this as well.

Iran’s escalation and de-escalation behavior in conflict with the United States is tied to perceptions of Washington’s intentions and willingness to employ greater force. This leads to a typical pattern of limit testing until Iran encounters a US response it cannot or will not match. In conventional campaigns—where US dominance is clearer—de-escalation can
be quite rapid. In unconventional campaigns—where US superiority is more diffused on the battlefield—de-escalation can be more measured.

When de-escalating, Iran typically needs to demonstrate it still retains the ability to defend and retaliate. Iran cannot allow its adversary to think it can continue to attack with impunity while drawing down a conflict. Tehran actions to restore deterrence and regain leverage—such as when the IRGC re-mined after Operation Praying Mantis or when Iran’s direct proxy conducted the botched kidnapping of five US soldiers at Karbala—may understandably be misinterpreted as an indication that Iran intends to escalate when, in fact, it does not.

**How Does Iran View Retaliation and Reciprocity in Military Action?**

During the simulation, Iran’s ballistic missile strike against US forces at Al Udeid airbase in Qatar was considered proportional from Tehran’s perspective. The strike targeted the facility from which the attacks on Iranian mine storage facilities originated. The US side felt it was disproportional, since it was a larger-scale attack with more casualties.

This divergence in perception is indicative of the fundamental asymmetry caused by the US ability to target the Iranian homeland and Iran’s relative lack of ability to similarly threaten the United States. The resulting strategic confusion experienced by participants in the crisis simulation has parallels in the historical case studies discussed previously.

**Iran almost always retaliates and targets proportionally from its perspective.** There are very few instances when Tehran has consciously attempted to respond to an attack during war with even greater force or a different kind of force. Supreme Leaders Khomeini and Khamenei have shown a strong preference for equal or de-escalatory responses in conflict, sometimes over the more aggressive recommendations of their military commanders. This preference is driven primarily by fear of escalation and secondarily by a desire to be seen as employing an “appropriate” level of force.

**The failure to understand the distinction between attacks on the Iranian homeland and attacks on Iranian personnel, proxies, or assets during conflicts on foreign soil or at sea could lead to serious miscalculation by the United States.** An Iranian attack on a US ship, a base in the Persian Gulf, or a regional diplomatic facility is not equivalent to a US strike on Iranian territory. Iran’s response to such an attack may be more severe than the United States expects. Iran may look to balance the retaliation and deterrence equation in the future by improving its ability to strike the US homeland.

**Iranian government cyber campaigns mirror traditional Iranian threat response and, in some cases, are viewed as a valuable retaliatory tool to help reduce escalation concerns.** The Iranian government appears to favor obfuscated cyber campaigns in which retaliatory doctrine is not firmly established to limit the possibility of a kinetic response from targeted nations. By comparison, a terrorist attack could very easily escalate into a military response.

**Teheran may also focus on the psychological impact, rather than the operational impact, of any retaliation against the United States.** Iran may look to damage a US vessel or find another way to humiliate the United States to save face and compensate for its inability to respond with equivalent force.

**Why and How Does Iran Attempt to End Conflict?**

The simulation never reached war termination. Similarly, Iran has faced the need to end a conflict not on its terms only once since 1979, when it accepted the ceasefire for the Iran-Iraq War. Given that limited data set, a combination of the following circumstances would likely be necessary for Iran to seek war termination on less-than-optimal terms.

**Iran recognizes its inability to continue a military campaign.** Clarity in understanding both its own weakness and its adversary’s real strengths can be particularly difficult for Tehran. Iraq’s success in
retaking the al-Faw peninsula and other victories in 1988 were primarily because of extensive retooling of Saddam’s army over the previous two years and the Iranian military’s exhausted and financially spent state.\textsuperscript{144} Iranian leaders, however, did not fully understand why the balance of power had shifted so quickly and tended to explain Iraq’s victories as being more the result of US and other outside help.

If Washington is looking to force Tehran to sue for peace during a conflict, it should understand the leadership’s mindset and real objectives and do whatever it can to accelerate Iran’s recognition that it is facing an impossible task. Exploiting the Islamic Republic’s history of overreading the role of the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, or other European powers in its affairs could be useful in making Iran’s task look insurmountable. The United States should also be sensitive to the distinct difficulties in Iranian civil-military relations. Iran will likely be unable to make a termination decision without unity in situational awareness and objectives among the IRGC, the Artesh, and the political leadership.

