

The Artesh: Iran's Marginalized Regular Military



*Middle East Institute Viewpoints
November 2011*

© Middle East Institute 2011. All rights reserved. Distribution of this work is permitted for non-commercial use, unmodified, with attribution to the Middle East Institute.

The Middle East Institute does not take positions on Middle East policy; the views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute, its employees, or its trustees.

Cover photos, from left to right: Wikimedia user Ebrahim-jamal, Wikimedia user Jilas.wox, US Government

For more publications from the Middle East Institute: <http://mei.edu/Publications/WebPublications.aspx>

The Middle East Institute
1761 N St. NW
Washington, DC 20036

Tel: 202-785-1141
Fax: 202-881-8861

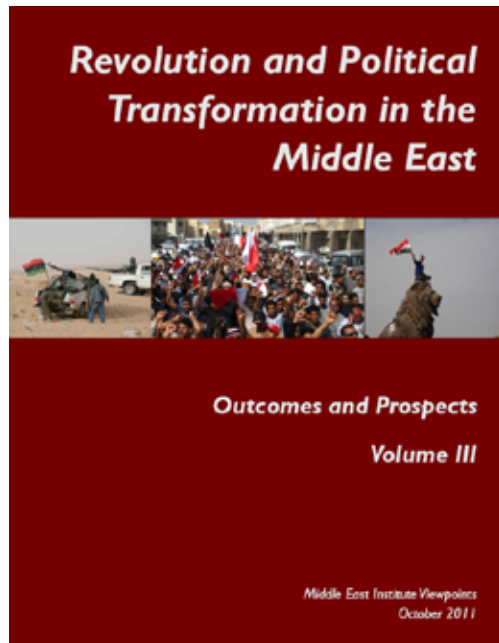
www.mei.edu



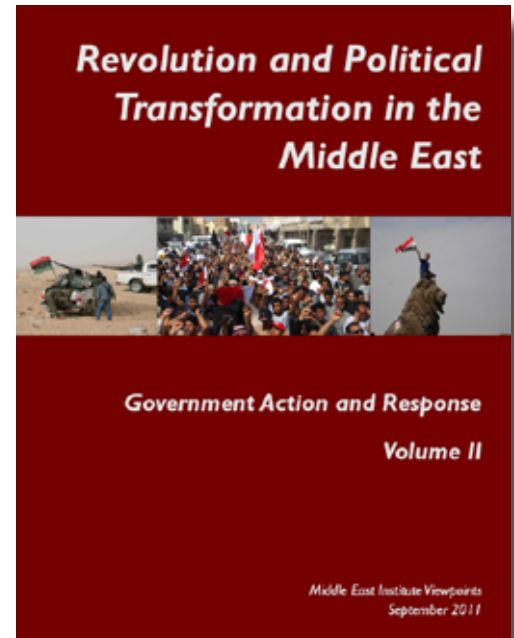
The mission of the Middle East Institute is to promote knowledge of the Middle East in America and strengthen understanding of the United States by the people and governments of the region.

For more than 60 years, MEI has dealt with the momentous events in the Middle East — from the birth of the state of Israel to the invasion of Iraq. Today, MEI is a foremost authority on contemporary Middle East issues. It provides a vital forum for honest and open debate that attracts politicians, scholars, government officials, and policy experts from the US, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. MEI enjoys wide access to political and business leaders in countries throughout the region. Along with information exchanges, facilities for research, objective analysis, and thoughtful commentary, MEI's programs and publications help counter simplistic notions about the Middle East and America. We are at the forefront of private sector public diplomacy. *Viewpoints* are another MEI service to audiences interested in learning more about the complexities of issues affecting the Middle East and US relations with the region. The views expressed in these *Viewpoints* are those of the authors; the Middle East Institute does not take positions on Middle East policy.

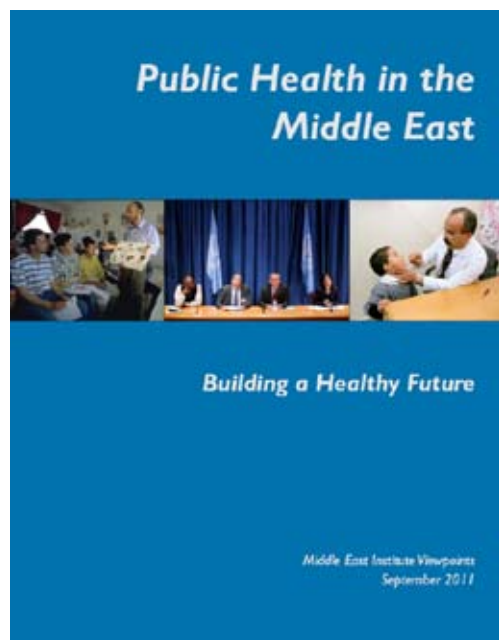
Recent Viewpoints



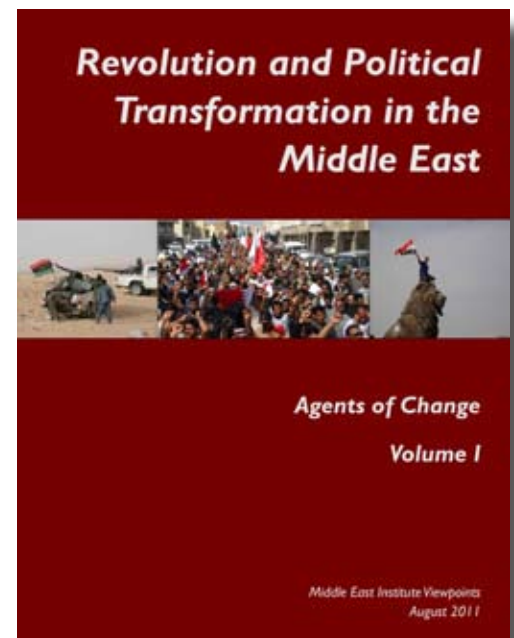
October 2011
Revolution and Political Transformation in the Middle East:
Outcomes and Prospects



September 2011
Revolution and Political Transformation in the Middle East:
Government Action and Response



September 2011
Public Health in the Middle East:
Building a Healthy Future



August 2011
Revolution and Political Transformation in the Middle East:
Agents of Change

Click on the images to view these editions online!



Table of Contents

About the Authors	6
Introduction	9
The Politics of Iran's Regular Military <i>Ken Katzman</i>	10
Sanctioning Iran's Military-Industrial Complex <i>Laura Grossman</i>	13
Living with the Artesh's Green Sympathies <i>Fatemah Aman</i>	16
Iran's Regular Army: Its History and Capacities <i>Gawdat Bahgat</i>	20
The <i>Artesh</i> : From the War with Iraq until Today <i>Richard Russell</i>	23
The <i>Artesh</i> and Revolution <i>Houchang Hassan-Yari</i>	29
Eternal Rivals? The <i>Artesh</i> and the IRGC <i>Ali Alfoneh</i>	32
The Iranian Army: Tasks and Capabilities <i>Bernd Kaussler</i>	36
The <i>Artesh</i> Navy: Iran's Strategic Force <i>Mike Connell</i>	40
The <i>Artesh</i> : Iran's Marginalized and Under-Armed Conventional Military <i>Hossein Aryan</i>	46
A United States Marine's View of the <i>Artesh</i> and IRGC <i>Sharif Sokkary</i>	51
Ayatollah Khamenei's Advances Toward the <i>Artesh</i> <i>Alex Vatanka</i>	55

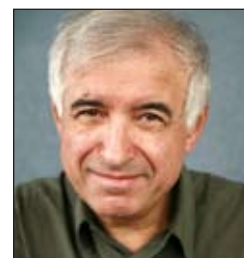
About the Authors

Ali Alfoneh (b. 1974) is a resident fellow at American Enterprise Institute. Mr. Alfoneh's research areas include civil-military relations in Iran with a special focus on the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Previously, Mr. Alfoneh was a research fellow at the Institute for Strategy at the Royal Danish Defence College and has taught political economy at the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Southern Denmark.



Fatemeh Aman has monitored and written on Iranian, Afghan and other Middle East affairs for over 13 years. She has worked and published as a journalist and anchor for RFE/RL, Voice of America, and is a frequent contributor on Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan for Jane's publications, including Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst and Jane's Intelligence Review. She has frequently lectured for various US government and non-government audiences on Iran and Afghanistan. She is also a regular voice in various Persian and English-speaking media outlets, including the Council on Foreign Relations. In 2008, she founded Global Media Trail where she is the Chief Technical Officer.

Hossein Aryan is a senior correspondent with RFE/RL's Iranian service, Radio Farda. Aryan joined RFE/RL in 2007, after serving as a naval officer for 18 years and spending nine years monitoring and covering Iran and South Caucasus news for the BBC. Hossein has been a part-time lecturer in Middle Eastern Politics at the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK. Graduate of Britannia Royal Naval College, UK; BSc (Maritime), Iran; Diploma in Management Studies (DMS), Northumbria University, UK; MA in Political Economy, Durham University, UK.



Dr. Gawdat Bahgat joined the NESA faculty in December 2009. Before joining NESA Bahgat was director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. For 20 years, Bahgat has taught political science and international relations in several universities. His areas of expertise include energy security, counter-terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, International political economy, the Middle East, Caspian Sea/Central Asia, and American foreign policy.

Dr. Michael Connell is a member of the research staff at the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) and the Director of CNA's Iranian Studies Program. His most recent work focuses on Iranian military culture, mil-to-mil engagement strategies, and Iran-GCC relations. Dr. Connell served as CNA's field representative to the headquarters of US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), Bahrain. Prior to joining CNA, Dr. Connell served as an intelligence officer in the US Army. He earned his PhD in History and Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University and his BA in Near Eastern Studies from Brandeis University. He also has a certificate in Persian studies from Tehran University.



The views expressed in these Viewpoints are those of the authors; the Middle East Institute does not take positions on Middle East policy.

About the Authors (cont.)

Laura Grossman is Senior Research Analyst and Program Manager for Special Research Projects at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. She received her bachelor's degree in History from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and a M.S. in Global Affairs from New York University.



Dr. Hassan-Yari is Professor of Political Science and the Special Assistant to the Principal for National and International Liaison (SAPNIL) at the Royal Military College of Canada (RMC-C). A native of Iran, Dr. Hassan-Yari earned his BA from the University of Ferdowsi (Mashhad, Iran), an MA and a PhD in Political Science (International Relations) from University of Québec in Montreal (Université du Québec à Montréal, UQAM). Dr. Hassan-Yari has taught at the Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran, Iran, University of Lyon III (Institut d'Études Politiques) in Lyon, France, UQAM, University of Montreal (Canada) and at the Queen's University (Kingston, Canada). His areas of interest and teaching include Middle East Issues, Geopolitics, Canadian foreign and defense policy, nuclear proliferation and Comparative Politics. Dr. Hassan-Yari has been the author and coeditor of a number of books and articles.



Dr. Kenneth Katzman is a senior analyst of Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Persian Gulf Affairs at the Congressional Research Service, which conducts research and analysis for the US Congress. His responsibilities include analyzing regional developments and US policy to assist members of Congress in their legislative and oversight responsibilities.



Dr. Bernd Kaussler has a PhD from the University of St Andrews and is currently Assistant Professor of Political Science at James Madison University where he is teaching courses on Middle East Security, Political Islam and US Foreign Policy. His research interests on Iran are focusing on foreign policy, human security and political violence and regional security.



Dr. Richard L. Russell is Professor of National Security Affairs at the Near East and South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, as well as Special Advisor to US Central Command, US Special Operations Command, and the Joint Special Operations University. He is the author of Sharpening Strategic Intelligence (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Weapons Proliferation and War in the Greater Middle East (Routledge, 2006).



About the Authors (cont.)

Sharif Sokkary spent 11 years as a United States Marine Corps Officer, during which time he completed deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, supporting Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, respectively. He is currently pursuing his Master of Public Policy degree at the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. The views expressed in this article are Sharif's alone and do not represent, nor should be attributed to, the Marine Corps or the Department of Defense.



Alex Vatanka specializes in Middle Eastern affairs with a particular focus on Iran. From 2006–2010, he was the Editor of Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst (jiaa.janes.com), based in Washington, DC. From 2001–2006, he was a senior political analyst at Jane's in London where he mainly covered the Middle East. He joined the Middle East Institute as a scholar in 2007, and also lectures as a Senior Fellow in Middle East Studies at the US Air Force Special Operations School (USAFSOS). A native of Iran, he holds a BA in Political Science and an MA in International Relations, and is fluent in Farsi and Danish.

As the US-Iran showdown continues, among Western analysts there is an infinite desire for more data and analysis relating to the workings of the Islamic Republic. From a US standpoint, a better understanding of the various organs and players in the Iranian regime setup is imperative as Washington weighs its options and sets out to formulate its policies.

The fact is that, while much of the Iranian internal policy-making deliberations are still somewhat of an enigma to US policy analysts, certain aspects of the regime are better understood than others. One key stakeholder in Iran that deserves far more scrutiny in the West is the *Artesh*, the 350,000-strong regular armed forces.

The Artesh has been largely ignored for two reasons. First, the regime in Tehran has tied its political future to the ability of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to safeguard it against both internal and external adversaries. Accordingly, it is the IRGC that has become the chief military face of Iran, even though it remains a smaller force than the Artesh. Second, the Artesh has avoided the limelight and UN sanctions because it is — unlike the IRGC — an entity that is designed and operates as a national defensive force.

In the following *Viewpoints* articles in this Middle East Institute series, the key historical, political, and military aspects of the Artesh are discussed. Each article focuses on particular features of the Artesh, and combined they tell the story of a force that is still distrusted by the regime due to its past American patronage. But there are also signs that the regime appreciates the harmful impact of continuing a long-held policy of sidelining the Artesh.

Not all scholars, even within this publication, see the same patterns emerging from the facts that are known. The goal of this series is to begin a conversation about the Artesh, its capabilities and limitations, and its role in domestic and regional policymaking. The Artesh must be understood in order to place Iranian politics in its proper context. It is our hope that this series will accomplish that goal. We would also like to express our gratitude to Alex Vatanka and Sharif Sokkary for their work as organizers and collaborators in this series.

The Politics of Iran's Regular Military

Ken Katzman

Iran's regular military, the *Artesh*, receives virtually no attention from international media or scholars on Iran. By contrast, its political rival, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, also known in Persian as the *Pasdaran*), is scrutinized constantly by analysts for its visible, high-profile role in Iran's political system, its economic resources and corporate activities, and its role as a spearhead of Iran's regional policies.

This imbalance in relative importance persists even though the Artesh fields more men under arms than does the IRGC (350,000 Artesh soldiers versus about 125,000 IRGC), and even though the Artesh still controls the preponderance of heavy ground armor (tanks, etc.) that Iran possesses. The dichotomy in press and analytic attention has reached the point where the casual scholar of Iranian affairs might not realize that the Artesh still exists at all.

This contradiction is, to some extent, justified. The Artesh is avowedly apolitical. It is a national institution, created and maintained to defend the nation against external threats. Unlike the IRGC, it is not a revolutionary institution and does not interpret its mission as defending the Islamic regime that came to power in 1979. Artesh leaders repeatedly assert that they are loyal to whatever regime is in power at the time.

Even if the Artesh is not politically influential, it cannot and should not be dismissed. It survived early consideration of its abolishment as an anachronism and as a potential threat to the nascent Islamic Republic. The Artesh's nationalist and apolitical character enabled it to derail such efforts — the clerics saw the Artesh as a useful counterweight to the likely political excesses of the IRGC, which was run by non-clerics. More accurately, Ayatollah Khomeini and his aides believed that the Artesh and the IRGC were useful as checks and balances against each other.

Having survived the early challenges to its existence, the Artesh was able to continue to maintain its independent identity during the Iran-Iraq war and beyond. During and after the war, the Artesh was unable to prevent the imposition of IRGC officers into senior Artesh command posts. Successive defense ministers, including the current one, Ahmad Vahidi, have been derived from the IRGC, and not the Artesh. The regime has also attempted to "Pasdaranize" the Artesh, with mixed success, with political and ideological training and through recruitment of former IRGC volunteers into Artesh ranks.

