

The Islamic Revolution Guard Corps, Drone Diplomacy, and Lethality on a Budget

By Chloe E. Smith

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More than six months after the June 2025 “Twelve-Day War” between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the State of Israel, Iran remains a critical variable in U.S. national security planning, as well as a critical determinant of future regional stability in the Middle East. At the center of the Islamic Republic’s contemporary political and security posture is the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC), an institution that dominates the national political system and controls Iran’s most consequential military portfolios, including its ballistic missile program and the unmanned aerial systems (UAS) industry. By leveraging drones and precision weapons to advance Tehran’s interests abroad, the IRGC is reshaping regional power balances and accelerating global arms proliferation. These trends directly intersect with U.S. interests in missile defense, counter-UAS operations, irregular warfare, and the security of regional partners.

The IRGC’s Indirect Doctrine

The roots of the IRGC stretch back to the founding of the Islamic Republic. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran swept the monarchical system of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi from power and replaced him with a radical revolutionary theocracy. It also enshrined the IRGC as the new regime’s clerical army, as well as its tool of choice for “exporting the revolution” beyond Iran’s borders.

In the years that followed, the IRGC grew in both power and prestige. In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), it evolved from a largely paramilitary organization into an institutionalized security apparatus with formalized authority.¹ Via its dedicated domestic militia, the *Basij*, the IRGC also became a critical pillar of internal stability, harnessed to curb domestic dissent and undermine political opposition to clerical rule.² The IRGC now functions as a virtual “state within a state,” in control of the Islamic Republic’s strategic programs and wielding vast influence over the national economy.³

Empowered by this growing autonomy, the IRGC has increasingly pursued low-cost operations that broaden Iran’s strategic footprint both in the region and beyond. This approach reflects Iran’s longstanding preference for asymmetric conflict, which was shaped by the lessons learned during the Iran-Iraq War, when conventional force proved both costly and ineffective.⁴ Those experiences reinforced the appeal of inexpensive, adaptable tools capable of translating

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resource constraints into a contemporary operational advantage. Iran's investment in UAS and proxy warfare therefore represents a strategic adaptation rather than a purely opportunistic shift.⁵

Core IRGC-affiliated manufacturers—most notably the Qods Aviation Industry Company, a subsidiary of the Iran Aviation Industries Organization—serve distinct roles within the supply chain.⁶ These organizations are directly under the purview of the IRGC and have reportedly scaled production of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) despite sustained sanctions pressure. The IRGC's extensive control over Iran's defense industrial base has enabled it to expand production of the Shahed 131, Shahed 136, and Mohajer-class combat drones for its clients across Africa, the Middle East, and beyond.⁷ Reports of Iranian drones surfacing in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Libya suggest that Tehran's influence now extends outside of its traditional spheres.⁸ Mapping these expanding supply chains would enable U.S. policymakers to better anticipate threats to deployed forces and allow the U.S. government to more effectively use other instruments of power to constrain the IRGC's growing network of arms clients.

From Tehran to the Front Lines

Iran's drone program has evolved from a regional deterrent to a global export enterprise, fueling conflicts that directly undermine U.S. and allied interests. Nowhere is this more visible or consequential than in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Since 2022, Iran has supplied Russia with thousands of drones for use against Ukraine, while simultaneously helping Moscow build the domestic capacity for the mass production of these systems.⁹

This has helped expand—as well as alter—the long-standing strategic partnership between the two countries. Today, Iran provides Russia with critical materials, military advisors, and hydrocarbon exports to stabilize Moscow's wartime economy. Russia, in turn, supports Iran's nuclear efforts, supplies it with advanced air defenses, and offers diplomatic cover in international forums.¹⁰ Most recently, the longstanding partnership between the two countries has expanded to include

coproduction deals, Iranian advisors embedded within Russian units, and IRGC personnel deployed to Belarus and the Crimean Peninsula to train Russian UAV operators.¹¹ This mutually beneficial exchange has allowed both states, geopolitically ambitious but constrained economically, to dampen the effects of Western economic and diplomatic pressure.

Strategically, this cooperation represents a profound shift. Iran's alignment with Russia marks its most significant partnership outside the Middle East. Through this, the IRGC has now embedded itself directly in a European theater of war.¹² The deepening partnership between Tehran and Moscow underscores the need to integrate Iran policy into a broader framework of security that recognizes the convergence of asymmetric warfare, sanctions-evasion strategies, and collective resistance to the Western-led order.

Africa has likewise taken on strategic importance for Iran, which has leveraged the continent's extensive illicit arms markets to evade sanctions and fuel regional conflicts. Throughout the Sahel and beyond, the IRGC has embedded itself in criminal networks and fragmented states at a rate that has outpaced conventional sanctions, creating a fundamental deterrence problem.¹³ At the heart of this expansion is a policy challenge: existing tools designed to restrict Iran's capabilities are ill-equipped to handle an environment characterized by weak state structures and unsecured borders.

