
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Iran's National Security and Operational Capability

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The Islamic Republic of Iran has faced many domestic and foreign policy challenges since its advent four decades ago. It has managed not only to survive these challenges so far, but also to expand its regional influence. It has sought to ensure its national security by building its hard and soft power within an asymmetrical warfare strategy, designed so that its response to an external attack makes that assault very costly for its perpetrator. This article seeks to elucidate and analyse the Islamic Republic's capability in this respect.

Keywords: Iran; US; military; doctrine; the Middle East; IRCG

Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States are potentially on a collision course. Since President Donald Trump's withdrawal of the United States from the landmark, 'Iran nuclear agreement', – officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – in May 2018 and his pursuit of a policy of maximum pressure against Iran and Tehran's defiance, hostilities between the two protagonists have heightened. Both sides have publicly said that they want to avoid a war, but they have been building up their defence and non-defence capabilities for such an eventuality. Clearly, Iran is in no position to match America's formidable sanctionary and military power, but has been working on an strategy whereby Iran is able to make an attack on it very costly for its perpetrator. It has nurtured a strategy of asymmetrical warfare with a reliance on hard and soft power, involving a network of regional state and non-state actors to defend itself in the event of a confrontation. An investigation into the nature of this strategy and Iran's capability to make it a reality underpins the rationale for this article. Yet, to address the issue, it is necessary to place our discussion in the context of the Islamic Republic's wider national security concerns and threat perception and what it has sought to achieve to pursue a policy of maximum resistance. The article explicitly seeks to explain whether Iran's military strategy is offensive or defensive in order to assess the threat from Iran. This is done by chronologically addressing four main objectives tracking the development in Iran from the revolution in 1979 to the present day.

The first objective is to outline Iran's security transition from a US-allied state under the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1953–1979) to an Islamic Republic, with a 'pro-Islamic' or independent foreign policy and national security posture, under the Shah's chief religious and political opponent, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979–1989). The second objective is to discuss Iran's military strategy as it has evolved in pursuit of what it has considered to be its national and regional security requirements. The third objective is to make an assessment of the Islamic Republic's hard and soft power capabilities. The fourth is to examine Iran's power capability in relation to the challenges that it faces from regional adversaries and the United States under President Trump, who has lambasted the Islamic Republic as the menace in the region and beyond.

Iran's Transition from US Ally to Regional Adversary

Prior to the 1978/1979 revolution, the autocratic monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah, who had assumed the throne of Persia in the wake of the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran in 1941, was a close ally of the US. Its foreign policy position was largely driven by a strong alignment of interests which began when the American CIA, backed by British MI6, sponsored a military *coup d'etat* in August 1953 against the then

elected and reformist prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh and brought the Shah back to power (after having been forced into a brief period of exile in Switzerland), to rule Iran at the behest of the United States.

Iran's foreign policy orientation shifted from a post-WWII neutrality towards becoming one of the 'three pillars' of support (the other two being Israel and Saudi Arabia) that the US sought to promote for its geopolitical dominance in the strategically and economically vital but volatile Middle East. One of the US's key objectives was to prevent the Soviet Union from gaining influence in the region, with access to the oil-rich Persian Gulf and its Strait of Hormuz, through which much of the world's oil exports were, and still are, shipped. Iran developed close economic and military links with the US, enabling Tehran to have privileged access to US military technology and financial support. Indeed, Iran became the largest recipient of American aid outside of NATO, a trend which underpinned the Shah's regime's growing dependence on and vulnerability to the US,¹ within a patron-client relationship. The relationship saw some balancing by the early 1970s when the Shah wrested control over the Iranian oil industry and pricing from the Western international oil companies in the context of the collective bargaining power of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and embarked on a speedy program of military, economic and social modernisation. However, his modernisation drive still ensured his alliance with the US, as it was not indigenous-based but rather pro-Western in its disposition.

The Shah's modernisation program was poorly conceived and implemented. It failed to deliver on the promised benefits which might have helped legitimise his rule by gaining support from a newly created middle class. He harboured ambitions to use his relationship with the US along with Iran's abundant national resources to transform the country into a regional superpower and the world's fifth largest economic and military power by the mid-1980s in the pursuit of what he called *Tamadun-e Buzurg* (Great Civilization or as the Shah put it 'a welfare state'). To realise his vision and ambitions, he could rely on only two important variables: one was the significant increase in Iran's oil revenues which rose, in the wake of the 1973 Arab oil embargo (as shortlived as it was) against Israel and its international supporters, from US \$1.2 billion in 1970 to US \$18.5 billion in 1974 and US \$20 billion in 1975 (Abrahamian, 1982: p. 427). Another was the full willingness of President Richard Nixon, whose administration was keen to recycle Iran's newly gained wealth back into the American economy, to sell the Shah whatever he required short of nuclear weapons. Washington's main objective was to empower the Shah's regime to act as the regional policeman to safeguard not only Iran's interests but also those of the United States under the 'Nixon Doctrine' (Keddie & Richard 1981: p. 163).

