



Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

MES Insights • Volume 8, Issue 6

December 2017

The Trajectory of the Iranian Military

by Alex Vatanka

There can be no doubt that despite much speculation about Washington's long-term intentions, the United States remains the most powerful political-military actor in the Middle East. In that context, the most powerful adversary of the US in the region is the Islamic Republic of Iran. A self-declared enemy of the US, the hardliners inside the Iranian regime are busy weighing their options as they seek to maximize their influence in the Middle East and beyond. This Iranian pursuit of power is occurring on different levels and involves different Iranian regime actors. However, there can be no doubt that one of the most significant actors—if not the most significant—is the Iranian military and specifically the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC).

The debate about the Iranian military

In the United States, after 16 years of ongoing military operations in the Middle East, American military planners are confronted with a simple but powerful reality: that US national security interests will force Washington to remain engaged in Middle Eastern affairs in the foreseeable future. On an operational level, military engagement against anti-American forces will continue to be required in some of the most sensitive spots in the region, including in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

In this context, the US is not confronting a single conventional military power (as, for example, with Saddam Hussein's Iraq). Instead, the US is faced with the prospects of cases of "[hybrid war](#)," which is basically a combination of conventional military assets, terrorist/militia operations, and cyber warfare and disinformation media campaigns. And here, among America's foes, the [Iranian threat is unique](#). The Iranians know full well that in terms of conventional military capabilities they are woefully behind not just the United States but also other US allies such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates. Most notably, Iran's Air Force and Naval capabilities are no match for its adversaries. In fact, one can argue that Iran really has only two key military assets: its "asymmetric war fighting" and its growing missile arsenal. Nonetheless, military planners in Tehran are known to exploit an array of military tools to bolster Iran's ability to project power.

The motivations behind Iran's emphasis on "asymmetric" capabilities were initially out of necessity. However, this type of military modus operandi has since 2011 gained additional significance for Tehran thanks to opportunities that have emerged on the regional scene. After Iran's revolution of 1979, when the United States ceased to be Iran's principal supplier of military hardware, training, and advice, the regime in Tehran had no choice but to improvise as it looked to address its military deficiencies.

Two of Iran's present-day military strengths—its use of foreign proxy groups and its development of a missile arsenal—emerged as policy priorities in the immediate period after the 1979 revolution and intensified during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The onset of the Arab revolts from 2011 combined with the emergence of ISIS in 2014 has since given Iran ample opportunities to look for ways to further

MES Notes

Information about MES events and publications is available on the MES website at: www.usmcu.edu/mes, or you can contact Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or adam.seitz@usmcu.edu.

MES at MCU Disclaimer

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Marine Corps University or any other governmental agency. Any references to this newsletter should include the foregoing statement.

intervene militarily outside of its borders, which it has pursued with notable (but also controversial) intensity.

Nonetheless, the [question](#) is whether these latest Iranian military interventions in the region amount to a new offensive “[military doctrine](#)” as such or if they are merely a reflection of Iranian opportunism in the face of power vacuums created in a number of states due to local upheavals resulting from popular Arab revolts. This question cannot at the moment be conclusively answered given the lack of data, but there can be little doubt that available empirical evidence does suggest the Iranians are evaluating a broad range of military policy options for the future.

At the same time, it is important not to assume that a full consensus exists in Tehran on the question of the country’s military posture. The Iranian regime is deliberately set up in a way to pit various state organs against each other as, for example, the IRGC against the Artesh (regular armed forces) or the President and his government against the Office of the Supreme Leader. However, while this division of labor together with intra-regime rivalry for power makes it hard to predict Tehran’s next military moves, certain recent developments point to an IRGC-led effort toward establishing a more agile offensive doctrine.

The “asymmetric doctrine”

There is no doubt that the Iranians have concluded that US military officials—such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis—have in the Trump administration an unprecedented amount of influence in the foreign policy decision-making process (particularly on questions relating to the Middle East) and, therefore, should not be overly provoked. For example, as soon as Trump entered the White House, the US military reported a reduction in the IRGC Navy’s harassment of American ships in the Persian Gulf.

The Iranian regime likes to show itself as a martyrdom-seeking state. But in reality, Iran’s military strategy remains mostly very cautious. For example, in the [case of Syria](#), Tehran has been extremely careful in the numbers of troops it has been willing to deploy to the battlefields. In fact, since the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, Tehran’s military strategy has been overwhelmingly about avoiding a head-on conventional military collision with its key international and regional adversaries such as the United States.