After the Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988, the Artesh suffered major new indignities. The regime judged that its lack of advanced heavy weaponry was at least partly responsible for the loss of the war. This judgment should, by any measure, have benefited the Artesh, who articulated that view during the war. The Artesh leaders were proven right in their assessment that the IRGC-led human wave offensives were not an appropriate or effective response to Iraq's advantages in armor and organizations. After the war, the regime decided to purchase major weapons systems, including tanks,

combat aircraft, submarines, and sophisticated patrol boats, from China and Russia. However, much of the new weapons, particularly the naval systems, went to the IRGC, and not to the Artesh. The IRGC Air Force was in clear control of Iran's growing arsenal of ballistic missiles. By 2010, senior US military officers were asserting that the IRGC Navy had assumed primary responsibility for Iranian operations along the Persian Gulf, and the IRI Navy (regular Navy) had taken a back seat on that mission, even though it still controlled Iran's largest ships.

IMPLICATIONS

The political strength within the regime, or lack thereof, was a decidedly minor issue until 2009, when it became clear that a significant proportion of the population was willing to demonstrate its opposition to the regime. At that point — the point at which major street demonstrations over the June 2009 election galvanized into the “Green Movement” — an analysis of the array of security forces willing and able to defend the regime moved front and center.

The Green Movement challenge in 2009, and attempted revivals in 2011, raised questions as to which security forces the regime would turn to in order to suppress the challenges. As the force most loyal to the Islamic regime, the IRGC, particularly its popular militia, the *Basij*, were expected to aggressively suppress demonstrations and riots and ensure that demonstrators could not seize government buildings or entire cities. Their intervention was required to suppress some of the larger demonstrations in 2009; smaller ones were handled by the Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), Iran's regular police.

However, uncertain of the ultimate scope of the popular unrest, in 2009 and 2010 there were indications in press sources that the regime might also ask the Artesh to intervene against demonstrators. That notion was disabused on December 10, 2009, the height of the Green Movement challenge. Commanders of several units of the regular military, including army aviation, the regular Air Force, and various training colleges of the Artesh, reportedly released a letter criticizing the IRGC and the *Basij* for using force to suppress demonstrations and threatening to intervene against those forces if their abuses continued.

Green Movement demonstrations continued subsequent to this letter, including the December 27, 2009 “Ashura uprising,” in which demonstrators captured numerous LEF personnel and vehicles, and in which LEF and *Basij* elements withdrew from certain locations. However, neither in this or in subsequent events did the Artesh carry out its purported threat to intervene to protect demonstrators. That observa-

... in 2009 and 2010 there were indications in press sources that the regime might also ask the Artesh to intervene against demonstrators. That notion was disabused on December 10, 2009

tion could suggest that the Artesh letter was less an actual threat than a clear statement that it would not, if called on, help the IRGC, *Basij*, and LEF suppress demonstrations. Others might argue that the Artesh threat was never realistic, in large part because the Artesh are located in garrisons outside major cities, and its ability to partake in urban political

events is limited.

The implications of the Artesh's political role are clear. Should the Green Movement revive its demonstrations, and should such demonstrations ever seize control of entire cities or neighborhoods, the regime's ability to rally suppressive armed force will be uncertain and potentially counterproductive.

The Artesh will not, under any conceivable circumstance, deploy its ground armor to wrest back control of territory for the regime. The LEF, Basij, and IRGC have proved sufficiently strong, to date, to suppress the Green challenge. However, that capacity has not been tested in Iran to the extent it has in, for example, Libya and Syria, where demonstrators and armed rebels have taken control of entire territories (and in the Libyan case, prosecuted a successful rebellion). The Islamic regime in Iran's ability to defend itself against a massive, sustained popular challenge remains unproved.

Sanctioning Iran's Military-Industrial Complex

Laura Grossman

As the United States and its allies have tightened sanctions on Iran, they have sought in particular to isolate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the regime's most aggressive institution. The IRGC, known in Persian as the *Pasdaran*, fields its own army, navy, and air force, and dominate a large and increasing share of Iran's national economy.

The IRGC first rose to prominence thanks in large part to the Islamic revolutionary government's suspicions of the *Artesh*, Iran's conventional military forces that had been closely associated with the United States and served as a key pillar of the Shah's regime. Although it has fallen out of favor, the *Artesh* has not gone away.

ARTESH AND SANCTIONS

The US and over 30 other countries have imposed sanctions on Iran in hopes that exerting pressure on the Iranian regime will persuade it to halt its illicit nuclear activities, or at least delay those activities and make them more difficult.

Sanctions prohibit individuals and companies from providing material or financial support to the people and companies they target. As a result, sanctions legislation constrains its designated targets' access to international markets and raises their operating costs, as the remaining firms can charge a risk premium to continue working with them.

While both the IRGC and the *Artesh* report to Iran's Ministry of Defense Armed Forces Logistics, international sanctions on Iran have generally focused on members of the IRGC and the companies they operate. This suggests that on every matter of strategic importance — from Iran's illicit nuclear activities to its ballistic missile program, its terrorist activities abroad and the ongoing human rights abuses associated with its efforts to repress internal dissent at home — the IRGC is the power broker.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini founded the IRGC after the Iranian Revolution to supplement the *Artesh* and safeguard the principles of the revolution. In addition to protecting the regime, the IRGC also seeks to export the principles of the revolution around the world. The IRGC has five branches — army, navy, air force, the volunteer paramilitary *Basij* militia, and the Qods Force, which heads their international activities — and they enjoy outsized influence in relation to their actual size. In addition to these branches, the IRGC have untold numbers of companies, organizations, and bureaus, which extend into a variety of Iranian commercial sectors, including energy, its most profitable enterprise.

The United States and its allies have targeted the IRGC on the basis of its great and growing influence in Iran under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a former Guardsman himself. *Khatam al-Anbiya*, the IRGC's engineering and construction arm, has become increasingly active in Iran's energy business, signing several no-bid contracts to develop

Iran's oil and gas fields in the past few years.

The IRGC has also stepped into Iran's media and communications businesses. In September 2009, an IRGC-linked consortium purchased a majority share of state-operated Iranian Telecommunications Company for \$7.8 billion.

At the beginning of Ahmadinejad's second term in office, 10 of 21 members of his cabinet are Pasdaran commanders. Former IRGC commanders also occupy 80 of 290 seats in Iran's *Majlis* [parliament], including that of its speaker. Most recently, the *Majlis* approved the nomination of an IRGC commander as Iran's oil minister: Brigadier General Rostam Qasemi, an individual designated as a target of sanctions by the US and the EU for his connections to the IRGC as the head of Khatam al-Anbiya.¹

The IRGC and the regime still view the Artesh as an institution loyal to the Shah, which they must therefore hold in check.

Unlike the IRGC, whose Qods Force is tasked with exporting Iran's revolutionary ideals, and arming and training foreign proxy forces like Hizbullah, the Artesh is responsible solely for the security of the Iranian state. The Artesh is comprised of Iran's regular navy, ground forces, and air force, and manned by a combination of conscripts and volunteers.² Its role in Iran's illicit weapons and terrorist activities is unclear, but it does not appear to act overseas in the same way that the IRGC does.

The IRGC and the regime still view the Artesh as an institution loyal to the Shah, which they must therefore hold in check.³ Additionally, the United States used to provide training and equipment to the Artesh, compounding the IRGC's suspicions of the regular army.⁴ The Iranian Constitution underlines the division between the two forces, stating that the Artesh is responsible for defending Iran's borders and maintaining internal order, while the IRGC is responsible for protecting the regime.⁵

In Washington's view, the IRGC's connection to Iran's nuclear program has made it the key concern among the armed entities in Iran. In October 2007, the US designated the IRGC under Executive Order 13382, which gives the US president the right to block American entities from maintaining financial connections with Iranians involved in the production or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).⁶ The UN and the European Union have

1. Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "Iran Nominates Military Man as Oil Minister," *Financial Times*, July 27, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/c85cef1a-b836-11e0-8d23-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1WS1jKKZe>.

2. "Iran Military," *The World Factbook- Central Intelligence Agency*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>.

3. Michael Eisenstadt, "The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Assessment," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol 5, No. 1 (March 2001), <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2001/issue1/jv5n1a2.html>

4. Alireza Nader, "The Revolutionary Guards," *The Iran Primer*, (<http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/revolutionary-guards>)

5. Michael Eisenstadt, "The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Assessment."

6. United States Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Fact Sheet: Designation of Iranian Entities and Individuals for Proliferation Activities and Support for Terrorism," October 25, 2007, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp644.aspx>.

also sanctioned the IRGC for its involvement in Iran's WMD activities. The EU designated the IRGC in June 2010, noting that the group had "operational control for Iran's ballistic missile program [and] has undertaken procurement attempts to support Iran's ballistic missiles and nuclear program."⁷ In 2010, the US State Department sanctioned the IRGC for its role in human rights violations in the aftermath of the June 2009 election.

In addition to sanctioning the entities themselves, the US, EU, and UN have gone after senior IRGC leaders for their ties to the group and its illicit activities. In June 2010, the United States designated the organization's commander Mohammad 'Ali Jafari for his connection to the IRGC.⁸ The US subsequently sanctioned him again for human rights violations committed by the *Basij* under his leadership in the aftermath of the June 2009 elections.⁹

When the US designated the IRGC in October 2007, it also named nine other entities owned or controlled by the group, including the Qods Force, for its terrorist activities.¹⁰ The EU followed suit, sanctioning the Qods Force in July 2010.¹¹

The Artesh has been spared most of the international attention that the IRGC receive because US and other government officials see it as distinct from the regime's minions. Though the Artesh reports directly to Iran's Ministry of Defense Armed Forces Logistics — an organization that the US, EU, and UN have all already sanctioned for its connections to the regime's nuclear activities — its historical connection to the United States appears to have remained.

By shying away from targeting the Artesh, American leaders appear to be making the careful and critical distinction between the Islamist regime and the Iranian people by opting to pursue the regime's elite forces and leaders responsible for documented proliferation activities and human rights violations.

Yet given the regime's continued use of front companies within its armed forces, the Artesh's involvement in illicit acts cannot be ruled out. It is, after all, part of a regime that shows no compunction about violating international law.

7. Council of the European Union, "Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No 668/2010," *Official Journal of the European Union*, July 27, 2010, <http://www.iranwatch.org/international/EU/eu-council-sanctions-072610.pdf>.

8. US Department of State, Press Release, "US Treasury Department Targets Iran's Nuclear and Missile Programs," June 17, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/t/isn/143265.htm>.

9. US Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Fact Sheet: New Executive Order Targeting Iranian Officials Responsible For Or Complicit In Serious Human Rights Abuses," September 29, 2010, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg877.aspx>.

10. United States Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Fact Sheet: Designation of Iranian Entities and Individuals for Proliferation Activities and Support for Terrorism."

11. The Council of the European Union, "Council Decision of 26 July 2010 Concerning Restrictive Measures Against Iran and Repealing Common Position 2007/140/CFSP," *Official Journal of the European Union*, July 27, 2010, p. 70, <http://www.iranenergyproject.org/documents/1324.pdf>.

Living with the *Artesh's* Green Sympathies

Fatemah Aman

In an official gathering in December 2010, Major General Attollah Salehi, Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian Army said that during his visits to Army barracks, he would see the pictures of the leaders of the “sedition” (The Islamic Republic’s present hard-line leadership refers to opposition leaders and 2009 presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi as leaders of sedition) hanging on the walls. “We would not tell them to tear down the pictures but we would ask political-ideological advisors to try to gently and sensibly work with [the soldiers] so that they would discard the pictures on their own will.” He went on to say “I have always said that no one should consider army [to be] softer on the sedition”, and added “we have to find effective ways to ensure that the Army personnel do not get tempted. The enemy considers the Army soft [ready to be subverted].”¹

These statements were seen as a clear public admission that there was widespread support for the opposition within the ranks of the army and the security forces. In other words, it suggested a deep rift in the ranks of the Islamic Republic’s military and security establishment. This is the first time in the post-revolutionary history of Iran that evidence had emerged to show that detectable elements within the Army had taken side with one specific political faction or identified themselves with the opposition to the regime.

One of the reasons that the regime did not take concrete and firm action against the supporters of the opposition Green Movement in the ranks of the Army was the fear that it might result in a major backlash. An overreaction by the regime against prevalent pro-opposition sympathies in the ranks of the Army would have elevated the regime-opposition standoff to a new and dangerous level and turned the Army from being a spectator to a stakeholder in the outcome of the dispute.

WHO IS GENERAL SALEHI?

Attollah Salehi, a 1971 graduate of the Iranian Army’s military academy with the rank of Artillery Second Lieutenant of the Army’s Ground Forces, was appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei to replace Major General Mohammad Salimi in September 2005. Both are among the 13 Major Generals, the highest rank, serving in the Islamic Republic’s armed forces. Salimi himself was appointed by Khamenei in 2000, and resigned two times during his five-year tenure. Salimi had, in the 1980s, served in the cabinet of then-Prime Minister Mir Hossein

1. See “Farmande-ye kolle artesh:fetnegaran ba maharat miayand” [“Artesh Chief Commander: Seditionists Will Infiltrate More Deftly”], TABNAK, December 5, 2010, <http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/134438/%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%DA%A9%D9%84-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B4-%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%87-%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%85%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%A2%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%AF>; and “Farmande-ye kolle artesh: akse sarane fetne dar otaghe sarbazan dar padeganha nasb bud” [“Artesh Chief Commander: Pictures of the Leaders of the Sedition were Held in Soldiers’ Rooms in Garrisons”], AFTAB News, December 5, 2010, <http://www.aftabnews.ir/vdcizwazyt1azq2.cbct.html>.

Mousavi as Defense Minister with the rank of colonel.

On his watch, Salehi has repeatedly warned against Iranian military complacency. Salehi's military doctrine is best described as one of avoiding being surprised by the enemy. He has stated that "This has always been emphasized by the Leader of the revolution [Ayatollah Khamenei] since the enemy is the killer of the inattentive and that's why our armed forces consider every night a night of attack."²

On his watch, Salehi has repeatedly warned against Iranian military complacency. Salehi's military doctrine is best described as one of avoiding being surprised by the enemy.

One of the biggest army war games, *Zarbat Zolfeqar* (Stroke of *Zolfeqar*, the name of Imam Ali's sword) on August 19, 2006 contained plans and tactics based on sudden moves and "enemies' surprising moves."³ In this war game, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) interestingly did not participate — the Army is considerably better equipped to carry out air operations.

Elsewhere, on April 13, 2011, Salehi told reporters that Iran now has access to the Mediterranean Sea and "as outside forces enter [Iran's] region, we can enter international waters."⁴ He went on to say that Iran is planning to expand its presence to twice the current level and added that, consistent with this decision, the center of the Navy's submarine activities has been moved from the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Aden.

He went on to say that Iran's presence in the Gulf of Aden is in accordance with defending Iran's and other countries' interest and to provide protection for "any country in the region that will ask us to support their oil tankers." At least on this score, Salehi's military rhetoric was no less bold than the slogans heard by the IRGC's top commanders.

ARMY-IRGC TIES

One of the smartest moves by the Islamist revolutionary regime in 1979 was to avoid the blanket dissolution of the Army despite pressure from leftist groups. This was when they feared a military coup by Shah loyalists. The body of the Army joined the revolution and supported Ayatollah Khomeini but the same people would not accept dissolution of the Army or operating under the IRGC's command.

2. "Navhaye doshman, hadafe monaseb baraye pasokhe sari'e artesh" ["The Enemy's Battleships are the Best Target for the Army's Quick Response"], Alef website, November 30, 2008, <http://alef.ir/vdcg3n9w.ak9n74prra.html?35586>.

3. "Etehhade norouhaye mosallah mesalzanist; amadegie artesh baraye hemayat azz naftkeshhaye khareji" ["The Unity Among Armed Forces is Remarkable; Artesh is Ready to Protect Foreign Tankers"], Mehr News Agency, April 17, 2011, <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1291698>.