Meanwhile, the sheer size, scale and speed of the Shah's modernisation reforms exceeded the country's capacity to absorb change, creating bottlenecks, congestion and in some cases, stagnation of living conditions. They failed to account for and address local needs and the country's infrastructure, labour force and logistical capabilities, resulting in situations where imported food rotted because there was not enough port space to store these shipments, and where foreign workers had to be imported because the education system could not handle the high numbers of students (Guerrero 2016: 20). Most ordinary Iranians did not experience the tangible benefits of these reforms, where unemployment sits at 30 percent, and poor sanitary and living conditions were prevalent, particularly in rural areas (Maloney, 2015: p. 61). The Shah's policies alienated various segments of Iranian society, most importantly the Shia clerical stratum, which viewed his Westernised secularist reforms as threatening to their traditional base of power and influence, and consequently could reverse the *ulema's* (learned scholars) historical role in balancing the Shah's temporal authority. Some of their prominent figures, most importantly Ayatollah Khomeini, found his policy actions – such as the promotion of Western cultural elements and a disregard for traditional and Shia Islamic principles – to be evidence that the Shah was a puppet of the US (Leffler & Westad 2011: 114–121).

The Shah's economic policies did not help the situation either. They involved measures that undermined the profitability of the *bazaaris*, a merchant middle class with strong ties to the religious establishment (forming a nexus which promoted traditional Islamic cultural ideas). The *bazaaris* viewed the Shah's drive as an effort to encourage an economic shift towards a competing "oil bourgeoisie" that would challenge their influence.

There were also political and professional opponents of the Shah's regime who wanted a reformation or a change of the monarchy. They included elements from academia, legal outfits, the public service and leftist/radical ideological groups, such as the Mujahadeen-e Khalq (the people's strugglers) and Fedayieen-e Khalq (people's sacrificers). Although they came from different backgrounds, they were united in a common

¹ For a detailed discussion, see Saikal, A. (2016). *Iran at the crossroads*. Cambridge; Malden: Polity Press. Retrieved from https://www.worldcat.org/title/iran-at-the-crossroads/oclc/934639207&referer=brief_results.

anti-Shah cause for a better system of governance and standard of living. In fact, by the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the leftist groups had already started a series of underground operations, involving the assassinations of some Iranian and American advisors of the Shah.

Adding to the monarch's woes was his 1953 reassumption of the throne at the CIA's behest. It robbed him of even the traditional political legitimacy that his predecessors had enjoyed, and was widely resented inside Iran, not to mention the regional apprehension from the Soviet Union and Arab nationalist forces under the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist policies of Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser (1954–1970). Mosaddeq (who died under house arrest in 1967) and his supporters could never overlook the subversive, undemocratic means by which the Shah had gained power. In his trial, Mossadeq had declared that "Numerous sins have been attributed to me, but I know that I have committed no more than one, and that is that I have not yielded to the whims of foreigners" (Elm 1994: 334). Thus, from the very start, the Shah's regime suffered from its unshakeable link with the US, and the widely held perception that he and his government worked for foreign interests.

These factors interacted to generate a revolutionary situation by late 1970s. A demonstration by the Iranian students in the United States during the Shah's visit to Washington in 1977 was followed up by a cohort of their counterparts in Tehran University and snowballed into mass protests against the Shah's rule within months. As the best organised cluster, the clerical establishment did not enter the fray immediately. They initially maintained a low profile, working from behind the scenes in stimulating and encouraging the protestors. However, by mid-1978, when the uprisings had evolved as a full blown rainbow revolutionary movement, they found it conducive to step into the front line and assume leadership of the movement under the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini but at the same time enigmatic critic of the Shah and his main backer the United States.

The Revolution commenced with the aim of a pro-democratic transformation of Iran, but resulted in the overthrow of the Shah's autocracy in favour of a theocracy under Ayatollah Khomeini, who fundamentally changed Iran's domestic and foreign policy settings. Khomeini denounced the Shah's policies and abolished the 2500-year-old Iranian monarchy. He established a Shia-based theo-political system of governance (*velayat-e faqih* or the rule of Supreme Jurisprudent) and declared Iran an Islamic Republic.

Khomeini adopted a foreign policy of 'neither East nor West', but pro-Islamic, and challenged the prevailing regional order. This discourse encompassed several features which antagonised most of the nascent republic's neighbours. Khomeini's call for the spread or 'export' of the Iranian revolution to predominantly neighbouring Sunni states was viewed as a serious threat to the regimes within these states. In particular, he called on Shias in Iraq to resist Saddam Hussein's rule, while also calling generally for the liberation of all oppressed peoples. This rhetoric, combined with the size and power of Iran, prompted fears of further popular revolutions and led incumbent regimes to adopt measures to counter this perceived threat. In Bahrain and Kuwait, for example, the government cracked down on Shia opposition groups, while in Saudi Arabia's Hasa province, the government increased surveillance on the Shia minority while bolstering funding to improve living standards (Marschall 2003: 44). Meanwhile, in response to Khomeini's call for the export of the Iranian revolution, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, triggering an eight year-long war that was the most deadly and costly conflict in the history of the region. These developments paralleled Khomeini's rejection in the 1980s of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and its Soviet-backed government and Kabul's view of the Iranian Islamic regime as a threatening force.