**Iran believes more vital interests are at risk.** In a war of necessity—such as the Iran-Iraq War until Khorramshar was liberated in 1982—Tehran is unlikely to seek to end the conflict without achieving its objectives unless it believes the preservation of the state or its revolutionary form of governance is in mortal danger. There is little doubt that Iran would have continued fighting Saddam until Tehran itself was threatened—or even beyond—before attempting to sue for peace. We saw this same tenacity in unconventional wars of “necessity” in Iraq after 2003 and Syria after 2011.

In wars of opportunity, such as the Iran-Iraq War after 1982, a disadvantageous termination of hostilities is more tied to a cost-benefit analysis. By 1988, the sacrifices, especially to Iran’s economic viability, were becoming too great to justify the limited benefits of continuing the conflict in hopes of a more beneficial settlement. Similar factors could be currently motivating Iran’s strategy in Syria.

**Tehran fears the risk of conventional conflict with the United States or another world power.** Believing that the United States intends to escalate to a direct military confrontation will likely drive Iran to end a war. The fear of US entry into an existing conflict may have the same effect. However, this recognition and decision may not come immediately because Iran is likely to test Washington’s intentions until they become clearer. Policymakers should not underestimate the US ability to deter Iran.

**Iran recognizes it is internationally isolated.** Tehran prides itself on its independence and willingness to defy the international system, which it believes is under the unjust and immoral control of the United States and its allies. Iran, however, does not want to be in a sustained conflict without any international support. The Iranian leadership finally concluded in the Iran-Iraq War that the world powers would simply not let Iran “win.”\textsuperscript{145} In future conflicts, Iran will keenly gauge Russian and Chinese support before making any major decisions.

**Iran must see a way to preserve its honor before conflict termination.** Symbols matter to the Islamic Republic, and maintaining the moral high ground is central to Iran’s self-image as a revolutionary state. Naming Iraq the aggressor and seeking reparations was essential for the Iranian leadership to accept a ceasefire in 1988. Iranian leaders are often profoundly unwilling to admit culpability or collective mistakes publicly, which the United States can find deeply frustrating.

The United States will need to make difficult choices as to how much coercion or force it would be willing to use to ensure the IRI ends conflict without resorting to face-saving measures that are harmful to US interests. Without recognizing that Iran will likely need face-saving offramps in any conflict in which it is losing, the United States may find it difficult to force Iran to end hostilities.\textsuperscript{146}
VI. Conclusion

Viewing the Islamic Republic’s approach to conflict as a model—if even possible—should never be considered determinative or predictive. Such an exercise is, at most, an analytic tool for better interpreting Tehran’s actions, crafting more effective responses to its operations, and most importantly, deterring Iran from engaging in war or other destabilizing behavior in the first place. Perhaps the most useful method of analysis for policymakers and planners is to ask a series of branching questions about Iran’s intentions, perceptions, and circumstances as the United States attempts to manage emerging crises in the region.

The questions most crucial for policymakers to answer are these. First, questions about the nature of the current conflict: What are Iran’s objectives in the conflict? What are Iran’s threat perceptions? What level of deterrence does Iran believe it has retained or lost? Does Tehran consider the conflict to be existential, is this an opportunity to expand Iranian power and influence, or are both true? Are these operations in retaliation for a conventional or unconventional attack?

Second, questions about the potential direction in which the conflict may evolve: Are there any factors that would push Iran to expand an unconventional conflict into a conventional one? Does Iran fear US or other major power intervention in the conflict, if this has not already occurred? Does Iran recognize US intent and willingness to use force? Does Tehran have escalation dominance in the conflict, or do its opponents? Does Iran feel free to escalate and push limits in the conflict?

Third, questions about possible Iranian response to US actions: Would any factors or misperceptions cause Iran to respond disproportionately during operations? Were strikes on Iranian soil or against Iranian assets at sea or abroad? Is Tehran achieving its objectives or not?

And finally, questions relating to Iran’s willingness to terminate the conflict: What are the likely indicators Iran is attempting to de-escalate? Does Tehran believe it has restored deterrence? Does Iran understand the relative balance of power and how it may have changed? Does Iran believe it can successfully end the conflict on its terms? What level of threat or degree of hardship would Iran need to face before settling a conflict on less-than-optimal terms?