However, as IRGC commanders are keen to repeat, the shifting regional security environment requires for Iran’s military strategy to adapt and to reinvent itself. In Tehran, this is often referred to as “[forward defense](#)” and the idea that Iran should battle its opponents outside its borders to prevent conflict from taking place on Iranian soil.

This kind of military restitution necessitates plenty of readjustments, including the conversion of some of the existing regular military units from regular conventional army ground troops to smaller, more agile units that can operate as commandos/light infantry forces in war zones such as the Syria or Iraq. Meanwhile, it is in the Artesh where the Iranians have most potential for a transformation.

The Artesh is in terms of size (about 350,000) approximately three times bigger than the IRGC (about 120,000). Artesh units are mostly organized in heavy armored, infantry, and mechanized units, which are distinctly a legacy of defense planning from the days of the Shah when the United States helped Iran plan for major conventional ground battles against the likes of the Soviet Union and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.

Today, there is almost no prospect for such ground-based military battles between Iran and its closest adversaries. As is currently evident, Iran’s two most intense regional rivalries with Saudi Arabia and Israel are overwhelmingly both happening via proxy actions and not through direct conventional military confrontation.

Accordingly, some military planners in Tehran appear to consider the Artesh’s present capabilities as being a mismatch and inappropriate for Iran’s foreign policy ambitions in the region in places such as Syria. By converting some of the Artesh manpower for so-called “forward operations,” the battle-hardened IRGC military units can be made more readily available for domestic security operations inside the Islamic Republic should circumstances require it, for example, if a 2009-type of Green opposition movement should rise up again requiring suppression. In other words, if Iran opts for a major military

makeover, it is within the Artesh where it will find most flexibility and space for change and reform.

However, while the concept of “forward defense” on a large military scale is somewhat a new idea, the use of asymmetric tactics is as old as the Islamic Republic. In order to overcome its conventional military weakness following the cut in US military supplies to Iran in 1980 and given Tehran’s limited financial capacity to engage in major military procurement, the Iranians have for some nearly 40 years relied disproportionately on low-cost deterrence to protect the homeland.

This process began in the 1980s during the war with Iraq. It was at this time that the Iranians began to focus on and develop asymmetric capabilities, including the formation of Iraqi (and later Afghan) proxies and short, medium, and long-range missiles as well as the conduct of mining and other anti-access and area-denial operations in the Persian Gulf.

Iran’s latest declarations of a new “forward defense” strategy is in fact only an extension of a process that has been in motion for many years. The major difference as compared to before is that Iran now can launch such asymmetric efforts on a scale unseen before thanks to the power vacuum found in so many conflict arenas in the broader Middle East. Iranian operations in Iraq and Syria since 2012 and 2014 respectively are the best examples of this new reality.

Transforming its military

In terms of specific signals that might substantiate such reform of the Iranian military doctrine, one could point to the April 2017 statement by [Brigadier General Kiumars Heydari](#), the head of the Ground Forces of the Artesh. Heydari said that some of the units under his command are to be transformed into “offensive” forces that can be deployed frontally outside of Iran’s borders. The exact motivation behind the statement is unclear, but two facts are not in dispute. First, Heydari is a former IRGC commander who Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appointed to the Artesh command role only in November 2016. Second, there are plenty of indications that the historic rivalry between the Artesh and IRGC is still ongoing. The deployment of “offensive” forces is traditionally the IRGC’s area of operations and not of the Artesh. If Heydari’s declaration proves to be true, then the implication is that the IRGC is shaping the Artesh in its own image. This is an important unfolding reorganization.

This potential transformation represents a major [development](#), but it is not a surprise as such. Tehran’s regional military posture and operations are overwhelmingly shaped by the IRGC, and it has a clear preference for the use of proxies, which both is relatively inexpensive for Iran and provides considerable scope for deniability for the IRGC and its controversial actions. In fact, someone as central in Iran’s regional military planning as Major General Qasem Soleimani (head of Iran’s Qods Force) knows best how to wage warfare via militants Iran controls.

A vivid example of this was the IRGC’s operations against the US military in Iraq from 2003 to 2010. While the US clearly detected the hand of the IRGC, the fact that the Iranians relied on Iraqi proxy groups for the attacks on the US provided Iran with enough deniability that Iran was able to avoid a direct US response. Limiting the IRGC’s scope of deniability must be a key goal for any adversary of the IRGC.