Khomeini's condemnation of the US as the 'Great Satan' and Israel as an imperialist, colonising force in occupying Palestine placed Iran on a collision course with these actors. His position in this regard was popular, stemming from memories of Washington's continual interference in Iran's internal affairs from as far back as 1953. Khomeini fundamentally resented the Pax-Americana regional order, and objected to the fact that the US had granted asylum to the Shah. The anti-American sentiment that he whipped up was reflected in the 'hostage crisis', which has continuously proved to be a factor in defining Iranian-American animosity to this day. On 4 November 1979, a militant student group of Khomeini's supporters stormed the US embassy and took 52 American personnel hostage (Rizvi 1979). The crisis continued for 444 days and led Washington to sever diplomatic ties with the country, served as a major source of tension and contributed to the mutually antagonistic perceptions that both sides nurtured of one another. For Iran, the US endured to be a subversive and illegitimate hegemonic power, while for Washington, Khomeini was a radical, anti-modern, religious fanatic and therefore an 'Islamic fundamentalist' beyond rational reasoning and a rejectable anomaly in the international system (Murray 2010: p. 41).

Khomeini died on 3 June 1989 but left behind enduring domestic and foreign policy foundations. There have been some changes in the post-Khomeini era under his successor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, most

notably a rapprochement with the West (Saikal 2019). Under the moderate-reformist Iranian presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013 to the present), who promised to improve Iran's dire economic situation and to end the international sanctions as a precondition for achieving his economic reforms, Iran initially experienced improved relations with the West, and even a shortlived thaw in US-Iranian relations during the amiable US presidency of Democrat Barack Obama (2009–2017). The thaw saw the signing of the 14 July 2015 multi-lateral JCPOA or 'nuclear agreement' between Iran, and the US and four other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, plus Germany (5 + 1). Under the agreement, Iran agreed to downgrade its nuclear program only for civilian purposes in return for the lifting of UN and US-driven Western sanctions. However, with the President Trump's rejection of the agreement in 2018 and withdrawal from what he has called the 'worst deal ever', a reimposition of American sanctions was enforced, and US-Iranian relations (or their lack of) have returned to one of intense hostility. Iran's adversarial relationship with the US has been a major factor in influencing Tehran's foreign policy interactions with both its regional neighbours, as well as the broader international community. With the looming prospect of US-Iranian – or, for that matter, Israeli-Iranian – conflict, backed by Saudi Arabia and some of its Gulf Arab allies, it is appropriate to examine Iran's military doctrine and its foreign policy as a defensive strategy.

Iran's Military Strategy

Iran's military strategy or plan of action is primarily defensive, with a focus on ensuring regime survival and national territorial integrity, and on forging a regional security structure in support of these objectives. The two dominant strategic concerns have been the US and Israel, while more recently competition with its Arab neighbours – notably Saudi Arabia – over influence in the region has emerged as a distinct third priority. The deeply ingrained aversion towards US involvement in the region stems from a pervasive perception amongst the Iranian security establishment that Washington is committed to undermining the Islamic Republic, for which Tehran has ample historical precedents.

Indeed, Iran's threat perception is heavily shaped by its geographical position. Its neighbours include several unstable and traditionally hostile states with differing ethnic and sectarian characteristics: to the east, Iran borders not only Pakistan, which has had an ambivalent relationship with Tehran and a close strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia, but also Afghanistan, which is a continual source of instability and security risks, whether it be from the Taliban's open hostility (epitomised in the 1998 killing of Iranian diplomats in Mazar e-Sharif) or the ongoing challenges posed by Afghan refugees and drug trafficking. Meanwhile, to the west, Iran borders Turkey – a NATO member with increasingly amiable to good neighbourly relations with Iran under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan – and Iraq, with which Iran fought a long war during Saddam Hussein's rule, but where Iran has gained much influence and faced challenges from continued instability during the rise of the anti-Shia and anti-Iran Sunni extremist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) following the 2003 US-led invasion of the country. To the south and across the Gulf lies Saudi Arabia, which, along with its Gulf Cooperation Council partners, has had a de facto alliance with the US and has emerged as Iran's main rival for regional supremacy, not to mention Israel further afield as Iran's main enemy in the region (Czulda 1992: 93).

To this end, Iran's military strategy has two core elements – deterrence and denial. Tehran has continually stressed that its security posture is overwhelmingly defensive and that it will not engage in aggressive military action, unless there is a need for some limited offensive engagement for defensive purposes in favourable situations. However, if Iran is attacked, it is capable and willing to inflict heavy losses, despite damage to itself. There are many examples of this discourse. In December 2014, for example, President Rouhani stated:

[Iran's] military doctrine is based on defense and we don't design any weapon for aggression; we don't carry out any research on how to occupy the regional states. All our researches are based on this defense principle that how we can defend ourselves or how we can stop the enemy (Easkarieh 2014).

Similarly, Ayatollah Khamenei has also declared that "[Iran] neither welcome, nor begin war, but in case of war, the U.S. will leave disgraced" (Czulda 1992: 94). He more recently claimed success against the US challenges by stating that "America has been defeated by the Islamic Republic over the past 40 years" (Khamenei Says U.S. 'Defeated' in 40 Years of Challenge With Iran 2018).

The objective of this rhetoric is to minimise Iran's threat perception by diminishing its likelihood of being an aggressor, and to discourage potential aggressors by emphasising that the costs will be more than the reward. This logic leads Shahram Chubin to note that "[Iran's] threats are often bellicose and apocalyptic,

but they are defensive, issued as counter-threats that indicate how it would respond to an attack" (Chubin 2014: 79).

