

## **Iran's Military Doctrine**

### **Michael Connell**

- The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) was a defining moment for the Iranian military and it continues to underpin many aspects of Iranian military doctrine.
- Iranian military planners are adept at incorporating lessons from other conflicts, such as the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, to refine their own doctrines and strategies.
- To challenge a technologically superior adversary, such as the United States, Iranian doctrine emphasizes aspects of asymmetric warfare that play to Iran's strengths, including geography, strategic depth and public willingness to accept casualties.
- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the branch of the Iranian military tasked with protecting the Islamic revolution, is undergoing a major restructuring to enhance its survivability and give regional commanders more flexibility to respond to potential threats.

### **Overview**

Iranian military doctrine constitutes a unique hybrid of western (especially U.S.) military concepts coupled with ideological tenets, including martyrdom and revolutionary zeal. Since the 1979 revolution, Iranian military doctrine has continued to evolve and adapt with the regime's shifting threat perceptions and regional political developments.

Iran's armed forces have tailored their war-fighting strategies to counter technologically superior adversaries, such as the United States. Tacitly acknowledging it has little chance of winning a conventional force-on-force conflict, Iran has opted for deterrence-based model of attrition warfare that raises an opponent's risks and costs, rather than reducing its own. The goal is to inflict a psychological defeat that inhibits an enemy's willingness to fight.

Asymmetric warfare plays a central role in Iranian military theory. Iran's armed forces appear to be focusing on the development of niche capabilities that play to Iranian strengths – manpower, strategic depth and a willingness to accept casualties – while exploiting the weaknesses of Iran's adversaries, who are regarded as risk averse, casualty sensitive and heavily dependent on technology and regional basing facilities for access.

### **Doctrine evolution**

The basis of Iranian military doctrine was developed during Iran's long and traumatic war with Iraq (1980-1988). Most senior officers are veterans of the "imposed war," which has had a major influence on Iranian strategic thinking. Concepts such as self-reliance, "holy defense," and export of the revolution first entered the military lexicon during the Iran-Iraq War and were codified as doctrine in the early 1990s. These ideas mingled with concepts from pre-revolutionary doctrine, which was heavily influenced by the United States, to form a unique hybrid that distinguished modern Iranian military doctrine from its largely Soviet-inspired counterparts in the Arab world.

After the war, Tehran gradually scaled back its efforts to export its revolution. As its foreign policy goals shifted, Iran's national security strategy also became more defensive. Iranian military strategists began to pay more attention to the principles of modern maneuver warfare, such as combined and joint operations. In the mid-1990s, there was even talk about merging the IRGC with the regular military, the Artesh, to alleviate the command and control-related problems of having two parallel military services operating in tandem. Iran's military capabilities still lagged behind its doctrine, but by the end of the decade, its forces were gradually evolving into professional, Western-style militaries.

The 9/11 attacks and U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan led Tehran to reconsider the trajectory of its armed forces. The regional security environment had changed drastically. Ba'athist Iraq and Taliban Afghanistan – two of Iran's main rivals – were no longer a threat. But the United States suddenly had troops positioned along both its western and eastern flanks. This confluence of events, coupled with rumblings in Washington about opportunities for regime change, led Tehran to reassess its national security strategy. Iran's armed forces began to tailor their strategies specifically to counter the perceived U.S. threat.

### **Land warfare doctrine**

In 2005, the IRGC announced that it was incorporating a flexible, layered defense – referred to as a mosaic defense – into its doctrine. The lead author of this plan was General Mohammad Jafari, then director of the IRGC's Center for Strategy, who was later appointed commander of the IRGC.

As part of the mosaic defense, the IRGC has restructured its command and control architecture into a system of 31 separate commands – one for the city of Tehran and 30 for each of Iran's provinces. The primary goal of restructuring has been to strengthen unit cohesion at the local level and give commanders more latitude to respond to potential threats – both foreign and domestic. But the new structure would also make it difficult for hostile forces to degrade Iranian

command and control, a lesson the Iranian military has learned by analyzing U.S. operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Balkans.