A detailed and thoughtful examination of these questions before and during a conflict, as difficult as it may be, is essential for shaping Iranian behavior and designing successful plans. Especially in the post–nuclear deal environment, the United States needs to develop more effective approaches to disrupt the IRGC’s unconventional campaigns in the region, ensure retention of viable military options that can deter Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons as the JCPOA unwinds by 2030, and dissuade Iran from coercive or aggressive conventional actions against its neighbors or US assets in the region. The United States needs to especially be on guard against Iranian efforts to “balance” the retaliation and deterrence equation by increasing its ability to attack the US homeland through terrorism, cyber warfare, and even ballistic missiles. Maintaining escalation dominance vis-à-vis Iran should be foundational for US strategy.

There are two important caveats to this analysis. Iran’s approach to war is evolving as Tehran acquires more advanced technologies, develops new doctrine for unconventional conflicts, and faces new strategic challenges and opportunities. As Tehran modernizes its air, naval, and unmanned weapons platforms and becomes more accurate with its missiles and cyber capabilities, Iranian patterns of use of force, deterrence, escalation, proportionality, and war termination will likely shift. Defense planners in particular
need to weigh these concerns when considering acquisition efforts by the United States or its allies.

Finally, analysts and strategists should remember that Iran’s behavior in conflict since 1979 has been driven by largely the same oligarchical set of elites. Most of these individuals should remain in power for at least the next decade, but a new supreme leader and the passing of the torch from the Iran-Iraq War generation will significantly affect Iranian decision making about war and peace.

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Notes


2. The IAEA’s overall assessment from its December 2015 report stated: “The Agency’s overall assessment is that a range of activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device were conducted in Iran prior to the end of 2003 as a coordinated effort, and some activities took place after 2003. The Agency also assesses that these activities did not advance beyond feasibility and scientific studies, and the acquisition of certain relevant technical competences and capabilities. The Agency has no credible indications of activities in Iran relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device after 2009.” See International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors, “Final Assessment on Past and Present Outstanding Issues Regarding Iran’s Nuclear Programme,” International Atomic Energy Agency, December 2, 2015, 14, http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA_PMD_Assessment_2Dec2015.pdf.


9. McInnis, *Iran’s Strategic Thinking*.


11. For more explanation, see McInnis, *Iran’s Strategic Thinking*, 7.

12. In his memoirs, Rafsanjani recounts the proceedings of a July 19, 1987, session to discuss the Iranian response to the US flagging Kuwaiti ships. Rafsanjani notes, “Imam [Khomeini] was present at the session.” Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Defense and Politics: The Memories and Records of the Year 1366* (March 1987–March 1988), compiled by Ali Reza Hashemi, ed. Ghadir Bastani (Tehran, Iran: The Office of Publications Promoting the Revolution, 2009), 186. Rafsanjani also recounts a July 14, 1988, meeting in which Rafsanjani and other “senior government officials” reach consensus about ending the war with Iraq, but subsequently regrouped in the presence of


16. Many of the sources consulted during this research were provided by the National Security Archive at the George Washington University. My thanks to Thomas S. Blanton, Malcolm Byrne, and the staff at the National Security Archive for their helpfulness in support of this project.


18. Ray Takeyh, “The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment,” *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 3 (Summer 2010).


24. For the article in Persian, please see “Naagofte-hayi az Tadaabir-e Rahbar-e Enghelab dar 22 Saal-e Akhir beh Revaayat-e Sarlashkar Safavi” [The Untold Measures of the Supreme Leader from the Last 22 Years, According to Major-General Safavi], Khabar Gozari-e Fars [Fars News Agency], January 31, 2012, http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13901118000986. This Persian article includes an interview with Major-General Safavi recounting the past 22 years of the supreme leader’s measures relating to various international and domestic events, such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, September 11, dealing with the Taliban, and Iranian student protests of July 1999.