In addition to this rhetoric, Tehran has adopted a strong focus on asymmetrical warfare through nurtured unconventional fighting strategies and tactics, given Iran's limited conventional military capacity compared to America's phenomenal military power or, for that matter, the offensive capability of some of Iran's regional adversaries – Israel in particular. Tehran has heavily invested in asymmetrical warfare means and methods by leveraging Iran's strengths – its geographic positioning, large and committed population, and regional influence, and proxy and specially trained militia forces – to maximise its ability to inflict costs and losses, and therefore to deter any military action from its foes. As Tira and Guzansky (2016) observe: "The Iranian army is exceptional among the world's armed forces: a regular army characterized by an asymmetric quasi-guerilla [sic] buildup." It has done so for three reasons.

First, recent conflicts and the history of American military engagements since the 1991 Gulf War have strongly shaped Iran's perception of the value of conventional military strength. The 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars demonstrated that it was futile to try to defeat the US or, for that matter, Israel in any conventional battle.

Second, severe rounds of sanctions and arms embargos since the rise of the Islamic regime have starved Tehran of the technology and materials required to develop and maintain a 'state of the art' military. Most of Iran's arsenals – including tanks, fighter aircraft, and naval vessels largely inherited from the Shah's era – are now obsolete and would struggle to be effective in the field, particularly against the more modernised technologically superior forces of some of Iran's Arab neighbours, not to mention Turkey and Israel. Thus, even if there was a desire to develop and modernise its conventional military capabilities, Tehran is limited by issues of supply and access to the necessary materials and expertise – a reality which further strengthens the prioritisation of asymmetrical capabilities precisely, because they typically do not require specialised parts that have to be imported, which can be developed using indigenous resources and know-how.

Third, the problems that US forces faced in trying to counter localised insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated to Tehran the effectiveness of guerilla tactics in countering technological superiority. The ongoing challenges faced by Coalition and US forces in stabilising and securing post-invasion territorial gains, and the high personnel and material costs suffered by these forces have shown alternative ways of resistance that can effectively impose significant costs on militarily superior forces. Indeed, the highly enclosed nature of urban settings negates the use of tanks and air power, forcing troops to occupy and fight insurgents in an unfamiliar environment, which places them on a more level playing field. Here, Tehran seeks to leverage the country's large population and terrain to hinder and overwhelm any invading force, imposing costs which it hopes the American public will not tolerate, thereby forcing a favourable political settlement.

Iran's military strategy is codified in the 2005 concept of 'Mosaic Defence', a doctrine or a set of principles which seek to counter conventional territorial-based invasion by prolonging the conflict and maximising losses from attrition. In this view, command is decentralised and symmetrical combat is avoided, prompting invading forces to fight multiple and continual 'layers' of resistance. As these forces progress, they become bogged down by localised urban-based insurgencies which negate technological (air in particular) superiority and make it impossible to retain any territorial gains. In 2008, in keeping with the doctrine's ethos, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) set up 31 regional command centres, each capable of functioning autonomously during a conflict (Chubin 2014: 72). Indeed, the strategy's architect, Major-General Mohammad Ali Jafari, is currently head of the IRGC, suggesting the continued salience and centrality of the doctrine to Iran's defence and security policies.

Denial and attrition underline the tenets of Iran's military doctrine and are incorporated into all branches of the military. The decision to establish the Air Defense Force as a separate branch of the military in 2006, for example, reflects Tehran's commitment to asymmetric warfare, as the focus of the new branch would be to defend nuclear sites, combine information collection and air defence and improve manoeuvrability (Department of Defense 2010: 6). As part of this strategy, focus has been placed on deploying ground-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft artillery in key strategic locations.

Iran's naval strategy reflects a similar approach, privileging the use of fast, small vessels and submarines to disrupt supply lines and ship movements, while using mines to help set up ambushes at chokepoints (Tira & Guzansky 2016: 8–9). In the event of a conflict with the US, Tehran has signaled that it would blockade the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 percent of the world's oil exports travel, in order to disrupt and increase the cost of global energy supplies, thereby applying global pressure to reach a favourable political settlement (Ward 2005: 567) – something that the US has said it will never tolerate. This strategy have forced the

Iranian navy to adopt the asymmetric warfare concept of military swarming, which is designed to maximise target saturation and thereby overwhelm the defences of the principal target or objective. This means that naval forces are able to engage with opponent navies even when facing an overwhelming force (Axe 2016). As alleged by the US, Iran showed its capability in this respect by attacking a number of oil tankers in the vicinity of the Strait of Hormuz in mid-2019, as the tensions heightened between Washington and Tehran (Cunningham, Gearsan & Morello 2019).

Another major component of Iran's deterrence arsenal is its focus on ballistic missiles. Missiles are cheaper and easier to produce than aircraft, making them an appealing alternative to maintaining conventional air capabilities – particularly considering the technical and material limitations that Tehran faces. It inherently costs more to counter a rocket than to fire one, giving it a cost asymmetry that makes it an effective deterrent. Thus, one strategy is to launch multiple salvos with the aim of “overwhelm[ing] missile defenses” (Olson 2016: 69), a strategy which remains central to Iran's defensive doctrine. The focus on ballistic missiles was also inspired by the ‘war of the cities’ during the Iran-Iraq war, where the use of missiles offered a viable option for retaliatory strikes that countered Iraqi air superiority. Furthermore, missiles can be manufactured domestically (Chubin 2014: 66–69).

Iran has the largest missile arsenal in the Middle East. With significant Chinese assistance in the 1990s, Iran has made significant progress in missile production (Olson 2016: 71). Most of its arsenal is still short-range missiles, reaching 500km or less, but Tehran has also developed capabilities for long-range missiles that can travel over a 2,000km radius, far enough to cover most of the Middle East (Hildreth 2012: i–ii).