4. "Etehhade norouhaye mosallah mesalzanist; amadegie artesh baraye hemayat azz naftkeshhaye khareji" ["The Unity Among Armed Forces is Remarkable; Artesh is Ready to Protect Foreign Tankers"], Mehr News Agency, April 17, 2011, <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1291698>.

In reaction to calls to dissolve the Army, Ayatollah Khomeini stated in a message dated May 18, 1979 that “Iranian nation is obligated to welcome the Islamic Army and respect them [as brothers]. The Army is now serving Islam; the Army is Islamic and our respectful nation needs to recognize this fact and support them. Opposing the Islamic Army which is protecting and guarding [our] independence is not permitted. You, we and the Army must cordially work together to preserve the country and its security and to put an end to enemy’s evil plans.”⁵

Whatever Ayatollah Khomeini’s motivation, this move served the regime very well. Perhaps he thought incorporating the Army into the IRGC would pollute IRGC’s revolutionary and ideological structure which he and his zealous followers were determined to maintain. It is also possible that this move was his response to the Army’s expressed loyalty and to prevent a backlash which would have materialized had the Army been forced to be under the IRGC’s command.

In the first years after the victory of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khamenei was the Deputy Minister of Defense and was Ayatollah Khomeini’s Representative in the Supreme Security Council. During this time, Khamenei was working towards bridging the divide between the IRGC and the Army. It is apparent that his experience during the war led him to appreciate the Army’s capabilities and to place an emphasis on the Army-IRGC cooperation.

It is apparent that [Khamenei’s] experience during the war led him to appreciate the Army’s capabilities and to place an emphasis on the Army-IRGC cooperation.

Khamenei’s support therefore strengthened the Army in those volatile post-revolutionary days. When it comes to classical military know-how, he appears to have clearly considered the Army more capable than the IRGC. Accordingly, a strong Army could help stabilize the domestic climate while also increasing Iran’s military credibility in the Middle East. Khamenei’s admiration for the regular Army and the expertise of Army officers such as Salehi is therefore likely genuine. Interestingly, to this date and unlike many in the top ranks of the IRGC, Khamenei does not blame the shortcomings in the Iran-Iraq war just on the Army.

This is tied to the question of who sacrificed most in the Iran-Iraq war, which remains in dispute and is an important factor in Army-IRGC relations. Unlike the IRGC and the Islamist *Basij* militia force, the Army personnel did not seek martyrdom. This is partly evident by the numbers, and the number of IRGC and Basiji casualties in the Iran-Iraq war is perhaps one of the key remaining justifications for these forces to make a claim on political power and economic access in the post-war period in Iran. Clearly, the Army does not today have access to the same benefits. Official statistics released on September 19, 1988, immediately after the ceasefire, listed the following figures for the number of military personnel who were killed during Iran-Iraq war: Army: 35,170 (29%); IRGC members: 79,644 (65%); Paramilitary: 8,406 (6%) (although it is now considered that these are low estimates).

Throughout the years following the Iran-Iraq war, the Army did not have the means or tools to highlight its achieve-

5. “Rouze arteshe jomhourie eslamie Iran” [“The day of the Islamic Republic’s Artesh”], Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), <http://www2.irna.ir/occasion/29farvardin85/index.htm>.

ments and sacrifices, while the IRGC portrayed itself as completely essential in the war. On February 8, 2009, the Army (boldly) published a statement criticizing the IRGC and the state-controlled Islamic Republic Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) for what it called “distorting the facts” and “falsifications about the Army’s role in the 8-years Iran-Iraq War” in favor of the IRGC’s role. Top army officials including General Salehi were among the signatories.⁶

This response, which could have been aimed to revitalize the Army’s authority, was triggered by a documentary aired on Iranian television called “Documented Critique of the Sacred Defense,” ran on February 5, 2009. The Army statement accused the producers of the documentary of lacking basic knowledge about military affairs and accused the IRIB of providing its one-sided support for the IRGC and ignoring the Army’s vital role in the war.

The Army statement charged that the documentary had sought to belittle the Army’s well-thought efforts to win battles or to slow down Iraqi advances with minimal loss of forces while glorifying efforts by “others” (the IRGC and Basij) who “took advantage of the selflessness of the revolutionary young but untrained forces that were willing to take higher casualty numbers lightly.” It also stated that in certain situations where the Army was forced to follow the IRGC’s directions, casualties were considerably higher.

The Army commanders’ response listed a number of grievances and even implied that Army war dead are considered second class. Army fatalities and veterans are discriminated against when it comes to naming streets or placement in key state positions, and the commanders complained that the documentary had glorified the “mobs” but failed to recognize the great service of the Army servicemen. “This kind of unfair assessment about the role of Army in the war is common in all aspects of [state-run] Iran-Iraq related research,” the statement bemoaned.

Thirty-two years have passed since the creation of Islamic Republic. The majority of today’s Army personnel have not experienced serving in the Shah’s military or were even born at the time of the 1979 Revolution. The post-revolutionary Army is not dreaming of a coup, as it is not longing for a pre-Revolution Iran it has not experienced. It is highly unlikely that this Army would engage in a plan to plot the regime’s overthrow. However, as is evident by post-2009 election events, it is receptive to political change and welcomes the country opening up to the world as espoused by the Green opposition. At the same time, this Army lacks in-depth ideological conviction and, unlike the IRGC and the *Basij*, is not willing to engage in a forceful fight for its interests. However, a broader popular movement, as has happened before in Iran, can expect to win the support of the Army rank and file.

6. “Naghde tahrifate mostanade defa’e moghaddas” [“A Critique of the Distortion of the ‘Holly Defence’ Documentary”], <http://www.military.ir/modules.php?name=Forums&file=viewtopic&p=81258&highlight>.

Iran's Regular Army: Its History and Capacities

Gawdat Bahgat

Along with Egypt and Turkey, Iran is one of the most populous countries in the Middle East. Aware of its strategic significance and millennium-long civilization, Iranian leaders have always aspired to assume a leadership role on regional and international issues and pursued an assertive policy to reach their country's potential. This ambitious strategy requires, among other things, strong military forces.

Iran's modern army (the *Artesh*) was established in its present form in the mid-1920s, shortly after the end World War I and the ascendancy of the Pahlavi dynasty. Similar to Kemal Ataturk's efforts to create a strong and modern Turkish army, King Reza Shah Pahlavi had a grand vision to make Iran a regional power. He sent thousands of officers to foreign military academies and hired Western officers to train the then-small and growing Iranian armed forces. These efforts laid the foundation for the creation of a modern air force and navy.

Mohamed Reza Shah followed his father's military and strategic ambition and wanted to make his country the strongest military power in the Middle East and South Asia. The backbone of this strategy was to create large, strong, and modern armed forces. This strategy was based on a close cooperation and partnership with Western powers, particularly the United States. Huge arms deals were signed between Washington and Tehran. This unofficial alliance proved crucial in containing the Soviet influence in the region. The Iranian army also played a significant role in defending the Sultan of Oman and defeating the leftist-separatist rebellion in Dhofar.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution altered the strategic dynamics fundamentally. First, suspicious of the armed forces' loyalty to the Islamic Republic, the new leaders created the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is better equipped and funded than the regular army. Second, Iranian forces were engaged in an eight-year-long war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988. In this war, the conservative Arab countries, the United States, and indeed most of the world supported Saddam Husayn against Iran. Third, since 1979, the Islamic Republic has been under a variety of US economic and diplomatic sanctions as well as a number of UN sanctions. These sanctions mean that Tehran's capability to import arms from Western countries was severely constrained. Iran was left with two options — import weapons from Russia, China, and North Korea; and develop indigenous military industry. Iran has since pursued these two options simultaneously.

Fourth, and probably most importantly, Iran's security environment and landscape have fundamentally changed. For many years the goals were to protect Iran from real and potential enemies such as Saddam Husayn in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan and their regional and international protectors. These two hostile regimes in Baghdad and Kabul were overthrown by the US-led international coalitions. Tehran was left surrounded by unstable countries on both

sides and American forces and bases in all directions. This heavy US military presence and the threat of attacks on Iran's nuclear installations by the US and/or Israel are the main challenges facing not only the armed forces but the entire military and political establishment in Tehran.

Against this background, one can understand the Islamic Republic military forces' doctrine and strategy. Unlike some neighbors (such as Iraq), Iranian leaders both before and after the Revolution have been satisfied with the general configuration of their country and have rarely, if ever, expressed serious interest in invading or annexing any foreign territories. Furthermore, the decades-long sanctions imposed on the country have taken their toll on the armed forces. Though the Iranian armed forces are among the largest in the Middle East, they are poorly equipped and poorly trained to carry out a sustainable attack on any neighboring adversary. They have almost no modern armor, artillery, aircraft, or major combat ships. Finally, the few skirmishes the Iranian Navy had with the American Navy close to the end of the 1980–1988 war with Iraq taught the Iranian military leaders to avoid direct confrontation with superior adversaries.

... heavy US military presence and the threat of attacks on Iran's nuclear installations by the US and/or Israel are the main challenges facing not only the armed forces but the entire military and political establishment in Tehran.

All these historical, geopolitical, and military experiences have shaped the armed forces' largely defensive doctrine. Overall, Tehran enjoys peaceful relations with most of its neighbors. The perceived threat now comes from the United States and Israel — Iran's military build-up in the last few decades has aimed at deterring both Washington and Tel Aviv from attacking the Islamic regime. This broad objective helps to explain Tehran's heavy investment in missile capabilities and the ambiguity of its nuclear program.

From an Iranian perspective, having the capability to reach targets in Israel and US military bases and troops in the Persian Gulf region is likely to make Washington and Tel Aviv think twice before attacking Iran. Again, the goal is not to confront any of these two more powerful adversaries; rather, it is to conduct irregular warfare and carry out asymmetric operations. A clear illustration of this strategy is the recently launched naval reorganization strategy. In 2007, Iranian leaders redefined the primary duties and operational areas for both the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) and IRGC Navy (IRGCN). Since the establishment of the IRGCN in 1985, the two navies shared overlapping responsibilities in the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Caspian Sea. The reorganization ended the duplication, "giving the IRGCN sole responsibility for defense within the Persian Gulf, and giving the IRIN responsibility outside of the Gulf, projecting Iranian power far beyond Iran's shores."¹ Giving the IRGCN primary responsibility in the Gulf amplifies the natural benefits of a small, fast, unconventional force operating in its own backyard. Meanwhile, the more traditional and less modernized regular navy was given the responsibility to project the nation's power in less critical theaters.

The fact that Iranian military forces have not taken part in any war or military confrontation since the end of the war

1. Joshua C. Himes, "Iran's Maritime Evolution," Center for Strategic and International Studies, available at <http://www.csis.org/mideast>.

with Iraq in 1988 makes it hard to provide an accurate assessment of their real fighting capabilities. Still, comparing the Islamic Republic's military budget and the size of its active armed forces with those of neighboring states in the Persian Gulf and with Israel, Tehran's main regional adversary, can be used as a rough indicator.

Table 1: Regional Military Balance (2010)

Country	Military Budget	Active Forces	Population
Bahrain	\$742 million	8,200	807,000
Iran	\$9.02 billion	523,000	75.077 million
Iraq	\$4.9 billion	245,782	31.466 million
Israel	\$15.6 billion	176,500	7.285 million
Kuwait	\$3.91 billion	15,500	3.050 million
Oman	\$4.02 billion	42,600	2.905 million
Qatar	\$9.1 billion	11,800	1.508 million
Saudi Arabia	\$170 billion	233,500	26.245 million
UAE	\$29.2 billion	51,000	4.707 million

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Military Balance (London: IISS, 2011), pp. 303–336.

The figures show that, with more than 75 million people, Iran is by far the most populous country in the Persian Gulf and, along with Egypt and Turkey, among the most populous in the entire Middle East. Not surprisingly, the Islamic Republic has the largest military forces in the Gulf. Despite these demographic advantages, Iran's military budget is very modest compared with its immediate neighbors and Israel. These figures underscore the conclusion that Iranian military forces do not have the military capability, and probably not the political will, to launch an attack on any of its neighbors or Israel. Rather, as discussed above, the goal is to deter its rivals from attacking the Islamic Republic.

The *Artesh*: From the War with Iraq until Today

Richard Russell

Iran's conventional military forces — ground, air, and naval — once stood tall as the best armed military forces in the Middle East aside from those of Israel. The United States lavished the most sophisticated military hardware on the Shah, who was willing and able to tap his financial resources from Iran's oil wealth to buy modern conventional arms. The Shah had the ambition, the financial means, and the political-military backing of the United States to turn Iran into the Persian Gulf's most formidable military power.

The United States, for its part, was eager to support the Shah's militarily modernization. President Richard Nixon saw Iran as a Cold War bulkhead against the Soviet Union's possible designs on warm-water ports in the Gulf for Soviet naval power as well as on Iran's oil wealth.

The United States relied on Iran's military as a critical component of its "Twin Pillar" strategy for holding at bay Soviet expansion in the Middle East. President Nixon saw Iran as the first pillar and Saudi Arabia as the second pillar. Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter saw Iran in the same light, and lavished the Shah's military with American arms and training, the scope and depth of which was not given to any other American security partners save Israel. The United States, for example, sold the Shah the most capable combat aircraft in the American arsenal at the time, the F-14.

President Carter too announced a doctrine in which Iran played a central role. After the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Carter declared the "Carter Doctrine" which warned that the United States would not stand idly by should a hostile power — a veiled reference to the Soviet Union — make a military drive into the Middle East, the most likely route to which laid in Iran. The Carter Doctrine was widely perceived to include a threat of American nuclear weapons to deter Soviet military designs against Iran and the Middle East.

Notwithstanding the massive infusions of American training and arms, the Shah's military was a Potemkin village. It may have paraded beautifully, but it collapsed during the 1979 Iranian Revolution, in part, because it had no direction from the cancer-stricken and ailing Shah who later died in exile. The implosion of the Shah's military left it vulnerable to purging from the Islamic clerics who took power in Tehran.

As journalist Robert Fisk recalls, every general had been retired — more than 300 of the Shah's senior officers were relived in three weeks — and much of Iran's British- and American-supplied military equipment, such as tanks, were inoperable due to poor maintenance.¹ The Revolution had purged 7,500 of the Shah's officers in just two months after the revolution and at the time of the Iraqi invasion Iran's military might have lost as many as 12,000 officers purged by

1. Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), pp. 176–177.

Ayatollah Khomeini.² The revolutionary regime had only some confidence in the air force because its cadets had played a support role during the revolution and, after the Shah's fall, the air force was the only armed service whose members were allowed to wear their uniforms outside their bases.³

Saddam's Husayn's invasion of Iran temporarily halted the revolution's dismantling of the Shah's military. Iraq invaded Iran in 1980 with attacks at four points along a 700-kilometer front with Baghdad sending about half of its combat-ready manpower and most of its 12 divisions across the Iranian border, but the Iraqi offensive had stalled inside Iran with the onset of seasonal rains that immobilized Iraqi armor.⁴ Kenneth Pollack judges that Saddam wanted to seize Iran's Khuzestan province to ignite a new revolution in Iran to oust Ayatollah Khomeini and replace him with a regime friendly to Baghdad and one that would allow Saddam to keep Khuzestan with its considerable ethnic Arab population and sizeable oil wealth.⁵

Saddam's Husayn's invasion of Iran temporarily halted the revolution's dismantling of the Shah's military.