The mosaic defense plan allows Iran to take advantage of its strategic depth and formidable geography to mount an insurgency against invading forces. Most of Iran's population centers and major lines of communication are spread out within the interior of the country. Iran's borders are ringed by rugged mountain ranges that serve as natural barriers to invasion. As enemy supply lines stretched into Iran's interior, they would be vulnerable to interdiction by special stay-behind cells, which the IRGC has formed to harass enemy rear operations.

The Artesh, a mix of armored, infantry and mechanized units, would constitute Iran's initial line of defense against invading forces. IRGC troops would support this effort, but they would also form the core of popular resistance, the bulk of which would be supplied by the Basij, the IRGC's paramilitary volunteer force. The IRGC has developed a wartime mobilization plan for the Basij, called the Mo'in Plan, according to which Basij personnel would augment regular IRGC units in an invasion scenario.

IRGC and Basij exercises have featured simulated ambushes on enemy armored columns and helicopters. Much of this training has been conducted in an urban environment, suggesting that Iran intends to lure enemy forces into cities where they would be deprived of mobility and close air support. Iran has emphasized passive defense measures – techniques used to enhance the battlefield survivability – including camouflage, concealment and deception.

### **Naval doctrine**

Tehran views maritime combat operations much the same way as it views land-based operations. Iranian naval doctrine is geared toward confronting a technologically superior adversary – often assumed to be the U.S. Navy – with a form of guerrilla warfare at sea. The bases of this doctrine were developed during the Tanker War (1984-1988), during which Iran used aircraft, speedboats, sea mines and land-based anti-ship cruise missiles to attack civilian tanker shipping in the Persian Gulf. After a U.S. frigate, the *Samuel B. Roberts*, was badly damaged by an Iranian mine, the U.S. Navy retaliated with Operation Praying Mantis (1988), destroying two Iranian oil platforms and sinking several Iranian surface vessels, including a corvette, a guided missile patrol craft and smaller gunboats.

After Operation Praying Mantis, Iran apparently determined that its maritime forces would not be as effective in a conventional force-on-force naval conflict with adversaries such as the United States. Incorporating lessons learned

from the Tanker War, the IRGC Navy (IRGCN) and, to a lesser degree, the regular Navy (IRIN) developed an asymmetric strategy based on avoiding direct or sustained confrontations at sea. It instead relies on surprise attacks, ambushes and hit-and-run operations. Rather than inflict a decisive defeat, Iran's maritime forces would seek to inflict enough casualties to raise the cost of victory to an unpalatable level.

Iran's naval doctrine relies on a layered defense and massing of firepower, integrating multiple sea, land and air-based weapons simultaneously to overwhelm and confuse adversaries. As Iran's naval doctrine has matured, the Iranians have acquired a large inventory of naval materiel suitable for asymmetric warfare. This includes naval mines, which can be covertly deployed using small boats or commercial vessels; land and sea-based anti-ship cruise missiles; small fast-attack craft, which can engage in swarming operations or suicide attacks; and submarines, including three Russian-supplied KIL0-class diesel-electric submarines and numerous North Korean and domestically produced midget submarines, which can be used in the Gulf's shallow areas.

Geography is a key element in Iranian naval planning. The Gulf's confined space, which is less than 100 nautical miles wide in many places, limits the maneuverability of large surface assets, such as aircraft carriers. But it plays to the strengths of Iran's naval forces, especially the IRGCN. The Gulf's northern coast is dotted with rocky coves ideally suited for terrain masking and small boat operations. The Iranians have also fortified numerous islands in the Gulf that sit astride major shipping lanes.

Iran has developed a strategy to deny hostile navies access to the Persian Gulf that focuses on the strategically sensitive Strait of Hormuz. This strategic maritime chokepoint is only 29 nautical miles wide at its narrowest point. Iranian officials have hinted that they might close the strait during a conflict, thereby temporarily cutting off as much as 30 percent of the world's oil supply. But closing the strait would also cause tremendous economic damage for the Iranians, so they are not likely to undertake such a measure lightly. Given the strait's importance, however, disrupting maritime traffic in it or even threatening to do so would be an effective tool for Iran to pressure neighbors and intimidate foes.