In relation to Iran's military doctrine, the use of ballistic missiles plays a key role for securing the Islamic Republic against foreign attacks, making it essential for Iran to protect and secure its missile program in order to maintain the capabilities required in the current military doctrine. According to several of William Broad's (2010) anonymous sources, most of Iran's ballistic missiles are hidden in mountainous areas, which naturally complicates the development of counter measures. One of the measures seen over the last decades have been to target scientist or experts that are working with these programs often through different internal opposition groups (Bergman 2018).

Iran's Hard Power Capabilities

Iran's military is bifurcated into two segments. *Artesh* ('army') functions as a conventional military force that is responsible for the defence of Iran's territorial sovereignty. It has four branches, with approximate force numbers based on 2016 estimates: the army (350,000–130,000 regulars, 220,000 conscripts), navy (18,000, including 2,600 marines), and air force (30,000 total, including 12,000 in an air defence service) (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS] 2011: 327–331). Operating alongside *Artesh* is the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), which undertakes all of Iran's overseas clandestine intelligence and espionage activity.

Operating parallel to *Artesh* is the IRGC (or *Sepah*). The IRGC was established as a shadow security and military institution after the overthrow of the Shah and is charged with the ‘defence of the revolution’ and the Islamic order against both internal and external threats. As such, it has its own land (100,000), air (20,000) and naval (20,000, including 5,000 marines) forces separate from the *Artesh* and has an increased focus on asymmetric capabilities. The air force division of the IRGC is also responsible for Iran's strategic and ballistic missile forces and runs the research and development arm of the missile program.

In addition to these forces, the IRGC has two unique divisions – the Quds Force and the Basij Resistance Force. The Quds Force undertakes covert subversive military activity outside of Iran's borders (in conjunction with other IRGC forces), and functions as a parallel institution to the MOIS. Commanded until recently by General Qasem Soleimani, who was assassinated by a US drone attack on 3 January 2020, the Quds Force seeks to establish and leverage subnational networks of influence with local ethnic, political and religious groups in neighbouring countries to further Tehran's strategic objectives. In particular, the group has developed a close relationship with the Lebanese Shi'ite group *Hezbollah*, as well as various Shi'ite paramilitary forces in Iraq. More recently, the group became the most visible representation of Iran's strong backing of the then-beseiged Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, acting as Tehran's ‘boots on the ground’ in providing weapons, supplies, expertise and even soliders to support government forces (Tira & Guzansky 2016: 8). The Basij Resistance Force, on the other hand, is a volunteer militia force with a current strength of 90,000 soliders, reserves of 300,000 and a total mobilisation capacity of one million. It was initially created as part of Khomeini's call for a 20 million strong Islamic army. It played a major role in conducting raids and fighting Iraqi forces during the Iran-Iraq War, and while it was initially an independent institution, authority over the

group has progressively been subsumed into the IRGC (Delijani 2010: 9). In fact, there have been talks about merging the Basij with IRGC ground forces (Delijani 2010: 9).

The bifurcation of Iran's military forces stems from the historical experiences learnt from the 1979 Iranian revolution. Khomeini and his clerical acolytes realised that the military could not be relied upon to protect the regime – a fact that was patently evident by the army's refusal to come to the Shah's aid. This underpins the IRGC's dual role of both national defence, but also in maintaining internal stability and protecting the Islamic regime from internal challenges. Since the revolution, the IRGC has been involved in suppressing local revolts in Kurdistan, West Azerbaijan and Khuzestan but also participated in the war with Iraq (Hashim 2012: 71). Since then, the IRGC has continued to grow in importance, overshadowing *Artesh* to become the most powerful force in the Islamic Republic, wielding significant influence in the political, economic, and cultural life of the nation.

The supremacy of the IRGC and the Supreme Leader are in many ways connected to each other as they legitimise and secure each other's domination and power internally, which means that IRGC along with Ayatollah Khamenei have a great interest in retaining the current power structure. However, Iran's power structure is highly affected by the many different military and intelligence institutions, who are responsible for monitoring and securing the survival of the Islamic Republic. This means that many of these organisations are competing with each other for power internally, which has complicated their ability to cooperate with each other and thereby decentralised the power structure inside Iran. Thus, it is important to stress that the IRGC cannot be regarded as a centralised institution either, since the organisation in itself has a rooted decentralized key component, with ethnicity and geographic belonging posing as important factors. This structure highly affects IRGC's military doctrine as the use of decentralised forces is given priority to ensure mobility of the military units (Wehrey et al. 2009a: 7–13).

Iran's Soft Power Capabilities

One of the key aspects of Iran's regional influence is its soft power – or what Joseph Nye (2013) describes as the means and ability by which you can persuade other actors to recognise and respect your interests. Expanding its soft power has been a key element of Iran's national strategy. This was codified in its 2005 'twenty-year vision' document, which noted that Iran's future soft power measures should stem from "strengthening of Islamic-Iranian identity", "deepening the spirit of knowing the enemy" (resistance), and promoting the "political, cultural, and economic achievements and experiences of the Islamic Republic and a rich understanding of Persian culture, art, and civilisation and religious democracy" (Jenkins 2014: 53).