Iran relied on its superior troop numbers to hold at bay the smaller but amply-supplied Iraqi forces. While Iran had lost its main weapons supplier in the United States because of the Revolution, Iraq continued to receive financial assistance and arms from the Gulf Arab states and Egypt that feared an Iranian conquest of Iraq and Kuwait and domination of the Middle East. The Soviet Union also continued to supply Iraq with military hardware. The United States too weighed in on Iraq's side during the conflict and provided invaluable intelligence to Iraq and gave Iraqi high command warning of Iranian preparations for offensives against Iraqi forces along a long battle front. Robert Fisk reports that American intelligence secretly provided the Iraqi General Staff with detailed information on Iranian deployments, tactical planning, and bomb damage assessments.⁶

The nature of the conflict was a battle of attrition along static and long battle lines. The Iranian military repeatedly prepared and instituted offensive campaigns that ousted Iraqi forces from Iranian territory, but were unable to drive deeply into Iraq or threaten Baghdad and Saddam's regime directly. By the later stages of the war, Iraqi forces, both regular military and elite Republican Guard forces, became increasingly proficient at marshalling and executing offensive operations against Iranian forces.

The Iraqis also became expert at integrating chemical warfare into their battle plans. The Iraqis would saturate Iranian front lines and rear areas with chemical weapons delivered by aircraft and artillery. These Iraqi chemical fires would wreak havoc with Iranian forces that would break and collapse because Iran was not prepared with equipment and training needed to fight in a chemical warfare environment. Only at the later stages of the war was Iran capable of ru-

2. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 186.

3. Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation*, p. 177

4. Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War: Volume II, The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 85, 96.

5. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 184

6. Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation*, p. 213

dimentary use of its own chemical weapons against Iraqi forces, but by then it was too late to stave off defeat.⁷

Iraqi forces also inflicted pain and suffering on Iran with ballistic missile attacks, which Iran's air force and air defense forces were unable to stop. The Iranian Air Force was largely knocked out of the war by the Iraqi Air Force, and Iraq was well supplied with surface-to-surface Scud ballistic missiles by the Soviet Union. Iraqi forces modified the Soviet-supplied Scuds to increase their range in order to attack Tehran and threaten the seat of Iran's power. The Iranians had more limited supplies of Scud missiles. The Iran-Iraq war saw a "war of the cities" with both Iraq and Iran trading ballistic missile barrages in attempts to raise fear among civilian populations and undermine the political support for both Baghdad and Tehran.⁸

The Iranians lost conventional military power during the Iran-Iraq war at the hands of American forces. The United States began naval escort operations to protect Persian Gulf shipping from Iranian attacks and harassment. The Kuwaitis had initially turned to the Russians for help and asked Moscow to fly Russian flags on Kuwait oil tankers, but the United States retracted its earlier refusal and agreed to protect Kuwaiti shipping.⁹ Clashes with American forces added

The Iran-Iraq war saw a "war of the cities" with both Iraq and Iran trading ballistic missile barrages in attempts to raise fear among civilian populations and undermine the political support for both Baghdad and Tehran.

pressure on Iran, and the Iranians and the Americans in April 1988 had their largest naval clash. The American frigate *USS Samuel B. Roberts* hit a mine which wounded ten sailors and the US Navy retaliated by executing "Operation Praying Mantis" in which it destroyed three offshore oil platforms that the IRGC had been using as bases to attack Gulf shipping. The Iranians tried to counter American forces with light aircraft and F-4 aircraft attacks; the Iranian missile boat *Joshan* was sunk after it unsuccessfully fired a US-made Harpoon anti-ship missile against American forces. The Americans also sunk the Iranian frigate *Sahand* and crippled its sister ship the *Sabalan*.¹⁰

The Iraqi concoction of chemical weapons and offensives against Iranian lines proved damaging and led to a series of battlefield and territorial losses. The toll in men and arms for the Iranian military after eight years of war was horrific. It lost a good share of the American military equipment purchased by the Shah. Iran also lost a sizable share of a generation of youth in battlefield losses. Losses on the battlefield were compounded by Iraqi ballistic missile attacks that increased hardships for Iranian city dwellers on top of the overall deterioration of Iran's economy and society over the course of eight years of war. The cumulative impact of these factors led Ayatollah Khomeini to "drink the poison chalice" as he called it and publicly accept defeat in 1988.

7. See Richard L. Russell, "Iraq's Chemical Weapons Legacy: What Others Might Learn from Saddam," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Spring 2005).

8. See Richard L. Russell, *Weapons Proliferation and War in the Greater Middle East: Strategic Contest* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 61.

9. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 225.

10. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 230–231.

WEAK MILITARY PULSE TODAY

The Iranian regular military still has not recuperated from the Iran-Iraq war. It lacks major weapons systems needed for it to be revived and modernized into an effective force. International sanctions have hampered major weapons producers from selling Iran the major weapons infusions it would need to repair its conventional military forces. To cope, Iran's military is forced to cannibalize — make some ground and air force equipment into spare parts — to help keep other units functioning. The overall effect of cannibalization is a further reduction in the amount of forces that the Iranian military could field or fly in a future conflict.

The Iranians are working strenuously in a clandestine black market to buy spare parts to keep their forces operational.

The regime, moreover, is building the IRGC into a heavy force to more than compete with the regular army. Iran's IRGC have some 125,000 troops while the army has 350,000 troops.¹¹ The caliber of IRGC commanders and rank-and-file on balance is superior to those in the army's ranks. The army, for example, only has about 130,000 professional soldiers, while the remaining bulk of some 220,000 soldiers are less well-trained conscripts.¹²

Iran's air power, too, is obsolescent. It has about 281 combat aircraft, of which about 60% of the American-supplied aircraft are serviceable while about 80% of the Russian- and Chinese-supplied aircraft are serviceable.¹³ The most sophisticated combat aircraft in Iran's inventory include some 25 F-14 Tomcats, 65 F-4 Phantoms, and 60 F-5 Tigers from the Americans, 24 F-1 Mirages from Iraqi pilot defections during the 1991 Gulf war, and 13 Su-25 Frogfoot, 30 Su-24 Fencer, and 25 Mig-29 Fulcrums from Russia.¹⁴

The Iranians are working strenuously in a clandestine black market to buy spare parts to keep their forces operational. Many attempts by individuals in the United States to smuggle older F-4, F-5, and F-14 aircraft parts to Iran have been uncovered. US law enforcement officials say that Iran has only been able, through reverse engineering, to produce about 15% of the parts needed for F-4, F-5, and F-14 aircraft.¹⁵ But these are drastic stop-gap measures and insufficient to support effective aircraft operations. Even the United States decided to retire the F-14 aircraft from its forces because they were too labor intensive and prone to mechanical problems to sustain. If the United States had problems keeping its F-14s airborne, the Iranians are going to have far greater trouble. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that the Iranian air force today is a greater threat to itself than to Iran's neighbors or the United States. The Iranians frequently lose aircraft due to mechanical and maintenance problems.

11. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance*, 2008 (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 242.

12. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance*, 2008, p. 242.

13. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance*, 2008, p. 242.

14. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance*, 2008, p. 244.

15. Robin Wright, "US Military Technology Being Exported Illegally Is a Growing Concern," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2007, A22.

Iran today no longer has a military edge over its Gulf Arab neighbors. Iran's mix of Russian and Chinese-supplied weapons is qualitatively inferior to the modern American and Western weapons systems in Arab Gulf State inventories. Although Iran once had more combat experience in mobile conventional warfare than their Gulf Arab State rivals, Iran's experience is rapidly aging. The Iranians that fought in the front lines during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988 are retired. The majority of Iran's population, moreover, is under 25 years of age and has no direct personal memory of the Iranian Revolution.

RESUSCITATION PROSPECTS

If Iran's military is even going to be resuscitated into a modern and capable fighting force, it will have to significantly expand its purchases of armaments from foreign suppliers. The Iranians make great public fanfare out of their indigenous weapons production capabilities. Tehran announced in November 2007, for example, that it had launched its second submarine built in Iran which it claimed could fire missiles and torpedoes simultaneously.¹⁶ Public relations aside, Iran's domestically-produced armaments are far less sophisticated than those of the United States and Western Europe, and even than those of Russia and China.

Russia, China, and North Korea loom large as Iran's best foreign military backers. These states have done hefty loads of business with Iran in the recent past and are poised to do more in the future. Iran has flirted on-and-off with Russia about Moscow selling Tehran sophisticated surface-to-air missile defense systems, the deployments of which would complicate American efforts to hold at-risk Iranian targets in a future conflict. The Iranians between 1991 and 1997 bought roughly \$1.4 billion of military equipment from Russia, including Kilo-class submarines, Su-24 combat aircraft, MiG-29 fighters, and advanced naval mines. Tehran also spent about \$1.3 billion on anti-ship missiles, missile patrol boats, air-to-surface missiles, and ballistic missile technology from China, while North Korea provided Scud-B and Scud-C ballistic missiles and technology for Iran's development of *Shahab* ballistic missiles.¹⁷

If Iran's military is even going to be resuscitated into a modern and capable fighting force, it will have to significantly expand its purchases of armaments from foreign suppliers ... Russia, China, and North Korea loom large as Iran's best foreign military backers.

Iran's arms purchased are aimed, in part, to counter American naval supremacy in the Gulf. Moscow sold Tehran three Kilo-class diesel-powered submarines which are relatively modern in that they became operational in 1980 and are very quiet, small, and ideal for operating in the Gulf's shallow waters. "The Kilo can carry a mix of 18 homing and wire-guided torpedoes or 24 mines."¹⁸ The Iranians too are building up their naval irregular warfare capabilities. They have

16. "Tehran Launches Second Sonar-Avoiding Light Sub," Associated Press, November 29, 2007.

17. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 258.

18. Anthony H. Cordesman and Martin Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat to the Northern Gulf* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), p. 113.

purchased at least three one-man submarines designed for covert demolition and infiltration operations and, in 1993, obtained some midget submarines from North Korea.¹⁹

Iran, for its part, will likely play Moscow and Beijing against each other in order to squeeze the most capable military hardware out of both. The Chinese notably have sold Iran dual-use technologies that could be used to produce chemical and biological weapons and “China has been resistant to the idea that transfers of missiles represent a danger qualitatively different from other conventional arms transfers.”²⁰ As China scholar Bates Gill points out, China’s arms sales to Iran in the 1980s and 1990s was for strategic reasons as well as profit and that China’s arms trade with Iran has been “more quantitatively and qualitatively comprehensive and sustained than that with any other country, with exceptions of Pakistan and possibly North Korea.”²¹

The modernization of Iran’s conventional military capabilities would be a long-term process. However, the regime is unlikely to turn its attention and affection away from the IRGC and Basij militia forces in order to make the necessary resources available for Iran’s regular armed forces. This is especially true now that the clerical regime is growing ever more dependent on the IRGC and Basij forces to hold domestic opposition in check.

Iran’s military pulse will likely remain weak while the regime stuffs resources into the IRGC. Yet, the regime probably will keep the regular military on life support to hedge against a traditional mobile-conventional military threat coming from Iran’s neighbors or the United States. Such a contingency would not appear in the near term as Iraq and Afghanistan are consumed by their own internal security problems while the United States is drawing down its forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Tehran, moreover, is likely to see the pursuit of nuclear weapons as the best “quick remedy” for its conventional military woes and as the best means for countering superior Arab and American conventional forces in the Persian Gulf.

19. Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran’s Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities*, pp. 116–117.

20. Daniel Byman and Roger Cliff, *China’s Arms Sales: Motivations and Implications* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999), p. 36.

21. Bates Gill, “Chinese Arms Exports to Iran,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (May 1998), p. 57.

The *Artesh* and Revolution

Houchang Hassan-Yari

Since its inception in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has duplicated almost all state institutions. It retained the institutions that existed under the old regime while creating new *Islamic* agencies to perform the same tasks. The Iranian armed forces did not escape this process. Under the monarchy, the armed forces were called the *Artesh Shahanshahi* or Imperial Army. Although called the “Army,” or Artesh, the force consisted of the three main services (army, navy, and air force) plus the Imperial Guard Divisions (*Gard-e Javidan*) and the Army Aviation Command (*Hawa Nirouz*).

Before his victory in the Revolution in 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who enjoyed great support among the population, urged the Artesh to put an end to its “humiliating behaviour” of following the dictates of US military advisers based in Tehran. Using a nationalist tone to rally the armed forces, he argued that “the Artesh is not under the command of our nation and does not benefit our nation; it is an instrument of repression in the hands of the Shah.” He called upon the commanding officers and soldiers to “save their dignity” by rejecting both the Shah and the monarch’s US ties. Khomeini and his close associates considered the Army to be weak in its belief and consequently totally dependent on the Shah and the Western powers. He wanted the “grandeur of the nation, the greatness of the country and that of the army, to be connected.” He expressed his affection for the soldiers, calling them “our children that we love,” and urged the Artesh to “return to the nation.”¹

In the dying days of the monarchy, on February 11, 1979, the Artesh Supreme Council announced that the armed forces would observe neutrality in the confrontation between Shahpour Bakhtiar, appointed earlier as Prime Minister by the Shah, and the revolutionaries led by Khomeini. The armed forces withdrawal allowed the revolutionaries to take control of the government. All military units were ordered to return to their barracks, assuring Khomeini of the impartiality of the armed forces in political clashes between the revolutionaries and the remaining royalists. Concerned about internal strife and foreign threats to the new Islamic system, he resisted the leftist and Islamist guerrilla organizations’ call for banning the Artesh.

In a decree issued a few months after the victory, he proclaimed April 18, 1979 to be “Army Day,” and ordered the military to parade across the country as a public display of its support for the Islamic Republic and the people. He ordered the armed forces to “be ready to sacrifice their lives for the independence and protection of the country’s borders.” The military and citizens should “join their forces to end the evil wrongdoers, hypocrites, counter-revolutionaries, trouble-makers and corruptors on earth.”²

1. Quoted by Seyyed Mahmoud Alavi, representative of the Supreme Leader and head of the Artesh doctrinal and political organization, in an interview. “In the Artesh There is No Abuse of the Soldiers,” *Tabnak News*, April 18, 2009 (29 Faevardin 1388).

2. “In the Artesh There is No Abuse of the Soldiers,” *Tabnak News*, April 18, 2009 (29 Faevardin 1388).

As the opportunistic realist that he was, Khomeini decided to keep the intimidated, divided, and humiliated Army, especially in the absence of a replacement Islamic force. His grand strategy was to transform and rebuild the Army through a process of indoctrination to protect the emerging regime. With the consolidation of the new clerical authority, loyalty to the revolution and its leadership and achievements became the criterion for separating friends from foes in the entire society, including the Army. For Khomeini, maintaining the Islamic system should be the primary responsibility of the nation and its armed forces.

The brotherly treatment of military promised by Khomeini did not last long. The clerical leaders of the revolution pushed aside their slogan of “brothers-in-arms” and launched a vast purge amongst the Artesh’s high command. Several generals, among them marshals and lieutenant generals, were hastily executed by a revolutionary tribunal while many others went into exile. The leadership of the Army was decapitated with the sole exception of a few officers who were known for their Islamic or mild nationalist credentials.

For Khomeini, maintaining the Islamic system should be the primary responsibility of the nation and its armed forces.

Despite the Islamic adjective it carries, the Army largely remains a “national” institution. It remains the Islamic Republic’s second-class armed forces. The brunt of the defense budget goes to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is by far the preferred military instrument of control, support, and protection of the Islamic regime. With the exception of one episode, the Islamic Republic Army has been completely absent from political debate and upheavals that shake up the Iranian society.

The failed “Nojeh Coup” of July 9, 1980 was launched by a group of servicemen who deeply resented the Islamist regime and sought a return to secularism. The coup attempt was, however, uncovered and foiled before it began. More than 150 military and civilians involved in, or accused of participating in, the coup were executed. Executions started even before the planned day of the coup and continued long after the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980.

Khomeini’s gamble of not dismantling the Artesh paid-off when Iraq invaded Iran. In spite of the waves of purges, the Artesh defended the country for eight years. Its cooperation with the IRGC was not always easy; there were several moments of high tension between them during the Iraq-Iran war, such as the IRGC’s confiscation of the Artesh base and their equipment in Do-Kouheh. A poorly-trained and disorganized force, driven by ideological zeal, the IRGC ordered a number of operations that ended in disaster in the Iranian Kurdistan region.