### **Air and air defense doctrine**

Iranian air and air defense doctrine is focused on defending Iranian airspace and deterring aggression, although certain Iranian aircraft, such as the Su-24 fighter-bomber, can be used in an offensive capacity. Surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and interceptor aircraft – most of which belong to the regular Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF) – both play an important role in this effort.

Iran's pilots are among the best trained in the region. They continue to use U.S. training manuals and employ U.S. tactics – a legacy of U.S.-Iranian military exchanges during the shah's rule.

The IRIAF and the Air Defense Force, a separate command within the Artesh, face numerous challenges in defending Iranian air space. In this case, geography is a limiting factor, given the size of Iran and its mountainous terrain, which tend to produce gaps in radar coverage. For the IRIAF, aging and outdated equipment remains another problem. Many aircraft in the IRIAF's inventory, including mainstays such as the F-14A and the F-4D, were supplied by the United States before the 1979 revolution. Some of these platforms have been kept running, either by cannibalizing parts from other aircraft or procuring spare parts on the black market, but IRIAF readiness levels are assumed to be low due to maintenance issues.

Iran has managed to acquire several batteries of the advanced Tor-M1 medium altitude SAM system from the Russians, but its air defense capabilities remain limited. As of mid-2010, efforts to buy the advanced long-range SA-300 SAM from the Russians had failed. Iran also lacks an integrated air defense network or the ability to engage air-to-air targets beyond visual range.

As a result of these challenges, Iran's military has opted to use its limited air and air defense assets to protect high-value point targets, including Tehran and the country's nuclear facilities. Iranian pilots have been trained to compensate for the limitations of their aircraft, avionics and weapons systems by using advanced tactics, such as terrain masking, to ambush enemy aircraft without being detected. Iran's air and air defense forces have also attempted to augment the survivability of their units with passive defense measures, including asset dispersion and the use of forward operating bases, hardened shelters and hidden installations.

### **Ballistic missile doctrine**

Iran's ballistic missile program dates back to the middle of the 1980s, during the Iran-Iraq War. For Tehran, Iraq's use of ballistic missiles against Iranian strategic targets highlighted a critical vulnerability in Iran's defenses; it also demoralized Iran's civilian population. To deter Iraq from attacking its population centers and strategic industries, Iran initiated its own ballistic missile program, beginning with the initial shipment of a limited number of SCUD-B missiles from Libya. By the end of the war, Iran had launched over 100 ballistic missiles at Iraqi targets in what would become known as the "War of the Cities."

Iran's strategic missile forces are now key to its deterrence strategy, in part because they are implicitly linked to Iran's weapons of mass destruction

programs. In 2010, Iran had the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the Middle East. The IRGC, which has operational control over Iran's missile forces, continues to extend the range and improve the performance of its ballistic missiles, several classes of which can range Israel and the Gulf countries. Their limited accuracy suggests they would not be useful in a conventional counter-force role. Instead, they are probably intended for strategic targets such as cities, oil production and export facilities, ports and water desalinization plants.

### **The future**

- Iranian military doctrine is primarily defensive in nature and based on deterring perceived adversaries. Iran is therefore unlikely to seek a direct, force-on-force confrontation with the United States.
- However, there is ample room for miscommunication between Iranian and U.S. forces at the tactical and operational levels. The recent push to decentralize command and control within the IRGC could have unintended consequences in terms of escalation, especially in the Persian Gulf.
- For the foreseeable future, lack of coordination between the IRGC and the Artesh is likely to remain a key weak point in terms of Iranian military planning, due to underlying structural issues and institutional rivalries.

*Michael Connell is director of Iranian Studies at the Center for Naval Analyses, a non-profit institution that conducts research and analysis in Washington D.C.*