Tehran's rush to expand its economic and military influence has been evident through its involvement with local militias, ideological indoctrination, and Shi'ite diaspora networks.¹⁴ Countless IRGC operations have been exposed in recent years, and recent transfers of UAVs and surface-to-air missiles to the *de facto* government of Sudan clearly illustrate the potential stakes. In that instance, Mohajer-6 drones and other combat systems were provided by Iran in exchange for access to military bases and political alignment when Sudan was facing an extreme regional security crisis.¹⁵ This sale, and others like it, has allowed Iran to shape outcomes at an extremely low cost to the regime.¹⁶

So long as Tehran can move drones across continents, shaping outcomes of regional conflicts with min-

imal cost, the destabilizing effects of drone proliferation will continue. And unless the architecture of Western sanctions is redesigned to target networks that enable Iran's operations across Africa, the continent will continue to serve as an incubator for both drone proliferation and IRGC influence.

The Economic Imbalance of Asymmetric Warfare

The proliferation of cheap drones has introduced a dangerous asymmetry into modern warfare, one in which the costs of defense far outweigh the cost of attack. Iranian-made drones, which can be produced for as little as \$20,000–\$50,000 per unit, have forced adversaries to respond with interceptor missiles, jammers, and other measures that cost millions.¹⁷ In Ukraine, a single Iranian-made Shahed drone can compel the use of a multimillion dollar Patriot missile interceptor.¹⁸ The result is a battlefield where the proliferation of these technologies impose severe fiscal strain on states engaged in protracted conflicts or deterrence operations.

U.S. institutional responses have not kept pace with the scale of the threat. The Pentagon has struggled to allocate sufficient resources to low-cost counter-UAS systems, despite annual defense budgets consistently ranging from \$700–\$800 billion. The Joint Counter-Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems Office, created to coordinate these efforts, currently lacks the authority to direct major acquisitions. The U.S. Central Command is similarly fiscally constrained, with the most recent National Defense Authorization Act marking a \$3.8 billion budget decrease in funds available to the combatant command for the acquisition of counter-UAV systems.¹⁹ This shortfall, in turn, comes with direct risks to U.S. forces operating in theaters where Iranian drones and missiles post an immediate threat.

U.S. Policy Calculations

While U.S. policymakers in Washington, DC, are currently focused on Iran's nuclear file in the aftermath of the Twelve Day War, they would benefit from a broader view—one that reexamines the United States' approach to deterrence of, and defense against, Iran in the con-

text of twenty-first-century warfare. To do so requires the United States to take several steps.

First, U.S. strategy should prioritize credible deterrence against destabilizing drone activity. As Iran's conventional deterrence erodes, its reliance on drones as low-cost tools of coercion has grown—and their usage has allowed it to extend power from Lebanon and Yemen to Ukraine and Africa. The United States and its allies must draw clear redlines for drone transfers, ensuring that each violation triggers credible retaliation. This can include coordinated sanctions and the exposure of IRGC-linked drone networks through intelligence releases. Integrating North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners into this deterrence architecture would amplify its reach and legitimacy, underscoring that IRGC drone aggression has global costs.

Second, the United States should invest in counter-UAS capabilities while expanding multilateral defense integration. Iran's drone proliferation is effective precisely because it leverages ungoverned political spaces and areas where international coordination remains weak. The United States should lead the creation of new policy regimes focused on drone export controls, intelligence sharing, and rapid response protocols, building on NATO frameworks but extending to African partners affected by Iranian arms smuggling. These alternative governance arrangements can take the form of agile coalitions, similar to the Proliferation Security Initiative, that would be capable of imposing sanctions, intercepting drone shipments, and developing shared detection mechanisms.²⁰

Third, the United States should take advantage of the political clarity provided by the IRGC's dominance in Iranian politics to create multilateral leverage. With the IRGC serving as a key player in Iranian policymaking, Washington can more freely target its economic and political appendages. The United States should coordinate with the European Union and the Group of Seven (G7) forum to impose harsher penalties on the Iranian regime for drone coproduction with Russia. By raising the political and operational costs for states and nonstate actors to purchase and use Iranian systems, Tehran's ability to shape conflicts abroad can be meaningfully constrained.

There are many strategic dilemmas that threaten to outpace existing international frameworks. The drone era has well and truly arrived, and it demands its own architecture. Iran's drone diplomacy represents not only a tactical challenge but also a litmus test for how effectively the United States can adapt global institutions and alliances to emerging technologies.

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