Conservation of the Army’s old structure did not, however, improve its fortunes. It remains an accessory to the IRGC in defending Iranian territorial sovereignty. The Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei, recently decided to move the Navy arm of the Artesh out of the Persian Gulf and entrusted its security to the IRGC. This proposed transfer to the Sea of Oman was, however, ordered before adequate port facilities had been placed.

Perpetuating incongruity between the politically-motivated desires of the Commander-in-Chief to expand the Iranian naval presence to international waters and the technical obstacles Tehran faces in attaining such a goal, Lieutenant General Gholam-Ali Rashid, Deputy Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently strongly expressed his dismay. He exposed the inconsistency by stating that “without developing adequate port facilities and infrastructure we cannot strengthen Iran’s naval position in the world. Without doing all this we cannot speak of building a powerful navy.”³

IDEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

The most important and influential unit within the entire Artesh is its vast Ideological-Political Organization (IPO), headed by a cleric who is directly appointed by Khamenei. The main unwritten task of the organization is to control all activities of the Army, indoctrinate its personnel, and intervene in any institutional matter when necessary on behalf of the Commander-in-Chief. In other words, the trusted representative, who is invested with absolute power, is to monitor the forces and keep them in line with and subordinate to the Leader’s wishes.

According to Article 14 of the Laws of the Islamic Republic Army, the promotion of religious and political awareness of the Army staff, providing ideological and political training; publishing journals, books, and other cultural products and art; maintaining control of the implementation of the Islamic principles; and all functions of public relations in the Army are part of the responsibilities of the political and ideological organization. The stated mission of the Organization is to strive to create an exemplary Islamic Army by observing all human, ideological, and military ways.

Despite three decades of intense Islamification efforts, it seems that the formation of an ideal “Islamic Army” as envisaged by Khomeini remains an unreachable goal. After the disputed presidential election in 2009, Major General Salehi, Chief-Commander of the Army, asked the IPO to intensify its campaign of indoctrination of soldiers. Referring to the post-election events and their impact on the Army, Salehi indicated that during his visit to the garrisons he saw the pictures of Mir Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karrubi, leaders of the opposition, in the rooms of some soldiers. Instead of confronting the soldiers, he asked the IPO representatives to educate the recalcitrant soldiers such that they, themselves, take those pictures down. The Army thus remains enigmatic; it seems wrong to believe that the Artesh will forever keep its distance vis-à-vis political developments in Iran, but they have not been put to the test.

3. “Iranian Navy Changes Direction,” *Iran Diplomacy*, July 27, 2011. <http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/>.

Eternal Rivals? The *Artesh* and the IRGC

Ali Alfoneh

More than three decades after the Revolution of 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran Army [*Artesh-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*] and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps [*Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami*] (IRGC), remain entangled in a state of fierce rivalry.

The rivalry is in part due to the early history of conflicts between the Army and the IRGC, but has also to do with overlapping responsibilities of the two military organizations enshrined in the constitution; doctrinal differences; and the civilian leadership's apparent desire to maintain the two military organizations in a permanent state of rivalry. The political leadership's desire is reflected in uneven access of the two forces to the political leadership; unequal access to funding, recruitment opportunities, and materiel; and different levels of subjective civilian control and prestige.

While the IRGC has superior access to the political leadership; a higher budget, including vast economic resources beyond the military budget, and prestige; enjoys access to the best recruits; and is subjected to a lower degree of subjective control mechanisms of the civilian leadership; the Army has — with the exception of the nuclear program — access to fairly sophisticated military hardware.

EARLY HISTORY OF CONFLICTS

Despite the Imperial Army's February 11, 1979 declaration of neutrality in the course of the Revolution, revolutionary leaders suspected the Army of maintaining its loyalty to the exiled monarch of Iran. Therefore, the new leadership in Tehran brutally purged the Army in the immediate aftermath of the victory of the Revolution on February 12, 1979. Simultaneously, the revolutionary leadership embraced the emergence of revolutionary militias supporting Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. These armed militias were later united in a body called the IRGC, which the revolutionary leadership used to create a counterbalance to the Army and to defend the new regime against military coups. Khomeini did not authorize the dismantling of the Army, despite pressure from the *Tudeh* Communist Party, *Mojahedin-e Khalq*, and leading clerics such as Ayatollah Mohammad Hosseini Beheshti, and in the wake of the 1980 Iraqi invasion of Iran, the Army was given a chance to prove its loyalty to the new regime.

Apart from the early history of conflict between the Army and the IRGC, the rivalry between the two military organizations was institutionalized and perpetuated by their overlapping responsibilities enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic.

According to Article 143 of the Constitution, the Army is “responsible for guarding the independence and territorial

integrity of the country, as well as the order of the Islamic Republic.” Article 150 of the Constitution, on the other hand, stresses that the IRGC must “be maintained so that it may continue its role of guarding the Revolution and its achievements...[in] brotherly cooperation [with other branches of the armed forces]...”

While reference to “independence and territorial integrity of the country” may indicate that the Army is primarily tasked with defending Iran in the face of foreign aggression, the abstract notion of “guarding the Revolution and its achievement” may be a reference to the IRGC’s role in maintaining the ideological nature of the regime. However, in the wake of the Iraqi invasion, the IRGC and the Army were entangled in bitter conflicts over doctrine, competition for scarce resources, and unequal access to the political leadership — a conflict that has continued to this day.

Every once in a while, the Army is awarded with sophisticated military materiel ... but as long as the IRGC remains the main agent of military procurement ... the Army can hardly compete with the IRGC when it comes to defense materiel.

DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES

The Army was, and still is, a classical military organization with classical doctrine. The IRGC was and still operates based upon asymmetric and “revolutionary” warfare. By the mid-1980s, the IRGC — to the great dismay of the Army — established in parallel its Ground Forces, Navy, and Air Force, but the difference in doctrine between the two forces continued. Army bases alongside international borders of Iran deter land invasion of Iran, while IRGC bases in Iran’s peripheral regions direct terrorist operations abroad; the regular Navy is designed to patrol the high seas, while the IRGC Navy’s fast boats harass the United States Navy and are tasked with patrolling the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea; the regular Air Force operates in the skies of Iran, while the IRGC Air Force is engaged in procurement and production of medium-range missiles.

Despite the fact that the Army is numerically larger than the IRGC, the Army is not as well-funded as the IRGC: According to the 2010–2011 National Budget, \$4.8 billion was allocated to the Army, while \$5.8 billion was allocated to the IRGC. Apart from the national budget, the IRGC and its many subsidiaries have direct access to Iran’s foreign exchange reserve, from which the Army is barred. Over the course of 2009–2011, the IRGC’s *Khatam al-Anbiya* (similar to the US Army Corps of Engineers) was awarded some \$25 billion in contracts developing Iran’s oil and gas sector, while the Army did not enjoy such largess. The IRGC is also engaged in many other economic activities, both legal and illegal, which have made it one of the most important actors on Tehran Stock Exchange. The economic activities of the Army, in contrast, seem limited to several chain stores.

UNEQUAL ACCESS TO MATERIEL AND RECRUITS

Every once in a while, the Army is awarded with sophisticated military materiel such as the Russian-built Kilo subma-

rines purchased in the early 1990s, the domestically-produced frigate *Jamaran*, or a few medium-range missile systems; but as long as the IRGC remains the main agent of military procurement, and the engine of the Islamic Republic's nuclear program, the Army can hardly compete with the IRGC when it comes to defense materiel. Establishment of the Air Defense Force as the fourth branch of the Army, to which even the IRGC Air Defense Force reports, may be a source of consolation to the Army, but this hardly corrects the fundamental imbalance between the Army and the IRGC.

The Army faces similar challenges concerning recruitment. According to open source material, the IRGC has the first pick of potential recruits. Combined with superior pay and brighter career prospects in the IRGC compared with the Army, the Army nearly always gets the second-best recruits.

The Army lost the political battle to the IRGC in 1979, and prospects of the Army improving its access to the political level seem unlikely under the present circumstances. Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamenei has surrounded himself with a few Army officers as military advisers, but most of his military advisers seem to be former IRGC commanders and other high-ranking IRGC commanders. At the cabinet level, the difference is even more manifest. From 1979 to 1989, all Defense Ministers of the Islamic Republic were Army generals, but since 1989 — when the IRGC Ministry was dissolved — there has not been a single cabinet minister in the Islamic Republic who has been an Army veteran, while an increasing number of IRGC veterans have been appointed cabinet ministers.

At the time of the writing of this article, 13 out of 18 of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's cabinet ministers are former officers of the IRGC. At the parliamentary level the difference is even starker: A review of the social background of Iranian parliamentarians since 1979 reveals that not a single Army veteran has been elected to the Islamic Consultative Assembly, the Iranian parliament. All parliamentarians who have a military career behind them are veterans of the IRGC or the *Basij* militia.

Combined with superior pay and brighter career prospects in the IRGC compared with the Army, the Army nearly always gets the second-best recruits.

DIFFERENT DEGREES OF CIVILIAN CONTROL

The Army also seems to be subjected to a much greater degree of civilian control in comparison with the IRGC, which may be an additional source of animosity between the two forces. While the IRGC has established its own theological seminaries, such as the Martyr Mahallati University which trains ideological/political indoctrination officers (or commissars) and is, as such, asked to control itself, the Army is subjected to heavy political and ideological infiltration conducted by members of the clergy, some of whom may be the graduates of Martyr Mahallati University.

The question of prestige may not be as tangible as unequal access to funding, materiel, political access, or different degrees of civilian control, but it may be just as important as the other factors. The mass media of the Islamic Republic often depict the IRGC as the victor of the war against Iraq, and the IRGC generally enjoys far more press coverage than

the Army, and popular culture, especially the Sacred Defense Cinema — previously the War Propaganda Office — of the IRGC pays little or no attention to the sacrifices of the Army during the war with Iraq. This lack of attention clearly lowers the prestige of the Army.

More than three decades after the Revolution, the Army and the IRGC remain entangled in a rivalry which the Army — should the hitherto trend continue — is bound to lose. Lacking proper funding, materiel, and qualified recruits; isolated from the political level; subjected to harsh civilian control; and losing its prestige, the Army of Iran is nothing but a shadow of its pre-revolutionary self. The Army has hitherto resisted attempts at integrating it within the ranks of the IRGC, but there is no guarantee that it will be capable of maintaining its resilience in the face of the ever-growing IRGC.

The Iranian Army: Tasks and Capabilities

Bernd Kaussler

Much attention has been given to the IRGC's asymmetric defense capabilities, its role in Iraq's post-2003 insurgency, and its alleged hold over the Strait of Hormuz, but there is little scrutiny in open source literature on the significance of the Iranian Army (*Artesh*) to Iran's national security.

As the EU and the United States continue to contain Iran in military, economic, and political terms in order to sway the leadership to accept a mutually acceptable settlement on the nuclear program, Iran's Army continues to underwrite the country's national security, checking both threats from within and without.

As the popular unrest that followed the presidential elections in 2009 was gaining momentum, Iran's internal balance of power depended on the position of the armed forces. However, unlike in 1979 (or Tunisia and Egypt in 2011), the Army never defected, thus allowing the IRGC and the *Basij* militia force to defend their economic and political stake in the country and crush the Green opposition movement.

Created as the Imperial Army under the direction and influence of foreign advisers in the 19th and 20th centuries, the *Artesh* had become the world's fifth-strongest army by 1979 and constituted a significant pillar in underwriting the Shah's power projection in the region. Ayatollah Khomeini's establishment of the IRGC as an ideological vanguard of the Islamic Revolution served to replace the monarchist with a revolutionary Islamist ethos. Since the violent crackdown against the opposition in Iran, which was largely undertaken by the IRGC as well as other elements of the security and intelligence establishment, the IRGC has moved on to be one of the most important power brokers in the country. Informed by ideological zeal as much as economic interests, many observers see the IRGC as turning Iran into a "praetorian state."¹

Nonetheless, the *Artesh* has remained an important element in Iran's armed forces. It was only after the revolutionary leadership ceased its purges of the Army and began to retrain the newly founded IRGC in the conduct of conventional, formation-based tactics and along with the Army that Iran was able to repel Saddam Husayn's advances in the early 1980s.²

According to Article 143 of the Constitution, the task of the Iranian Army is to safeguard the independence and territorial integrity of the country, as well as the order of the Islamic Republic. While concerted efforts to Islamize the Army failed to instill revolutionary zeal, they ensured that the Army, largely comprised of conscripts, remains loyal to the regime. Beyond the need to maintain popular acquiescence at home and conscious of US capacities to deploy significant military power against the Islamic Republic, the Army remains a main element of Iran's defense posture.

1. Elliot Hen-Tov and Nathan Gonzalez, "The Militarization of Post-Khomeini Iran: Praetorianism 2.0," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Winter 2011), pp. 45–59.

2. Ariel I. Ahram, "Origins and Persistence of State-Sponsored Militias: Path Dependent Processes in Third World Military Development," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (August 2011), pp. 538–539; Daniel Byman, *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2011), pp. 31–44.

As the Army's leadership claims that it has restructured its fighting capabilities and resources in order to fight in conventional as well as asymmetric theaters, the Army continues to play an important role in securing borders as well confronting what the regime considers to be a Kurdish insurgency emanating from Iraq as well as a homegrown terrorist threat in the region of Sistan va Baluchistan.³

Since the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, Iran's conventional military forces, particular infantry, mechanized infantry, and armored elements have been deployed along the borders with Iraq, Afghanistan and Turkey. While the Army continues to confront conventional strategic threats along Iran's borders, it has largely been used in fighting the Kurdish insurgency and in recent years witnessed military operations, ranging from shelling of artillery as well as incursions into Iraqi territory. At least 5,000 military forces (including Basij and IRGC units and the 28th Infantry Division) have been deployed along the common border with the Iraqi Kurdistan region.

While concerted efforts to Islamize the Army failed to instill revolutionary zeal, they ensured that the Army, largely comprised of conscripts, remains loyal to the regime.

In the restive eastern province of Sistan va Baluchistan, a region witnessing considerable ethnic Baluch unrest, the Artesh's role is also on the rise. In recent years, the militant ethnic Baluch and Sunni group Jundullah has used the momentum of popular dissent against the government and engaged in a campaign of assassinations, bomb attacks, and kidnapping involving civilians but mostly targeting local officials, members of the armed forces, and the police. As the Iranian regime staged large-scale maneuvers in the region, stepped up intelligence cooperation with Pakistan, and increased security along the border, significant Army resources continue to be used. It is evident that the Army's leadership continues to see the suppression of secessionist movements and the subduing of ethnic insurgencies in the periphery as an important task. However, state-sponsored concerted violence against the opposition and ordinary protesters following the 2009 presidential elections revealed fissures in the officers' corps of the regular armed forces, indicating that at least some in the top brass differentiate between legitimate political protests and political violence.

Along the 950-kilometer-long border with Afghanistan, over 50,000 IRGC, Army personnel, and border security forces have been deployed to control drug trafficking. According to Iranian authorities, over 3,700 policemen and soldiers have lost their lives and 11,000 have been injured in Iran's war against drugs. Over 200 tons of opium and heroin are being trafficked from Afghanistan through Iran onto the world market, making Iran the most important transit point for Afghan opiates.

Most importantly, the regular Army remains Iran's first line of defense. The southwestern region of Khuzestan, which was of great strategic significance during the early stages of Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980, hosts a number of armored divisions of the regular army. As Iran remains subject to targeted assassinations, acts of sabotage, and cyber warfare, which it perceives to be covert operations by US and Israeli forces, the country's security establishment continues to view the threat of a US invasion as

3. See statement by Brigadier-General Purdastan, Iran, BBC Monitoring (April 17, 2010).

a possibility. To that end, significant military resources are based in Khuzestan, including the 92nd Armored Division, equipped with T-72 tanks, as well as units from the 45th Commando Brigade.⁴ The Army is also charged with the protection of nuclear facilities and recent Army maneuvers in Qom, Bushehr, and Esfahan simulated WMD attacks against nuclear installations.