Here, Iran seeks to leverage four sources of soft power. The first source is Iran's *velayat-e faqih* model of theocratic governance. Tehran has consistently promoted the model as a viable, religiously legitimate synthesis of popular and divine sovereignties that is an appealing alternative to Western democratic models. For example, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif writes:

[I]n light of the increasing importance of normative and ideational factors in global politics, the Islamic Republic is well suited to draw on the rich millennial heritage of Iranian society and the significant heritage of the Islamic Revolution, particularly its indigenously derived and sustained participatory model of governance (Zarif 2014: 54).

While no Muslim country has adopted this model, many political elites, particularly within the IRGC, see it as a potential example and inspiration for other sub-national ethnic and sectarian groups in the Middle East that wish to create their own authentic forms of governance (Djalili & Kellner 2014: 1).

Second, Iran has a strong anti-establishment narrative that appeals to both Muslim and non-Muslim countries across the world. Its historical tradition of resisting colonialism and its assertive, unwavering opposition to the US aligns closely with the experiences of many states in the global South who are increasingly disillusioned with the current neoliberal orthodoxy. Chubin writes that "Iran's revolutionary past demonstrates its ability to stand up to the West. It also gives voice to the dispossessed and those who can't stand up for themselves" (Chubin 2012: 8–9).

The third source is its revolutionary activist Islamic ideology. Khomeini's post-revolutionary government preceded the popularisation of Islamism, demonstrating a political approach which was neither 'East nor West' but an Islamic alternative. The overthrow of the Shah demonstrated that it was possible to make the peoples' interests known, even if this meant resisting a major global superpower. As a result, the revolution, while since coloured by sectarian overtones, still appeals to the underprivileged and oppressed populations

in Muslim (and non-Muslim) majority countries that are governed by corrupt authoritarian leaders who are backed by foreign interests.²

And finally, the fourth source is Iran's extensive historical and cultural ties to its neighbours. Iran shares strong religious and non-religious cultural connections with many of the states in the region, most notably with Iraq as well as Syria, Lebanon and the Central Asian and Caucasus states, and actively seeks to use these relationships and connections to further its influence – a point that will be discussed later.

To capitalise on these four sources and promote its soft power influence, Iran uses multiple state and quasi-state linked institutions and methods. The most notable of these are *bonyads*, charitable organisations that provide a range of social services and cultural outreach activities that seek to improve Iran's image in the region. *Bonyads* have significant economic power, accounting for 10 to 20 percent (some estimates say up to 30 percent) of Iran's GDP, (Thaler et al. 2010: 58) and are often the beneficiaries of rentier arrangements and networks of patronage amongst conservative elites. For example, in Lebanon, Iran has actively been involved in a slew of infrastructure projects. Slavin notes how after the 2006 war with Israel, "Iran had rebuilt 504 roads, 19 bridges, 149 schools, 48 mosques and churches, and 64 power stations" (Slavin 2008: 8). She further notes that for the 20 years leading up to 2007, Iran built around 330 schools teaching around 700,000 students, 20 hospitals and clinics, and 550 miles of roads in Lebanon (Slavin 2008: 8). Similarly, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (*kommēti-e emādād-e Imam Khomeini* or IKRC) is another institution that seeks to promote Iran's reputation through cultural and educational services. As of 2012, it had offices in Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Iraq and Comoros, and has provided social services to over 94,000 individuals, 30,000 of these in Afghanistan alone (Slavin 2008: 70).

In addition to providing social services functions, *bonyads* also engage in cultural outreach. Organisations such as the Farabi Foundation and the Islamic Propaganda Organisation promote Iranian cinema, while the Islamic Cultural and Relations Organisation maintains informal networks via 'cultural consellers' in Iranian embassies that promote Persian language, literature, culture, and history (Wastnidge 2015). Meanwhile, the Astan Qods Razavi Foundation (*Astan-e Qods-e Razavi bonyad*) oversees several libraries and museums that publish Islamic material in multiple languages (Nasr 2016: 215).

The final aspect of Iran's soft power is its focus on 'soft war' (*jang-e narm*), which became a major priority after the emergence of the Green Movement in 2009 prompted fears that institutionalised liberal norms, combined with US foreign policies promoting human rights and democracy, represented a conscious and subversive effort to produce regime change by inciting popular uprisings (PressTV 2010). To counter this, Tehran has set up several agencies to "confuse and [disrupt] foreign-organized soft attacks" (Price 2012: 2407), whilst also working to promote the state's revolutionary ideology and nationalist ideals amongst the general population.

Another soft power tool that Teheran has used increasingly in recent years is offensive cyber attacks targeted at acquiring scientific knowledge or intelligence from other countries. An example of that was a cyber attack in Denmark against the Technical University of Denmark in March 2018. Cells inside the IRGC gained access to several research projects that could be used to reinforce Iran's knowledge within different scientific research areas. The increasing number of Iranian cyber attacks have been verified by the US authorities, and in 2018, nine Iranian individuals was accused of extensive cybercrime against 320 universities in 22 countries (Jørgensen & Boye 2018).

A further source of Iran's soft power is its economic disposition, although in this area the country has not been doing well. Like its military power, Iran's economy has suffered from over a decade of sanctions – in particular a crippling oil embargo – which has severely limited the country's growth and development. Indeed, inflation, unemployment and stagnating standards of living have been perennial issues faced by successive presidents since the revolution.