28. See, for example, “Daesh be Hoodood-e 40 Kiliometri Marz-e Iran Beresad Nabood Mi Shavad” [Daesh Will Be Destroyed if It Comes Within 40 Kilometers of Iran’s Borders], Khabar Gozari-e Mehr [Mehr News Agency], June 2, 2015, http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2766738%D8%AF%DA%A9%DB%8C%D9%84%D9%88%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%B2-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%A7%86-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B2-%D9%88%D8%A7%86-%D8%AF-%D9%88%DB%8C-%D9%88%DB%AF; and “Hoshdar-e Amir Pourdastan be Daesh: Taharokat-tan Ghabl az Residan be Marz-haye Iran Khoonsa Mi Shavad” [Amir Pourdastan’s Warning to ISIS: Before Reaching Iran’s Borders Your Movements Will Be Counteracted], Khabar Gozari-e Tasmim [Tasmim News Agency], November 16, 2015, http://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1394/08/25/917817%D9%87%D8%B4%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%86-%D8%B1%D8%B2-%D9%88%D8%A7%86-%D8%AF-%D9%88%DB%8C-%D9%88%DB%AF%
30. Reports of Pentagon spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby’s comments on the incident differed, with AFP reporting his comments as, “We have indications that [Iran] did indeed fly air strikes with F-4 Phantoms in the past several days,” and the official Department of Defense transcript recording, “I’ve seen the reports. We have no indication that the reports are not true, that Iranian aircraft have conducted airstrikes in the last several days against ISIL targets in eastern Iraq. . . . We have no indication that they’re not true. I have no reason to believe that they’re not true, those reports that Iranian aircraft struck targets against ISIL in eastern Iraq. Again, you should consult the Iranian government to speak to the activities of their military.” See Lachlan Carmichael, “US-Led Coalition ‘Halting Islamic State’s Advance’,” AFP, December 3, 2014, http://news.yahoo.com/iranian-jets-carried-anti-air-raids-iraq-us-232852689.html; and John Kirby, “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Rear Adm. Kirby in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” news transcript, US Department of Defense, December 2, 2014, http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/606972/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-rear-adm-kirby-in-the-pentagon-briefing.


32. McInnis, Iran’s Strategic Thinking.

33. For discussion of Iran’s conventional military limitations, see McInnis, Iran’s Strategic Thinking, 10.

34. For discussion of these events, see Jubin M. Goodarzi, Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East (London: I.B. Tauris: 2006), 62–63.

35. Ibid., 63.

36. See the section in this report on the Iran-Iraq War.

37. Goodarzi, Syria and Iran, 64–67.


41. Ibid.


44. Ibid.


47. See, for example, news reports from the period cited in Human Rights Watch, “Endless Torment: The 1991 Uprising in Iraq and
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54. Weisgerber, “How Many US Troops Were Killed by Iranian IEDs in Iraq?”

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57. For discussion of these events, see Goodarzi, Sya! and Iran, 63–67.


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79. Ibid.


84. Crist, The Twilight War, 241–42.

85. Ibid., 244. Additionally, Rafsanjani reports that on October 17, 1987, he received word of the Silkworm missile attacks on an American flagged tanker (the Sea Island City). He notes, “I told the IRGC Navy and Artesh Navy to not attack Americans for now as to not incite them.” Rafsanjani, Defense and Politics: The Memories and Records of the Year 1366, 312.


89. Crist, The Twilight War, 328–29.

90. In his memoirs, Rafsanjani relates an April 30 meeting among Ali Akbar Velayati, Supreme Leader Khomeini, and himself, in which they decided to continue the policy of opposing the United States, despite the belief that it may result in clashes with the Americans. Rafsanjani, The End of Defense, the Beginning of Reconstruction: The Memories and Records of Hashemi Rafsanjani of the Year 1367, 102.


94. Crist, The Twilight War, 527; and Gordon and Trainor, The Endgame, 324.


98. Crist and Gordon note that the raid’s intention was to secure hostages, not to kill US soldiers. Crist, *The Twilight War*, 529–30; and Gordon and Trainor, *The Endgame*, 312–13 and 333.


104. In April 2007, 34 EFP detonations were reported, 41 detonations were reported in May, and 46 were reported in June, rising to a peak of 55 in July 2007, the highest level experienced until the spring of 2008.

105. Evidence for this lies in the shift in violence in March 2008 and in the actions of special group militias in Basra and Sadr City as Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s government began to consolidate control. See Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq*, 31–32.