Table 1: The Military Strength of Iran and its Neighbors

	Iran	Iraq	KSA	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	UAE	Yemen
Army (active manpower)	350,000*	238,010	75,000	6,000	11,000	25,000	8,500	44,000	60,000
Main Battle Tanks	1,613	212	565	180	293	117	30	471	790
Artillery	8,196	n/a	855	92	218	233	89	561	1,167
Anti-Tank Weapons	2,720	n/a	2,600	45	332	200	144	717	820
Air Defense Weapons	1,882	n/a	1,191	117	n/a	58	58	277	234

*This figure excludes 100,000+ IRGC Ground Forces

Source: IISS Military Balance 2011, Jane's Security Sentinel "The Gulf States" (2011)

Looking at the military balance in the Persian Gulf, it is evident that in quantitative terms, Iran records an impressive number of conventional military hardware. However, given that the armed forces in Iran suffer from systemic atrophy, maintenance issues, as well as war-torn systems and equipment, Iran's actual war fighting capabilities fall short of the regime's bellicose rhetoric. While numerous weapons embargos and other sanctions against Iran for almost 30 years have not swayed Iran in any way to meet US and European security demands, it has significantly checked Iranian procurement efforts.

Even though multilateral efforts at military containment led Iran to develop an indigenous military-industrial complex, its military inventory largely consists of obsolete weapons systems purchased before the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Military hardware operated by the army fail to provide the armed forces with the capacity to conduct large-scale conventional offensive operations and as such can only project very limited power against the Gulf States or any other outside forces.⁵ Iran's main battle tanks (approximately 1,613) are mainly made up of aging Chieftain MK3/5, M47M, M60A1 (British); Soviet-made T-72; North Korean-made T-59 and T-62, and the domestically-made *Zulfiqar*.⁶ The artillery inventory is equally ineffective and fails to sustain any conventional warfare theater. By and large, EU-wide export guidelines, UNSC Resolutions 1737, 1747, and 1803, as well as the entire sanctions regime implemented by the US has largely kept Iran's army inventory ineffective or non-operational.⁷ Recent weapons sales from the EU (particular Germany) to Arab states in the

4. Jane's, Iran Security Sentinel.

5. IISS, Military Balance 2011, Chapter 7, 111:1, pp. 296–297.

6. IISS, Military Balance 2011, Chapter 7, 111:1, p. 307

7. Anthony Cordesman, "The Conventional Military," *Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/>

Persian Gulf, coupled with US extended deterrence in the region, keeps the military balance in favor of Gulf monarchies.

In addition to the army's conventional defense posture, there is an overwhelming human security task assigned to the armed forces as well as to non-governmental organizations. Iran has a large population of victims caused by war and other forms of armed violence, including millions of landmines and other explosive remnants of war (ERW).⁸ ERWs continue to threaten civilians, especially on the country's western and eastern borders. According to the Ministry of Interior there have been 6,765 casualties (2,840 people killed and 3,925 injured) from 1988–2004 and a UN report documents approximately 10,000 casualties as of 2006.⁹

Iranian authorities claim that, during the war, Iraq placed between 12–16 million landmines in Iran, which contaminated an area of over 16,216 square miles.¹⁰ The minefields along the borders of Iraq block access to agricultural land, infrastructure, and undeveloped oil fields. Ironically, while the Iranian government wants to clear the minefields along the Iraqi border, the Army continues to place them along the porous and long Afghan-Iranian border. The effects of landmines continue to impact Iranian civilians, but because of international isolation and the diplomatic stalemate over the country's nuclear program and other concerns, this important humanitarian issue has received little attention by the international community. Under the authority of the National Mine Action Council, the Army's Engineer Units, IRGC, and private contractors are largely responsible for clearing minefields. Because of lack of training and lack of modern equipment, over 169 demining personnel were killed since 1999 and over 697 injured. This represents the highest casualty rate in the world.¹¹ Iran has not acceded to the Convention on Cluster Munitions, nor is it state-party to the Mine Ban Treaty or the Convention on Conventional Weapons. Reluctance to subject Iran to these humanitarian regimes as well as perceived Iranian intransigence on the nuclear talks and related concerns over regional security means that Iran is unlikely to garner much support amongst donor countries to provide much needed international assistance in mine action.

As Iran continues to present itself as guardian to disenfranchised Arabs across the region and as the anti-status quo power, challenging US-allied autocracies, its armed forces remain a crucial asset to that end. So, while the Artesh may constitute an underequipped force, suffering from atrophy and facing superior US forces and better-equipped Arab armies in the region, Iran's military strengths and realist resolve is still being perceived by its neighbors and the US as a political and strategic threat. As long as the Persian Gulf remains subject to a Cold War security dilemma, Iran will continue to put a premium on military deterrence and brinkmanship as means of securing territorial integrity and security. Even though Iran's military modernizations and procurement efforts are lagging behind the Persian Gulf Arab monarchies and Israel, there are few in the region willing to pick a fight with Iran.

conventional-military.

8. According to the Islamic Revolution Martyrs Foundation, 204,795 Iranians lost their lives in the Iran-Iraq war, including 188,015 military and 16,780 civilians. IRNA, (September 23, 2000); *Iran Times*, (November 10, 2000), p. 4.

9. Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, "Iran," (June 18, 2010), http://www.the-monitor.org/index.php/cp/display/region_profiles/theme/1047#_ftn1.

10. "Islamic Republic of Iran," *Mine Action Information Journal*, http://maic.jmu.edu/journal/11.2/profiles/voegel_iran/voegel_iran.htm.

11. "Islamic Republic of Iran."

The *Artesh* Navy: Iran's Strategic Force

Mike Connell

Iran has two independent naval forces: the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN), whose existence predates Iran's 1979 Revolution, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN), which evolved separately in midst of the Iran-Iraq war (1985).

Both the IRIN and the IRGCN continue to operate as distinct services, with parallel chains of command. Despite the fact that both forces have as their primary mission to protect Iran's maritime interests and defend the Islamic Republic from sea-based threats, deep-seated institutional rivalries between the IRIN and the IRGCN mask even deeper structural and cultural differences between the two services.

The IRIN, for instance, with its larger, longer-range surface assets, is considered to be more of a blue water navy, while the IRGCN, whose inventory consists primarily of small fast-attack craft, is more ideally suited to be a coastal defense force. The IRIN is also more professional in the Western sense. Based on their interactions with IRIN and IRGCN vessels in the Persian Gulf, US Navy personnel routinely account for the erratic behavior of IRGCN vessels by noting that — unlike the IRIN — the IRGCN “doesn't speak Navy.”¹

True to its origins, the IRGCN has essentially remained a “guerrilla force at sea,” paralleling the structure of IRGC ground forces on land. Relations between the ranks are less hierarchical, more informal than they are in the IRIN.² The IRIN tends to place a greater premium on training, whereas the IRGCN, with its more decentralized command structure, prioritizes revolutionary élan and innovation over procedure.

Because of its revolutionary nature and ideological underpinnings, the regime in Tehran regards the IRGCN as more politically reliable than the IRIN. Iran's naval procurement and acquisition, which has been heavily weighted toward asymmetric areas traditionally regarded as the preserve of the IRGCN — fast attack craft, coastal defense cruise missiles, mines, etc. — also suggests that Iranian military planners regard the IRGCN as better equipped to confront a technologically superior adversary, such as the US Navy, than the IRIN. These views have probably been compounded by the IRIN's performance during the Iran-Iraq war, when, despite its early successes against the Iraqi Navy,³ it received a drubbing at the hands of the US Navy during the so-called Tanker War (1985–1988).

As a result of its presumed ideological and organizational deficiencies, the IRIN has often been in a poor position

1. Interviews with US naval personnel, Washington, DC, 2009–2011.

2. Interviews with former Iranian military personnel, 2010.

3. In Operation Movared (Pearl) (November 28, 1980) for instance, the IRIN was assessed to have destroyed 75% of the Iraqi Navy's operational capacity. Movared is still defined as a textbook operation by the IRIN. It is also commemorated every November as “Navy Day” in Iran. See <http://www.sajed.ir/>.

to compete for resources with the IRGCN. For at least two decades following the formation of the IRGCN, the IRIN languished, with the only significant additions to its inventory being its three Russian-supplied Kilo class submarines.

However, in recent years, the IRIN's reputation appears to be enjoying a revival within Iran's military establishment. Not only has it significantly expanded the breadth and nature of its acquisitions, but it appears to have successfully defined a new role for itself — in the words of Iran's Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamenei — as Iran's "strategic force."⁴

the IRIN's reputation appears to be enjoying a revival within Iran's military establishment. Not only has it significantly expanded the breadth and nature of its acquisitions, but it appears to have successfully defined a new role for itself ... as Iran's "strategic force."

MISSION, ORGANIZATION, AND CAPABILITIES

The traditional mission of the Navy has been to protect Iran's territorial waters, ports, and islands, and to secure its sea lines of communication and claims to natural resources in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Along with the IRGCN and the Iranian Coast Guard,⁵ Navy patrols routinely interdict smugglers, drug traffickers, and vessels that illegally fish in Iranian waters.

The Navy also serves as a deterrent against potential adversaries, such as the United States. In Iranian military circles, the Navy, because of its geographic reach, is generally regarded as Iran's first line of defense in the event of a conflict with extra-regional powers. Finally, Iran also uses its Navy for political ends, to engage in naval diplomacy and strategic messaging.⁶

The IRIN is organized into four naval districts, with headquarters located at Bandar Abbas, Jask,⁷ Chabahar, and Bandar Anzali. Together, the IRIN's four operational zones encompass the southern littorals of the Caspian Sea, the northern Gulf of Oman, and the Strait of Hormuz. In the case of the latter, the IRIN's 1st District at Bandar Abbas is co-located with a similarly designated IRGCN headquarters,⁸ suggesting that the two services have overlapping responsibilities in this strategically significant area.

The IRIN also continues to occupy bases inside the Persian Gulf, although the Gulf itself is now under the operational control of the IRGCN as a result of a major naval reorganization that began in 2007. That same reorga-

4. Islamic Republic of Iran News Network Television (IRINN), July 5, 2011.

5. The Iranian Guard is a subordinate element of Iran's Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) — also known by their Persian acronym NAJA.

6. Office of Naval Intelligence, "Iran Naval Forces: From Guerrilla Warfare to Modern Naval Strategy," Fall 2009.

7. The IRIN 2nd District Headquarters moved from Bushehr (inside to the Persian Gulf) to Jask (outside of the Persian Gulf) in October 2008 as part of a major naval reorganization. See Hossein Aryan, "Iran's Navies Flex their Muscles," RFE/RL, May 11, 2010.

8. David B. Crist, "Gulf of Conflict: A History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea," *Policy Focus* #95, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2009.

nization witnessed the establishment of the IRIN Southern and Northern Fleets,⁹ each of which theoretically has jurisdiction over IRIN forces deployed from Iran's southern and northern littorals.

In terms of its overall size, the IRIN is the smallest of Iran's conventional military services, with a total complement of around 18,000 active duty personnel.¹⁰ It is also the smaller of Iran's two naval forces — the IRGCN is assessed to have slightly larger complement of 20,000. Draftees are expected to serve 18 months in the Navy. Officers, who earn the equivalent of bachelor's and master's degrees at the Imam Khomeini Naval Academy in the town of Nowshahr, are obliged to serve longer terms than their enlisted counterparts.

Anecdotal evidence from interviews conducted in 2010 suggests that the IRIN is regarded more highly by Iran's populace than the IRGCN, both for its high degree of professionalism and for its apolitical nature.

Anecdotal evidence from interviews conducted in 2010 suggests that the IRIN is regarded more highly by Iran's populace than the IRGCN, both for its high degree of professionalism and for its apolitical nature. However, many enlisted still prefer to serve in the IRGCN, where the training is regarded as easier, relations between the ranks are more relaxed, and the benefits are generally better.¹¹

Little is known about the force's structure below the district level, although the IRIN has employed organizational concepts familiar to Western navies, such as flotillas, for its out-of-area deployments. In contrast to the IRGCN, which has focused its efforts on developing a smaller, more maneuverable force, the backbone of the IRIN consists mostly of older, mid-sized surface combatants, including its three British-supplied Sa'am class (Mark 5 Vosper) frigates;¹² one new domestically-produced variant, the Jamaran; two smaller Bayandor class corvettes (delivered in the 1960s), and 14 Kaman class (Combattante II) guided missile patrol craft.

Most of Iran's larger surface combatants are armed with anti-ship cruise missiles, including the Noor — a domestically-produced variant of the Chinese C-801. The IRIN is also assessed to have seven mine warfare ships, 44 coastal and inshore patrol craft, approximately ten amphibious ships, and a replenishment vessel — the Kharg — the largest Iranian military vessel by tonnage.¹³

According to *Jane's*, the IRIN's aviation branch "is one of the few air elements in any Gulf navy," with 2,000 person-

9. Interview with Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, IRIB 1, July 30, 2011.

10. "Iran Navy," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment*, September 1, 2011.

11. Interviews with former Iranian military personnel, 2010.

12. Although the Iranians classify their Mark V vessels as destroyers, their overall displacement (1,100 tons) suggests that they are more akin to frigates. By way of comparison, a US Arleigh-Burke class destroyer has a displacement of more than 8,000 tons when fully loaded.

13. "Iran Navy," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment*.

nel, three aging P-3s, other assorted maritime patrol craft, and helicopters.¹⁴ The IRIN also has two brigades (approximately 2,600 personnel) of naval infantry, whose primary responsibility probably involves protecting Iran's vulnerable offshore energy infrastructure and its islands in the Persian Gulf.

Rounding out the IRIN's order of battle are its submarines: three Kilo class diesel subs, supplied by the Russians in the 1990s; seven Yono class midget subs, supplied by North Korea and now domestically-produced; and one Nahang class midget sub, also domestically-produced. Whereas the primary function of the IRIN's Kilos is assessed to be anti-surface warfare (ASW), the midget subs — whose range is much more limited than the Kilos — probably have additional functions, including covert mining and the delivery of maritime special operations forces (MARSOFF).

The late Admiral Ashkbus Danehkar, referring to the deterrent value that submarines provide against a technologically superior adversary, noted that the Navy prioritized submarines in its acquisitions process because extra-regional powers “were confronted with a handicap — they were not experienced in subsurface warfare in the waters of the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman ... Submarines could, on a purely self-sufficient basis, detect surprise attacks launched from far distances and abort them.”¹⁵

Trends in Iranian naval acquisition and domestic production indicate a strong emphasis on self-reliance — a lesson learned from the Iran-Iraq war when spare parts were hard to acquire due to foreign sanctions. Current acquisition efforts appear to be focused along four separate lines of development, including medium-heavy submarines,¹⁶ midget submarines, large surface assets, and medium-size missile patrol craft. The IRIN has also been retrofitting its aging surface combatants with upgraded equipment and weapons systems.

CHALLENGES AND REORGANIZATION

Despite these modest improvements, the IRIN has been challenged by persistent problems with maintenance and readiness. Most of the IRIN's surface fleet is Western in origin. Without the ability to send these ships to foreign shipyards for overhaul and repairs, Iran has been forced to service them domestically to the best of its ability. As a result, according to the Office of Naval Intelligence, “Approximately half of the IRIN's missile-armed surface combatants are in very poor material condition, limiting their readiness and operational endurance.”¹⁷ Iran's three Kilo subs and its P-3 Orion aircraft are also well overdue for overhauls, although the Rus-

Without the ability to send these ships to foreign shipyards for overhaul and repairs, Iran has been forced to service them domestically to the best of its ability.

14. “Iran Navy,” *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment*.

15. *Saff*, February 20, 2000, pp. 40–42.

16. Iran's Maritime Industries Organization has stated that it is producing a new 450-ton submarine, the Qa'em. Fars News Agency, November 26, 2009.