Iran's economic weakness stems from several interrelated factors. First, the Iran-Iraq War left behind a legacy of high population growth and the institution of populist policies such as price controls, import restrictions and subsidies which are increasingly difficult to sustain. Pro-natalist policies championed during this time to bolster the population in the face of the conflict have produced a generation which is now entering the workforce and fuelling high unemployment as the economy fails to produce enough jobs to keep up (Gammer 2016: 135). This is exacerbated by the state's commitment to populist policies, notably subsidies, which are becoming increasingly costly as the population increases and by President Donald Trump's harshest sanctions.

² Maintaining the policy of neutrality became difficult in the wake of the hostage crisis and the resulting deterioration of relations with the West. Especially in light of the emergence of the US-led unipolar order, the result is that Iranian foreign policy has typically taken, at least rhetorically, an anti-American position.

Second, Iran's economy has suffered from historically poor management, which has generally favoured short-term populist policies. This was clearly demonstrated in Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's discourse of populist redistribution in support of *mosta'zafin* (the 'have not' or downtrodden) to bring the oil wealth to the tables of ordinary Iranians. This involved re-introducing a fixed exchange rate to keep consumer imports cheap while pursuing large-scale infrastructural projects such as the low cost *Mehr* housing project, which borrowed on cheap credit and resulted in ballooning levels of loan write-offs and government debt (Merat 2013).

The prevalence of populist economic policies is largely due to the third factor: political rentierism. Close links between political, military and economic interests have resulted in widespread corruption as clerical elites use their political influence to gain favourable economic contracts and concessions – a process exacerbated by the privatisation of state companies, which enabled the wholesale capture of economic assets under the guise of 'liberalisation'. Indeed, some estimates suggest that the IRGC controls over 30 percent of Iran's economy, including banks, airports, ports, construction industry and commercial enterprises, which allow them to control imports and exports (Mather 2010: 506).

The final factor is Iran's dependence on oil, which accounted for 33 percent of government revenues and 24 percent of GDP in 2014, although this has reduced substantially since then (Khajepour 2014; Wilson 2016) and even more so since Trump's imposition of severe sanctions in 2018. Oil rentierism has cultivated a state dependence on revenues from hydrocarbon exports to fund populist policies such as cash handouts, price controls and subsidies for fuel and basic goods – all of which forms part of a basic rentier agreement where the state 'buys' the public's support. Reliance on oil exports also means that Iran is exposed to market fluctuations, while the artificially high exchange rate that results from these exports undercuts other industries, therefore limiting any alternative sources of income and creating a self-perpetuating cycle of dependence. When the UN imposed additional sanctions in 2010 in response to Ahmadinejad's aggressive rhetoric towards the West and his refusal to negotiate on the nuclear issue, the Iranian government lost \$133 million a day as oil exports fell from 2.3 million barrels per day (mbpd) in 2011 to 1.2 mbpd in 2012 and, with further sanctions by the US and its allies that halted Iranian oil exports to the European Union, less than 1 mbpd in 2013. This resulted in increasing inflation and the value of basic goods such as vegetables and chicken (DiPaola & Arnsdorf 2012).

However, despite these weaknesses, the Iranian economy has been able to achieve some growth and development due to several strengths – a large educated labour force, some existing industrial capacity and diversification and significant natural resources – including the world's fourth largest oil reserves. Indeed, Iran currently has the second largest economy in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, with a GDP of \$412.2 billion (World Bank 2018). However, the Trump administration's reimposition of sanctions have once again put the Iranian economy under enormous strain, with a severe inflationary and high cost of living impact.

Iran's Hard and Soft Power Capabilities in Relation to its Neighbours

Iran's military capabilities in the region are influenced by mixed factors: its defence expenditure is relatively low – around 2 percent of GDP, which is well below the MENA average of 6.48 percent in 2015 – and reflects both the impact of sanctions in limiting access to military technology and equipment as well as the resultant focus on self-sufficiency and unconventional tactics (IISS 2011: 312). Indeed, Iran accounts for only 7 percent of the total defence expenditure in the MENA region – a low amount compared to its Gulf neighbours (Saudi Arabia 41.8 percent, the United Arab Emirates 7.4 percent and Oman 5.1 percent) (IISS 2011: 313).

Its conventional military forces are of very limited effectiveness, suffering from lack of modern technology and equipment, conflicting authority and reporting lines and deeply ingrained structural and command issues stemming from its competition with IRGC. It is undeniable that decades of sanctions and restrictions on the transfer of technology and military materials have left Iran's military considerably underdeveloped, undermining its effectiveness. Indeed, Wehrey et al. (2009b: 39) write that "Iran's military is beset with structural, organizational, and capacity problems that prevent it from completely operationalizing Tehran's doctrinal ambitions".

In contrast to its conventional forces, Iran has significant asymmetrical warfare capabilities. Tehran has invested heavily in its missile program while seeking to leverage the country's large population, strong sense of nationalism and geographic and economic size to offset these conventional weaknesses. However, while these capabilities are effective in acting as a deterrent against foreign aggression, they are limited by their inherently defensive nature and do not translate to an ability to influence or achieve its strategic objectives outside of Iran's borders. This has been amply demonstrated by Iran's support of the allied regime of Bashar

al-Assad against widespread opposition in Syria since 2011. Despite the deployment of its Quds forces, along with those of Hezbollah and 'volunteer' Shia elements from some of the neighbouring countries, in particular Afghanistan and Pakistan, Tehran was unable to save the Assad regime on its own. It had to ultimately rely on Russia's augmented military, especially airpower, operations to rescue the regime from advancing rebel forces. Similarly, if it were not for Russian and US-led operations, Iran could not defeat ISIS in Syria. The same is true in the case of Iraq, where the US-led coalition enormously complemented Iranian efforts, though indirectly, in folding back IS's occupation.