107. The average EFP rate during this period fell to just over 16 incidents per month.


110. On January 4, President Hassan Rouhani asked in a widely covered speech, “Until when should our economy subsidize our policies? It subsidizes both our foreign and domestic policies. Let’s reverse this relationship for one decade. Let’s have our foreign policy subsidize our economy, and let’s see what happens to the people, their livelihood and the employment of their youth. Let’s ask the people.” Arash Karami, “Rouhani’s Referendum Proposal Causes Stir in Iran,” Al Monitor, January 5, 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/rouhani-direct-referendum-iran.html.

111. A public opinion poll conducted by the University of Maryland in January 2016 showed that 80 percent of Iranians approve of the role their country is playing in Syria, while 63 percent agreed that Iran should send military personnel to Syria. See Ebrahim Mohseni, Nancy Gallagher, and Clay Ramsay, “Iranian Attitudes in Advance of the Parliamentary Elections: Economics, Politics, and Foreign Affairs,” University of Maryland Center for International and Security Studies, February 2016, http://cissm.umd.edu/publications/iranian-attitudes-advance-parliamentary-elections-economics-politics-and-foreign.


119. In a subsequent interview, Rafsanjani notes that Khomeini said, “‘We cannot [end the war] because then they will never recognize our demands; but we also cannot enter into Iraqi territory.’ It was then decided that, out of consideration for the Iraqi people, we will only push into those uninhabited parts of Iraq that were of strategic interest, hence the Majnoun Islands.” Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, “Speech on the War,” Baznevis Online, July 27, 2008, obtained from the George Washington University’s National Security Archive.


121. Rafsanjani, The End of Defense, the Beginning of Reconstruction: The Memories and Records of Hashemi Rafsanjani of the Year 1367.

122. In a 2008 interview, Rafsanjani observed of the US reflagging mission, “The U.S. entered the war with us, but it was an undeclared war. The U.S. under the rubric of support for the oil carriers started that war and through that tried to cut off our financial resources and limit our exports of oil. But we countered and they could not gain very much of what they had in mind, although by resorting to excuses they attacked us several times and fired on a number of our helicopters and bombarded a few oil rigs and sank our warships.” Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, “Rafsanjani on Iran’s Conduct of the War,” Aftab News Agency, June 21, 2008, obtained from the George Washington University National Security Archives.


126. In a February 2012 interview with Fars News, Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, Khamenei’s military adviser, related the discussion between the military command and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Khamenei refused Safavi’s invasion plan, stating, “First, the Taliban have not entered our soil, and have not violated our [borders]. The entry of Iran into Afghan soil might lead to reactions by others.” He continued, ‘Now 13 individuals have become martyrs, and you will go avenge them, but in this expedition it’s possible that more than 13 individuals become martyrs.’ See “Nagoftehaye az tadabeer raibar enghalabi dar 22 sal akheer be ravayat sarlashkar safavi” [Unspoken Measures of the Revolutionary Leader in the 22 Years Narrated by Major General Safavi], Khabr Gazr-I Fars [Fars News Agency], February 7, 2012, http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13901118000986.


128. This excludes actions by Iranian Baluchi separatists operating from Pakistani territory or Iranian Kurdish separatists operating from Iraqi territory, as well as any covert actions conducted in Iran by foreign powers.

129. Some understanding of this may have influenced the US decision to refrain from striking IRGC positions, training camps, or infrastructure inside Iran in 2007 when the coalition’s counter-Iranian proxy campaign was at its height. This recognition of inherent escalatory risk was certainly present during the Tanker War, when in October 1987 the United States decided against targeting Iranian


137. Ibid., 379–81.


139. Ibid.

140. Ibid.


143. Ibid.


145. A similar dynamic could be observed for why Iran came to negotiating table on its nuclear program after the permanent five members UNSC consistently held together on sanctions. Rafsanjani, “Rafsanjani on Iran’s Conduct of the War.”

146. There is an interesting parallel here with the nuclear negotiations. It was crucial for Iran that whatever UNSC resolution was passed implementing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that the issue was removed from Chapter VII, which addresses threats to international peace and security and can have binding force on member states. By supplanting the UN resolution adopted under Chapter VII, Iran hoped UNSC Resolution 2231 would remove the stigma that Iran’s nuclear program was a threat to international order.