17. Office of Naval Intelligence, “Iran Naval Forces.”

sians have apparently been assisting the Iranians with a domestic refit of one of its KILO subs, the *Tareq*.¹⁸

The IRIN and the IRGCN also continue to suffer from a lack of coordination, compounded by the difficulties associated with having a bifurcated system of command and control. The Joint Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, recognizing that this was a significant vulnerability that Iran's enemies could exploit, initiated a major reorganization of Iran's naval forces in 2007, involving the realignment of each service's areas of responsibility and the opening of several new naval bases along Iran's littorals.

As a result of this reorganization, the IRGCN has assumed exclusive operational control over the Persian Gulf, while the IRIN has shifted its focus to the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, and the Caspian Sea.¹⁹ Concurrent with this reorganization, new IRIN naval districts and district headquarters have been established outside of the Gulf. As of 2011, the division of effort between the two services was still ongoing. Presumably, in the event of a conflict, the IRGCN will assume operational control over existing IRIN bases and assets inside the Persian Gulf, while the IRIN will assume operational control over IRGCN bases and assets outside of the Gulf.²⁰

As a result of this reorganization, the IRGCN has assumed exclusive operational control over the Persian Gulf, while the IRIN has shifted its focus to the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, and the Caspian Sea.

The benefits associated with this realignment have been three-fold. First, it has reduced the need for the two services to coordinate and deconflict their operations in times of crises. Second, it represents a logical division of effort, given that the IRIN's larger surface assets and submarines are better suited to operating in the deeper, less confined areas outside of the Persian Gulf, whereas the IRGCN's smaller, more nimble assets are better suited to operating inside the Gulf. Third, it has allowed the IRIN to focus and prioritize its efforts further afield, by conducting long-range patrols and out-of-area operations, therefore extending Iran's strategic depth. Thus, the realignment has essentially set the stage for the IRIN to redefine its role as a strategic force, and, as a result, increase its utility in the eyes of Tehran's leadership.

A NEW DIRECTION

The architect of this transformation within the IRIN — or at least, the individual who was appointed to implement it — is Rear Admiral Habobollah Sayyari, who was selected to head the IRIN in 2007. Sayyari, an Iran-Iraq war veteran whose career in the IRIN stretches back to the pre-revolutionary period, described the genesis of the IRIN's transformation in an interview he gave to the Iranian Student News Network in 2009:

18. Office of Naval Intelligence, "Iran Naval Forces."

19. See Office of Naval Intelligence, "Iran Naval Forces," and Joshua C. Himes, "Iran's Maritime Evolution," *Gulf Analysis Paper*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2011.

20. Interview with Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, IRIB 1, 30 July 2011.

On the 7th of October 2009, at the Nowshahr Naval Academy student graduation ceremony, the Supreme Leader made a remark which hadn't crossed our minds before. He said that the Navy today is a strategic force in many parts of the world and in our country, and it should be regarded as such. This opened up a whole new horizon for us, and we realized that whatever we had done up until then, wasn't what his imminence had in mind. After he delivered these remarks, meetings were held and we conducted different studies. We came to the conclusion that a strategic force is a force that is capable of having a presence in the free seas, meaning that we leave the Persian Gulf.²¹

Public statements by Navy officials suggest that the IRIN endeavors to extend its reach within an area bounded by four strategic maritime chokepoints: the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca in South East Asia, the Bab al-Mandeb off of East Africa, and the Suez Canal.²² It is, perhaps, no accident that this area also encompasses a majority of the world's major sea lines of communication, including its principal energy trading routes.

In pursuit of its objective to play a more prominent role on the world stage, the IRIN has engaged in several out-of-area deployments, most notably to the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, where the IRIN has been conducting counter-piracy operations alongside the NATO, Russian, Chinese, and Indian navies. On at least one occasion, an Iranian submarine has accompanied these long-range patrols in order to "collect data."²³ The IRIN has also embarked on an extensive campaign of naval diplomacy. Since 2009, IRIN vessels have conducted several high profile port visits to Sri Lanka, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, and Syria. On the way to the Syrian port of Latakia, two of the IRIN's vessels — the frigate Alvand and the replenishment vessel Kharg — transited the Suez canal and entered the Mediterranean, the first vessels to do so since the 1979 Revolution.

While the significance of these deployments is largely symbolic, they nevertheless represent a technological achievement on the part of the IRIN, at least by regional standards. Moreover, by planting the Iranian flag in locations as far afield as the Mediterranean and the Southern Indian Ocean, the IRIN has signaled its aspirations to play a more dominant role on the regional stage.

21. Interview, Iranian Student News Network, 31 July 2011.

22. Recent claims by IRIN officials that they wish to expand their reach to encompass the Atlantic Ocean are generally regarded as bluster, and beyond the IRIN's capabilities, at least for the foreseeable future. See "Iranian Navy to Dispatch Squadron to Atlantic, UPI, 18 July 2011.

23. "Iran Sends Sub, Warship on Red Sea Patrol," Agence France Press, 30 August 2011.

The *Artesh*: Iran's Marginalized and Under-Armed Conventional Military

Hossein Aryan

Ravaged, intimidated, and gutted to the core in a series of purges after the 1979 Revolution, the remnant of the Shah's military, renamed the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran, known generally in Persian as the *Artesh*, put itself together as best as it could to face invading Iraqi forces at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war.

Eight years prior, during the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) in London, commenting on the relative strength of states in the Persian Gulf region, considered Iran "militarily much the strongest."¹ The IISS appraisal also pointed out that the Iranian Air Force was more than a match for the entire Arab forces in the Persian Gulf.

After masterminding a counter-offensive which led to the retaking of the port of Khorramshar in May 1982, a turning point in the Iran-Iraq (1980–1988) war, the clerical regime, mistrustful of the *Artesh*, assigned it to play second fiddle to the rising Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) for the rest of the eight-year war. By mid-1982, all areas lost to Iraq were recovered but the clerical regime decided to topple Saddam's regime by launching offensive operations, often with disastrous results, spearheaded by the IRGC.

MARGINALIZED, APOLITICAL

Since the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the assigned role of the *Artesh* has not changed much. Numerically three times the size of the IRGC, the *Artesh* continues to be on the periphery. In sharp contrast to the IRGC, the *Artesh* wields very little influence in the regime's political centers of power and therefore it is in a disadvantaged position in terms of securing resources and funding.

Besides being the Islamic regime's Praetorian Guard, the IRGC as a political-military organization runs a host of economic and business entities and exercises great influence through its former members in the three branches of power, including the Defense Ministry and Defense Industries Organization. Having its finger in every pie, the IRGC interferes in political, economic, social, military, and foreign affairs of the country. Meanwhile, the *Artesh* has been forced to remain apolitical and confine itself to its mission within the military doctrine of the Islamic Republic.

ISLAMIZATION AND LEADERSHIP SYNDROME

In line with Articles 143 and 144 of the Constitution, the *Artesh* must be committed to Islamic ideology and it is respon-

1. IISS, Strategic Survey 1971, p.40, p.45

sible for guarding the territorial integrity of the country as well as the order of the Islamic regime.

On the basis of these articles, all military personnel were subjected to the process of Islamization implemented by the Ideological and Political Organization (IPO) of the Artesh. The IPO, which continues its religious education and political supervision of the personnel in the Artesh, is managed by a representative of Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader. Clerics attached to the IPO, very much like political commissars of the Soviet era, are present at every unit of the Artesh.

Today, with the exception of the commander-in-chief of the Artesh, Major-General Ataollah Salehi, all other commanders are post-1979 trained officers who in military colleges received heavy doses of indoctrination in Islamic beliefs and allegiance to the principle of *velayat-e faqih* (the governance of the jurists, the basis for Iran's theocracy).

... with the exception of the commander-in-chief of the Artesh ... all other commanders are post-1979 trained officers who in military colleges received heavy doses of indoctrination in Islamic beliefs and allegiance to the principle of velayat-e faqih

Officer ranks of the Artesh, at least its senior commanders, like that of the Shah's era, suffer from what is known as the "leadership syndrome." They show or feel obliged to express undivided allegiance to Ayatollah Khamenei and the Islamic regime. His portrait, in various poses, as the Supreme Commander of the Iranian Armed Forces and as spiritual leader adorns military websites, journals, offices, and establishments. Senior commanders of the Artesh in most ceremonies praise his leadership qualities and evoke his sayings to give weight to their own speech or comments. In most cases, in order to ward off controversy, commanders utter no official words in the front of a camera without Ayatollah Khamenei's picture in the background.

COMMAND, STRUCTURE AND DOCTRINE

The Artesh has four services: the Ground Forces, the Navy, the Air Force, and the newly-established Air Defense Force. Though it has its own command and control and joint staff, the access of the Artesh to the Supreme Commander, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the IRGC is via his personal staff called the Armed Forces General Command Headquarters. Almost all senior officers in this HQ are from the IRGC and all proposals of the Artesh in terms of planning, resources, operations, and logistics have to go through these officers to the supreme commander.

The overall doctrine of the Armed Forces (the IRGC and the Artesh), which has been heavily influenced by the lessons of the Iran-Iraq war and the shifting perceptions of threats around Iran, is based on deterring a technologically superior adversary, like the United States.

MISSION, OVERALL CAPABILITIES

In the context of this doctrine, the Ground Forces of the Artesh, with some 350,000 men (220,000 conscripts), are to form the first line of defense against invading forces. In contrast, the IRGC's Army, with a strength of some 150,000 together with the omnipresent Basij Resistance Force is to establish the second line of defense and act as a stay-behind force in case of foreign aggression.

The IRGC's Army units have been divided into 32 parts, two for Tehran Province and one for every other province, to effectively maintain domestic security of the country in peace time — the main concern of the Islamic Republic. Although labor is divided between internal and external security, the Artesh tends to be sidelined while the overt activities of the IRGC's Army go beyond the country's border. The latest incursion of the IRGC into northern Iraq in the summer of 2011 in pursuit of PJAK (Free Life Party of Kurdistan) fighters is a case in point. In fact, the security of some volatile border provinces, like Khuzestan, Sistan va Baluchestan, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan, are entirely in the hands of the IRGC Army.

Contrary to Iran's claims of self-sufficiency in producing major weapons, the Ground Forces of the Artesh are, to a large extent, dependent on arms purchased by the Shah and on relatively low-grade weapons imported from China, North Korea, and Russia. The quality of its personnel and training is mediocre because of heavy reliance on conscripts. Nevertheless, the Ground Forces of the Artesh together with the IRGC's Army have significant capabilities for asymmetric warfare and irregular operations, though they are neither trained nor organized for power projection or operations outside Iran.

With the exception of some 65 Russian-made Su-24, Su-25, and MiG-29 ... the sustainability and operational capability of other aircraft are doubtful. It is estimated that between 40–60% of aircraft in the inventory of this force are non-operational.

The 18,000-man Navy of the Artesh is charged with the responsibility of forming the first line of defense in the Gulf of Oman and beyond. In spite of its efforts in maintaining and refitting its ships, this Navy suffers from obsolescence. With the exception of three Russian-made Kilo class submarines and one home-made destroyer, the rest of its ships, acquired by the Shah over 40 years ago, are old and their capability for sustained operations are limited. The same applies to the Navy's air arm in terms of maritime patrol aircraft and anti-submarine helicopters. Although the IRGC's Navy has steadily improved its capabilities to support unconventional warfare and defend Iran's offshore facilities, coastlines, and islands in the Persian Gulf, not much has been done to equip the Navy of the Artesh to carry out its mission as an effective "blue water" navy. In spite of claiming to be capable of operating in the northwest quarter of the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and even in the Atlantic Ocean, there is a huge gap between the assigned mission of the Navy and its capabilities.

The Air Force of the Artesh, with 37,000 personnel charged with the responsibility of defending Iranian airspace, relies

largely on aging US-supplied aircraft purchased by the Shah. With the exception of some 65 Russian-made Su-24, Su-25, and MiG-29, for bombing, close air support, and deterring aggression, the sustainability and operational capability of other aircraft are doubtful. It is estimated that between 40–60% of aircraft in the inventory of this force are non-operational. It is doubtful whether the current rate of modernization to offset the aging aircraft can remedy some of its major operational shortcomings. In addition, this force has many qualitative weaknesses, including the lack of advanced training facilities and questions about the effectiveness of its new generation of pilots.

The Air Defense Force was established in February 2008 to give a sharper focus on Iran's deterrent doctrine. With 15,000 personnel, the force operates air force radars, anti-aircraft guns, and a variety of Russian, Chinese, British, and US surface-to-air missile systems acquired before and after the 1979 Revolution. Iran has also deployed its own domestically-manufactured missile systems. It also managed to purchase from Russia several batteries of the low-altitude Tor-M1 missile system, though Moscow, in spite of a previous agreement with Tehran, has refused to equip Iran with the advanced long-range S-300 missile system.

With its inadequate number of defense systems and in view of the size of Iran, the Air Defense Force can only provide limited air defense for key installations.

There is no clear indication how Iran deploys its air defenses and which of these systems are operated by the IRGC. However, the IRGC seems to be in possession of Iran's medium-range ballistic missiles, including Sejil 2, which makes up the strategic arm of Iran's air power and its primary deterrent. It also appears to be responsible for the air defense of nuclear sites in the country.

With its inadequate number of defense systems and in view of the size of Iran, the Air Defense Force can only provide limited air defense for key installations. Currently it cannot provide long-range medium-to-high altitude coverage of these installations, though a number of IRGC commanders claimed that Iran is in the process of making its own S-300 system. The IRGC also claims to operate a home-made long-range radar that monitors low-altitude satellites.

Accordingly, there are strong indications that Iran lacks an integrated air defense system and an overall radar network. It is also susceptible to electronic countermeasures. To remedy some of its shortcomings, on September 1, 2011 the Air Defense Force chief, Brigadier-General Farzad Esmaili, said that Iran had tested a home-made radar with a range of several thousand kilometers and made noticeable advances in electronic warfare.²

BOTTOM LINE

Iran's doctrine and strategy are primarily defensive. It does not seek military confrontation. Currently, the clerical re-

2. "Commander: Iran to Deploy Home-Made Destroyer in Red Sea," FARS News, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007161223>.

gime is using its unconventional capabilities and proxies to advance its interests in the region.

In the process of developing the doctrine, Iran's Armed Forces have been polarized under the leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei. With the ever-rising power of the IRGC, the Artesh has been sidelined and Iran retains divided armed forces by a command structure that restricts the flow of information through a rigid line of control. The clerical regime has not been able to modernize the Artesh. With the exception of some land-based naval weapons, the regime has not been able to import large arms consignments and instead has made efforts to produce or assemble weapons at home. It also popularized the idea of moving towards self-sufficiency in arms production. However, none of these arms have modernized the Artesh and there is a huge gap between its overall mission and its fighting capabilities. Not being able to modernize the Air Force of the Artesh, the clerical regime has chosen an affordable and short-cut approach to develop a deterrent capability by investing and focusing on its missile industry through assembly, modification, and reverse engineering of imported North Korean and Chinese weapons. In other words, replacing weak conventional forces with asymmetric forces. That said, and at least in comparison to its immediate Arab neighbors, the Artesh remains a major conventional power in the Persian Gulf region.

A United States Marine's View of the *Artesh* and IRGC

Sharif Sokkary

United States military forces use standard procedures for planning operations against other militaries. These procedures differentiate between different branches, or units, of an opposing force depending on their capabilities and limitations. This article presents one such analysis of the Iranian Military, where there are vast differences between the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the *Artesh*, or the regular Iranian armed forces. The article then draws parallels to the planning for Operation Iraqi Freedom that led to the defeat of the Iraqi Republican Guard and regular Iraqi forces.

MILITARY PLANNING

In order to be efficient and focus the efforts of the military forces, military strategists determine enemy centers of gravity. "Joint Operational Planning," the primary source for planning operations in the military, defines center of gravity as "a source of moral or physical strength, power, and resistance." Once these sources of power have been identified, planners establish ways to defeat them, aiding US forces in accomplishing the objectives of the conflict. When properly done, it allows the limited resources of the military to be targeted against the most vital interests of the enemy and, by denying these interests, bring about an expeditious resolution to the conflict.