This modus operandi means that Iran relies heavily on Arab proxies. On one hand, this is relatively low-cost and gives Tehran deniability, but it is a double-edged sword. On the other hand, the IRGC already has vast experience with forming proxies that look to it for ideological guidance and military-financial support. The list includes groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah, the Iraqi Badr Corps or Asaib Ahl Al-Haq, various Afghan groups, and to some extent even the Yemeni Houthis. And Iran can be expected to continue to work along these lines based on a tested formula. The IRGC will look for a security vacuum in the region and will fill it to the extent that it can. Also it will not push its luck by being too dogmatic in steering the proxies it selects and will work with what it has at hand.

And yet, the IRGC faces the danger of over-reliance on proxies as there is always an inherent danger in such groups acting unilaterally or even against Tehran’s wishes. The cases of Hezbollah’s 2006 war with Israel (which Iran had initially opposed) and the 2011 decision by Hamas to abandon Bashar al-Assad are two good examples of Tehran’s being wrong-footed by proxy allies.

While the Iranians clearly demonstrate strategic patience in many of their regional military

operations, there is always an inherent danger of overreach by doing too much too fast thanks to the multiple fronts that have opened up in the Middle East since 2011. And the IRGC leadership recognizes that the organization's Achilles Heel is the perceptions among the Iranian population that its adventurist actions are costing the nation dearly or risking severe retaliation. Its nervousness on this front was evident in late April 2017 when a number of public figures in Iran criticized Iran's Syria policy. Ali Saeedi, the Supreme Leader's personal representative in the IRGC, was forced to [portray](#) the organization as the first-line of defense of the Iranian nation. The incident clearly demonstrated the IRGC's anxiety about a backlash among Iranians, and this factor will also shape its future calculations.

Meanwhile, despite the lack of data, what is certain is that the IRGC has been experimenting with various new ways of warfare for some time and that the latest statements about a potential reorganization of the Artesh Ground Forces has to be seen in the context of this evolving thinking. What is beyond doubt is that the use of local proxies will continue to be the preferred *modus operandi* of the IRGC in the arenas of conflict where it is militarily involved. Accordingly, major Iranian rearmament of its conventional forces, a costly proposition, is improbable in the foreseeable future.

Finally, it is imperative that Tehran's effort in the realm of military planning is not judged against military objectives only. Its asymmetric warfare capacities clearly do act as a deterrence against Iran's rivals—as most vividly demonstrated by the hesitation they have generated inside the Pentagon about what to do with the Iranian threat. But Tehran's cultivation of Arab proxies is also a way of creating political leverage inside state institutions in targeted countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. These proxies have a proven record to eventually become mouthpieces for Iran's broader ideological agenda, and the implications of such political propagation will last much longer than Iran's military agenda.

The standard international assessment of the present Iranian military doctrine is that it is still inherently defensive. However, there is at the same time a broad recognition that Tehran continues to decentralize its military command. This is both to enhance its pursuit of "hybrid warfare" and, above all, to strengthen Iran's flexibility to conduct asymmetric operations, as a result of Iran's recognition of the superiority of the conventional forces of its key adversaries, most notably the United States.

The fact that the Pentagon was extremely successful in quickly disabling and destroying the command-and-control centers of its adversaries (particularly in Iraq and Libya) in recent conflicts is a reality that has been carefully noted by the Iranian military planners. Accordingly, the command-and-control in Iran is divided along 31 units based on the number of provinces in the country.

But the Iranians do not appear to anticipate a conventional war with the United States in the foreseeable future. Instead, and as has been pointed out above, at least the IRGC leadership appears to seriously experiment with the idea of a new "forward defense" that will enable Iran to maximize the advantages of asymmetric warfare. It includes the use of rapid deployment of militias in conflict zones (such as by pro-Iran groups within Iraq's Hashd Shaabi movement or Syria's National Defense Forces) and combined guerilla tactics with massive information/media campaigns against Iran's rivals.

Whether the IRGC can continue to succeed in such efforts depends largely on the following two factors: the willingness of Arab client groups to continue to be subservient to the IRGC agenda and the tolerance of the Iranian public to see the IRGC continue its military adventurism in the region despite the risks it brings.

In other words, the use of asymmetric warfare does not mean that Iran will not make use of its missiles or other conventional military capabilities, but rather that alongside taking advantage of them, the use of asymmetric warfare tactics is also considered an advantage for the Islamic Republic, and it can increase defensive and offensive capabilities against rivals such as the United States.

Alex Vatanka is a Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC. He is the author of "Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence." He is presently working on his second book: "Personal Rivalries and the Making of Iranian Foreign Policy." @AlexVatanka.

Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University

Dr. Amin Tarzi • Director, MES • amin.tarzi@usmcu.edu

Mr. Adam C. Seitz • Senior Research Associate, MES • adam.seitz@usmcu.edu