In terms of its economy, the key question of whether it can continue to grow largely depends on the ability to increase its efficiency, as well as Tehran's relationship with the US. The JCPOA offered multiple economic opportunities in expanding trade ties, gaining access to technology and increasing oil exports, even if, as both sides claim for different reasons, the full conditions of the agreement were never fully implemented. Indeed, on a macro-economic level, Rouhani's reforms initially produced some results, reducing inflation and reversing negative growth under Ahmadinejad (World Bank 2016). However, despite these indicators, the inherent structural weaknesses (in particular rentier practices) have played a major role in dampening the potential future growth and development. Indeed, the persistence of these structural weaknesses underpinned the popular perception that despite the JCPOA, the economy did not really improve. A poll conducted in 2016 by the Center for International and Security Studies found that while 63 percent of those interviewed a year before had stated that they expected "tangible improvements in people's living conditions within a year" (Glenn 2015), 74 percent stated that there had been no improvement. In the light of America's sanction reimposition, the public discontent continues to grow even higher.

At present, Rouhani faces pressure from multiple fronts: on the one hand, the lack of tangible improvements has resulted in increased pressure from conservative elements to roll back liberalising measures (Nasseri 2016). On the other hand, deteriorating relations with the US point to even bigger challenges for the economy, causing it to stagnate and fuel civil unrest. They have a serious negative impact, with the value of the *rial* plummeting since May 2018, inflation reaching hyper levels and unemployment rising dramatically from when Trump first announced his intention to withdraw from the JCPOA (Iran Currency Extends Records Fall as U.S. Sanctions Loom 2018).

The effectiveness of Iran's soft power policies also remain in doubt. While *bonyads* have undoubtedly been instrumental in enhancing Iran's standing and image in the region, Tehran's ability to project soft power has been undermined by the relatively closed nature of Iranian public life (and its semi-authoritarian model of cultural production), as it impairs the ability of civil society to produce genuine and 'authentic' cultural outputs (Iran Currency Extends Records Fall as U.S. Sanctions Loom 2018). This is because the explicit link to the government inherently undermines the legitimacy of cultural production because it colours them with political implications alluding to Shia Islamic ideology and the 'export of revolution'. At the same time, this authoritarian model prevents Iran from drawing on the works of its diaspora, because it was the cause of their displacement in the first place.

In addition to the limitations of Iran's regimented and closed civil society, Tehran's ability to project soft power has increasingly been affected by sectarianism. While Iran has sought to appeal to both Shia and non-Shia audiences, its emphasis on its Shia identity and credentials – which seeks to leverage sectarian faultlines and groups within the region to further Iran's influence – paradoxically undermines this exact objective. As a result, Iran has often struggled to overcome the perception that it is, first and foremost, a *Shia* state, rather than an Islamic one (Hunter, n.d.: 744). Sectarian divisions have widened significantly since the 2011 Arab uprisings, where the geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia took on increasingly sectarian overtones. This was exacerbated by Tehran's backing of the Assad regime, which undermined its claim to be the guardian of the revolutions.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic of Iran has nurtured a strategy of asymmetrical warfare and built an array of hard and soft power means and a regional security architecture in support of this strategy. It has premised its approach on defensive deterrence and denial, with a capacity to exploit a favourable situation, whenever it has arisen, to its advantage to secure a degree of regional influence. According to a 2019 study, while the Islamic Republic's regional rivals have spent billions of dollars on purchasing state of the art arms, mostly from the United States, Iran has succeeded in expanding its network of regional influence and is winning the strategic struggle in the Middle East (Gardner 2019). Even so, the country remains limited in its power projection capacity beyond its border. Neither in economic nor in military terms has it reached a position comparable to some of the other regional actors, namely Israel and Turkey, let alone

the United States. Yet, its degree of regional influence has alarmed its regional adversaries and the United States. This in turn has invited increasing regional and US hostilities and recriminations, with the Trump administration renewing Washington's old policy of containment with more vigour than ever before. The US pressures, in conjunction with regional apprehensions, are set to seriously impact the Islamic Republic's operational capability, especially when Washington's sanctions take full effect. If the US ban on the export of Iranian oil lasts for too long, it will affect the Islamic regime's ability to maintain its current regional status. Yet, the regime has proved to be very resilient and skilled in manoeuvring its way through many challenges, including a persistent set of US sanctions. The regime is set to survive as it has over the last forty years, but it is the society that will bear the burden of Trump's unprecedented sanctions. This cannot be good news for the regime in the long run but, on the other hand, the continued pressure from US provides legitimacy for the regime's ability to maintain a high level of resources directed to the security sector. This can be mitigated if the other signatories to the JCPOA maintain their commitment to the agreement, despite Tehran dropping some of its commitments in response to US sanctions. Yet, one cannot be certain in this respect, given the US pressure on the three allied European signatories (Britain, France and Germany) to back Washington in its policy of containment of the Islamic Republic.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Saikal, A., & Vestenskov, D. (2020). Iran's National Security and Operational Capability. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 3(1), pp.18–30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.29>

Submitted: 13 March 2019 **Accepted:** 11 December 2019 **Published:** 20 February 2020

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