IRGC VS. ARTESH

As with any opposing force, a consideration of Iranian centers of gravity must be done relative to the objectives of the conflict. If the objective is regime change, critical considerations are the military's capabilities to defend the regime and "moral forces" that support the regime and provide legitimacy.

With regime change as the objective, military planners would consider the IRGC a center of gravity. Their land, sea, air, and missile forces; asymmetric warfare capabilities; and burgeoning economic stature make them a source of physical strength for the regime.¹ The IRGC's role since the 1979 Revolution in propping up the Iranian government and enforcing the strict "Islamist" aspects of its rule make them a source of moral strength. The defeat of the IRGC would serve the objective of regime change by denying the regime's key military strength and lessening its ability to enforce their form of governance.

While the *Artesh* may not be considered a center of gravity, they would still be deliberately targeted based on their deployment around key strategic areas and certain capabilities. If *Artesh* units were deployed as part of the defenses of

1. Ali Reza, "The Revolutionary Guards," *Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, December 2010, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/revolutionary-guards>.

Tehran, a strategic target for regime change, those units would be targeted. The Strategic Air Defense Forces (a separate command within the Artesh) would also be high on the priority list in order to allow air power to operate more freely and prosecute targets as required.

This last capability leads to the next step in scheming against an enemy force: how to defeat an enemy's center of gravity. If possible, US forces attempt to avoid engaging directly against an enemy strength (the old adage of "around their strengths and through their weaknesses"). Thus, military planners look for these weaknesses in order to exploit them — critical vulnerabilities.

A glaring vulnerability of Iranian forces is their susceptibility to air attack. Defending against air power in Iran is a monumental task: the geography of Iran and the outdated technology employed by Iranian forces make air defense very challenging.² This task is further complicated for the IRGC by the structure of the Iranian military, which gives the Artesh command of Strategic Air Defense. While the IRGC does maintain some of its own air defense capabilities, issues could develop if they need further support from Strategic Air Defense. In situations such as this, where forces from one branch support those of another, complications can arise. From critical aspects of coordination, like agreement on tactics and deployment of forces, to mundane matters like keeping the morale of soldiers high by ensuring that they are properly housed and fed by another command, a unit's effectiveness can be degraded when supporting another command.

While the Artesh may not be considered a center of gravity, they would still be deliberately targeted based on their deployment around key strategic areas and certain capabilities.

In a situation where one branch's forces are working for another, command relationships must be established and followed. The best case scenario is that, while rank and status are accounted for, subject matter experts are allowed to employ their assets in a way that maximizes their effectiveness. All too often this is not done, and higher ranking officials are allowed to overrule those who know best, reducing the effectiveness of forces in accomplishing their missions. The command relationship for a situation like this, with the IRGC dependent on the Artesh, is ripe for conflict. With the IRGC having a higher standing within the military of Iran, their leaders might override supporting commanders from the Artesh's Strategic Air Defense on how they want air defense assets employed. This would not only reduce the effectiveness of the Strategic Air Defense but further diminish the support relationship by creating tension and frustration on the part of the air defense commanders.

The Artesh represents a critical vulnerability to the upholding of the regime in two other major ways. First is their attachment to the people of Iran, not the regime. If their reaction to the 2009 election crisis is any indication, there are a great many people in Iran who disagree with the current system of government. Since the Artesh is mainly a conscript

2. Michael Connell, "Iran's Military Doctrine," *Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, December 2010, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/revolutionary-guards>.

force composed of the sons of many of these same protestors, they may be hesitant to defend a regime that they know is not supported by their families. While the IRGC does receive some of the same conscripts, its senior officers are far more linked to the regime than those of the Artesh, ensuring that they would act in its defense.³

A further conflict is the battle over morale in the Artesh. Constantly receiving less funding and attention than the IRGC must surely have a negative impact on Artesh morale. While it is unrealistic to expect the Artesh to rise up against the government of Iran and the IRGC, especially in the face of an attack by outside armies, any sizable diminishment in the Artesh, which comprise two-thirds of the manpower and critical capabilities (like air defense) of the Iranian armed forces, would be a difficult blow to Iranian officials.

LESSONS FROM OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

While military tacticians will insist that no two conflicts are the same, the planning for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) does present some parallels in preparing for a military composed of two very different branches in terms of capabilities, similar to the IRGC and the Artesh. Military planners identified the Iraqi Republican Guard (IRG) as a center of gravity (some generalize this to “special” ground forces which include Husayn’s militia, the *Fedayeen*, but I will limit the scope by focusing on the IRG).

Their mandate to destroy political opposition and prop up Saddam Husayn’s regime made them critical to the objective of regime change. Their sources of strength lay in their better training and equipment relative to the regular Iraqi forces.⁴ The US military clearly designated the IRG as a center of gravity as evidenced by the deliberate targeting and focus of firepower on them. Close to 80% of coalition airstrikes were directed at ground forces, of which the Republican Guard was heavily targeted, and strikes were planned to prevent additional IRG units from deploying to protect Baghdad.⁵ The result was the destruction of the IRG before it could consolidate on Baghdad and provide an effective defense. The loss of the IRG helped coalition forces take Baghdad, considered a key requirement for regime change.

An excellent example of the deliberate targeting of units like those of the Artesh, due to their deployment in a strategic area, is the United States Marine Corps’ attack against Iraq’s 51st Mechanized and 18th Infantry Divisions in the first major ground engagement of Operation Iraqi Freedom. With maintenance of Iraqi infrastructure as an objective of Coalition op-

Consideration of the Artesh is critical for military thinkers as they develop a strategy against Iran.

3. “Military Culture and Society in Iran,” Marine Corps Intelligence Activity, [http://projects.publicintegrity.org/iranintelligence/Iran%20\(D\)/html/iran/MilitaryCulture/Cultural%20Influences%20on%20Military%20Effectiveness.html](http://projects.publicintegrity.org/iranintelligence/Iran%20(D)/html/iran/MilitaryCulture/Cultural%20Influences%20on%20Military%20Effectiveness.html).

4. John R. Leskovich, “An Operational Center of Gravity Analysis from Operation Iraqi Freedom,” Naval War College Thesis, February 13, 2006, pp. 14–15.

5. Anthony Cordesman, *The Iraq War: Strategy, Tactics, and Military Lessons* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), pp. 27, 63

erations, the South Rumaylah oilfields were identified as a key piece of terrain. The Marines were ordered to defeat the enemy in the vicinity of the oilfields and to seize, intact, the oil infrastructure.⁶ With this as their objective, the Marines planned to defeat the forces protecting the oilfields, the 51st and 18th Iraqi divisions. These units were not a larger threat than any other regular army units, and were considered to be composed of the same ill-trained and ill-equipped forces. If they had not been designated to defend the oilfields they almost certainly would have been bypassed by coalition forces, like many other regular Iraqi units, in the race to Baghdad.

Iraq provides other lessons for dealing with units considered less capable like the Artesh. The selective targeting of regular Iraqi units in the race to Baghdad was successful in that Baghdad fell quickly. But bypassing many of the “lesser” Iraqi units in the rush to Baghdad left many follow-on coalition support units susceptible to attack, the most notorious case being the 507th Maintenance Company’s ambush by Iraqi forces, which killed nine American service members.⁷ The first Persian Gulf War also offers a useful lesson: the requirement of planning for mass prisoners from poorly trained units. The Iraqi army surrendered in droves, and quickly exceeded coalition capacities to handle them.

Consideration of the Artesh is critical for military thinkers as they develop a strategy against Iran. Should the Artesh be directly engaged due to their poorer equipment and training? Which Artesh capabilities will need to be targeted and which units need to be defeated in order to achieve the objectives of the conflict? Once these questions are answered, military planners would need to develop a plan to defeat all Iranian centers of gravity, including units and capabilities of the Artesh, in order to bring about the swiftest possible defeat of Iranian forces and accomplishment of US objectives in a potential conflict.

6. Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion of Iraq* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), p. 209.

7. John Kapfner, “The truth about Jessica,” *Guardian News* (May 15, 2003), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/may/15/iraq.usa2>.

Ayatollah Khamenei's Advances Toward the *Artesh*

Alex Vatanka

To truly appreciate the political standing of Iran's regular armed forces in today's Islamic Republic, the key is to take into account the impact of the ongoing and unparalleled internal feud in the top ranks of the regime. The feud, pitching the factions of Supreme Leader Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei and President Mahmud Ahmadinejad against one another in a bitter contest for power, has turned the *Artesh* into an inescapable entity that neither faction can afford to ignore. Given, however, that Ayatollah Khamenei is the ultimate Commander-in-Chief in Iran's constitutional setup, he appears to be succeeding in his attempts to shape the *Artesh* with the aim of further consolidating his grip on power in Iran.

As Khamenei has set out to appeal to *Artesh* commanders, as well as the rank-and-file, two developments are evident. First, the *Artesh* is increasingly idealized by the state-controlled media. This is a noticeable trend because the Islamist regime has largely sought to ignore or sideline the regular armed forces in the course of the 32-year history of the Islamic Republic. Instead, the *Artesh* is now periodically put in the front position when the regime in Tehran seeks to brandish its self-declared military capabilities. In contrast, up until recently the *Artesh* was rarely if ever given the chance to outshine the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), its politically-favored military counterweight.

Second, there are now a growing number of joint *Artesh*-IRGC military exercises and operations. This development in particular suggests that Khamenei's efforts to bring the *Artesh* under his tutelage might go beyond merely rhetoric and public relations campaigns at the hands of state-run media.

IN THE LIMELIGHT

When it comes to the Iranian armed forces, the Western media's focus has traditionally been centered on war games and the testing of ballistic missiles carried out by the IRGC, which occurs at least once a year to much fanfare inside Iran. The last few occasions, however, when the Iranian military has made headlines in the West involved not the IRGC but rather the naval branch of the *Artesh*.

The latest development came in early October, when authorities in Tehran announced that *Artesh* naval forces had begun patrolling the international waters off the coasts of Somalia and Yemen. The mission was hailed as one of the Islamic Republic's boldest military steps and one that military and political officials assessed would catapult Iran into the ranks of leading military powers. On October 9, 2011, Rear Admiral Habibullah Sayyari, the commander of the *Artesh* Navy, declared the force under his command as a regime vanguard and said that "Iran's naval forces

are considered strategic.” Sayyari further stated that the Artesh Navy’s presence in “international waters will act to defend the policies of the Islamic Republic.”¹ This sort of rhetoric and political boastfulness by a senior Artesh commander is uncommon and unquestionably reflects a new phase in the regime’s approach toward the regular forces.

The Artesh senior commanders, for too long demanding attention and respect from a theocratic ruling class that has viewed the regular forces as largely uncommitted to the regime, likely welcome such new high-profile military missions. The drawback, however, is the reputational costs for the Artesh that has hitherto benefitted from having an image in the country as a non-politicized force.

The new bravado of the Artesh, echoing the sort of bluster usually associated with the IRGC, has recently included an announcement by Sayyari in late September 2011 that the Artesh Navy plans to “establish a powerful presence near the marine borders of the United States” and that Iranian naval forces would be deployed close to the US coast in the Atlantic Ocean.²

Such far-fetched goals, which scarcely reflects the actual capabilities of the Artesh Navy, does not fit the Artesh’s traditional defense posture — it does, however, fit nicely into the propaganda of the regime in Tehran. Accordingly, the important distinction is that, whereas the military-related propaganda of the Iranian regime has hitherto been centered on the IRGC, Ayatollah Khamenei has evidently opted to involve the Artesh in such indoctrination efforts that are ostensibly also seen to act as deterrence against the West by presenting a united front between Iran’s militaries.

The Artesh senior commanders ... likely welcome such new high-profile military missions. The drawback, however, is the reputational costs for the Artesh that has hitherto benefitted from having an image in the country as a non-politicized force.

Furthermore, there is little doubt that Khamenei enjoys associating himself with Iran’s military progress and takes credit as the visionary behind policies of self-sufficiency or “*khodkafaei*.” When Iran launched *Jamaran*, its first domestically-made destroyer, in February 2010, Ayatollah Khamenei was present at the high-profile launch at the port of Bandar Abbas and repeatedly stressed that it was he who advocated for military production in Iran when the prevailing opinion did not believe Iranian scientists were up to the job. In a predictable stroke, Khamenei cast himself as the visionary leader, if not the savior, of the Iranian people, while handing over one of Iran’s biggest military production achievements to the Artesh.

There have been a number of other recent cases where the Artesh has been exalted to the point where its lesser status

1. “Iran Reiterates Wider Deployment in High Seas,” Fars News, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007160282>.

2. “*Hozour-e Nezami-e Iran dar Abhay-e Saheliy-e Amrika*” [“Iran’s Military Presence in the Coastal Waters of America”], Jamejam Online, <http://www.jamejamonline.ir/newstext.aspx?newsnum=100858850359&nnc=1>.

to that of the IRGC might not be immediately apparent. For example, on September 28, 2011, Iran's Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi, himself a senior IRGC commander, made an important symbolic gesture when he announced the simultaneous delivery of new anti-ship cruise missiles to Artesh and IRGC navies.³

In another recent example, it was an Artesh commander who took the lead in promising new measures to defend the country against external threats. In April 2011, commander of the Artesh's Ground Forces, Brigadier General Ahmad-Reza Pourdastan, announced that his forces will undergo structural changes and that given that Iran faced a "new phase of threats" it had been decided to construct "new bases and garrisons in many border areas of the country."⁴ Again, the fact that an Artesh commander was left to lead on such an important political-security issue on the national stage was telling.

Whether the rising star of the Artesh can last will depend almost entirely on the perceptions of Khamenei and his cohorts ... about internal and external threats.

Recent signs that the Artesh might be handed a bigger and more important role in military affairs were also corroborated with the announcement that ground forces from the Artesh and the IRGC had staged jointed operations in northwest Iran in July against PJAK, a militant anti-regime Kurdish group. Although there is hardly any literature in open sources about joint Artesh-IRGC operations after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, their cooperation is assumed during anti-insurgency operations in the restive Baluchistan province and similar cases.

Of some note, however, is the timing of the announcement of joint operations — occurring in the midst of the campaign against PJAK. The politically-influential IRGC has in the past customarily taken the limelight in the realm of military operations, pushing the Artesh to a secondary role. All of a sudden, the Artesh has been placed on an equal footing with the IRGC and involving an important anti-insurgency campaign that IRGC commanders are otherwise known to claim as their exclusive domain.

SUSTAINING THE MOMENTUM

The role of the Artesh and the force's ongoing transformation is a massively under-covered topic inside Iran. There are hardly any major studies conducted about the force in either the Persian or English languages. Furthermore, there is very little raw data on the present regular armed forces. What is left for the analyst is the monitoring of developments and the hope of uncovering a noticeable trend when it comes to the status of the Artesh in the Islamic Republic.

3. "Iran Equips Army, IRGC Naval Forces with New Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles," Fars News, September, 28, 2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007040361>.

4. "Commander: Army to Reinvoarte Military Buildup along Iranian Borders," Fars News, April 12, 2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9001231869>.

That and the ability to deduct from the past record and experiences of the Artesh point to the strong likelihood that Ayatollah Khamenei has set about to much more seriously integrate the regular forces into the body of the Islamic Republic. Two clear reasons can be highlighted for such a decision by Khamenei. First, at a time when Iran is continuing to face the distinct possibility of a military conflict with the US and her allies, it can only be expected that the top leader in Tehran would want to consolidate the ranks of the different military branches of the country.

Second, and probably more importantly, it is a decision driven by a fear of insubordination by the Artesh rank-and-file when Khamenei needs them most — for example, in times of internal political turmoil. This was clearly shown to be a factor feared by the regime when reports came out of extensive sympathies for the Green opposition movement in the aftermath of the disputed 2009 presidential elections and the popular protests that followed.

Whether the rising star of the Artesh can last will depend almost entirely on the perceptions of Khamenei and his cohorts, which at the moment includes the top leadership of the IRGC, about internal and external threats. After all, it was the change in such perceptions that has allowed the Artesh a greater public and operational role.



Middle East Institute