



# IRAN'S MILITARY DEVELOPMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE PROSPECTS FOR NEGOTIATION

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Iran's search for nuclear weapons capabilities is only one part of a much broader set of military efforts, and a much broader competition with its neighbors and the West. There is no doubt that a "nuclear" Iran could be a major new source of instability in an already all too troubled region, but this is only one part of the challenge developments in Iran pose to its neighbors and the West.

If one puts Iran's nuclear efforts in context, they reflect a steady drift towards a more nationalist and hard-line regime, a government dominated by the Supreme Leader and those around him, and the growing power of current and former members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps over both Iran's national security efforts and domestic politics and economy.

Domestic politics, and the crisis over the Iranian regime, may have created forces that will ultimately push this leadership from power, but these same forces may instead lead to a more repressive government that exploits foreign "enemies" and Iran's international ambitions as a rationale for authoritarianism and suppressing political opposition. At this point, internal regime change is possible, but scarcely certain or even likely.

The West and other outside powers may be able to improve their relations with Iran through dialogue and negotiation, using both incentives and pressures like sanctions. This *may* reduce the risk of a regional arms race, and escalation and misunderstanding in a crisis. It *may* offer a peaceful means of placing limits on Iran's behavior, of helping to convince Iran's regime that such limits are really in its interest, and establishing "rules of the game" which limit the risks involved to both Iran and other powers.

It seems more likely, however, that Iran will remain a serious challenge as long as its current religious regime remains in power. It is also important to understand that Iranian diplomats and well meaning Iranians that participate in negotiations and various forms of second track diplomacy are largely pawns in a different game. The real power center of the regime is the Supreme Leader, backed by instruments of regime control like the IRGC, armed forces, intelligence services, Basij, police and justice system, key councils and review bodies, and the state media.

Iran's president and the members of its Majlis and various "councils" are scarcely unimportant, but they are not the real power in the "regime." As for Iranian intellectuals, supposed spokesmen for Rafsanjani, and advocates of "grand bargains," "regional solutions," and other easy and comprehensive changes in Iran's actions, they are not serious pieces on the board and will not be as long as the present regime is in power.

### **Types and Levels of Iranian Military Competition**

This makes it essential to look beyond nuclear proliferation and consider the overall structure of Iran's military and national security efforts. Iran's actions, and the

development of its military forces, create close links between its acquisition of nuclear capabilities, its missile programs, the way it seeks to improve its conventional military forces, and its efforts to improve its capabilities for asymmetric warfare. It also shows that Iran is involved in a broad strategic competition with its neighbors, the US, Britain, France, and Israel that involves far more than a concern for either offensive or defensive warfare.

Iran is seeking to expand its own status and to deny competing states military options. Extreme as some of the rhetoric of its leaders may be, its actions tie the search for nuclear capability to a broad range of military efforts to establish or reinforce deterrence, increase its prestige and status, and create political options for using its military forces to influence the behavior of other states. In fact, Iran seems to concentrate far more on developing forces military forces that can be used in “wars of influence” than interested in preparing for any form of actual conflict

As the briefing shows, this involves the following major types of military activities:

- *Weapons of mass destruction:* Recent discoveries like new underground facilities and neutron initiators as part of Iran’s nuclear program are simply new events in a process that has been going on since the Iran-Iraq War, and Khomeini’s decision to resume nuclear research once Iran came under chemical weapons attack from Iraq. Iran is also making advances in its centrifuge designs that not only can greatly increase their capacity, but make it far easier to create small, dispersed facilities with compact arrays of centrifuges that will be far harder to detect. Even if Iran should agree to IAEA inspection, or be subject to some form of preventive attack, its growing technology base will create new options to conceal a nuclear weapons program and/or develop a break out capability.

The competition between Iran to acquire nuclear capabilities, and outside powers to prevent them, is also only part of the story. Iran is a declared chemical weapons power, although it has never complied with the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), nor stated its holdings. It probably has the capability to manufacture persistent nerve gas. It could certainly put such gas in a unitary warhead and probably has some cluster weapon capability.

Iran is a signatory to the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), but there are no firm data to indicate whether it does or does not have a biological weapons effort. It is clear, however, that Iran has the capability to develop and produce advanced biological weapons – and could do so as either a supplement or substitute for nuclear weapons. Iran should acquire the ability to develop even more advanced genetically engineered biological weapons in the 2010-2015 time frame. Roughly the same timeframe as it could deploy a major nuclear force.

There is no inspection regime for the BWC, and a variety of studies raise serious questions as to whether such a regime is possible. Accordingly, even if Iran did fully comply with all IAEA requirements, it probably could still covertly develop the capability to produce weapons of mass destruction. Similarly, there is no enforceable way true weapons of mass destruction free zone can be established and enforced in the Middle East or any other area with advanced biotechnology.

As Iran’s tests of new solid-fueled missile designs have shown, Iran’s missile programs represent another critical part of its military efforts and expenditures. They still, however, do not exhibit a test program that could give them the reliability and accuracy to be effective without using a weapon of mass destruction as a warhead. Even a chemical missile warhead, however, would be more a terror weapon than a true weapon of mass destruction. It would risk provoking a massive response that could be far more lethal to Iran even if it used precision conventional weapons.

Moreover, Iran's leaders must know that they are already involved in a nuclear arms race with Israel. Whether or not Iran ever moves to test and deploy nuclear weapons -- and regardless of whether the US or Israel conduct a preventive conventional strike on Iran's nuclear facilities -- Israel is already making major improvements in its missile defense programs. Israel has long had long-range boosters for its missiles. It seems almost certain that if Israel does not have current capability to target Iran with nuclear-armed missiles – a capability that already seems highly probable – it will have this capability soon.

Israel can clearly launch nuclear-armed air strikes, and it is widely reported to be developing nuclear-armed cruise missiles for its Dolphin submarines. It also has had French fission and fusion design and test data on nuclear weapons for decades. While Iran is still developing fission designs, Israel is probably targeting Iran with boosted and thermonuclear weapons. As a result, there is already an existential nuclear arms race in the region, although at present it is Iran and not Israel that is the target.

- *Iran's conventional forces: Iran is steadily expanding its conventional forces in ways intended to expand its influence, ability to limit US military options, ability to intimidate its neighbors, and increase its power projection capabilities.* Iran has not been able to acquire large numbers of modern armor, combat aircraft, longer-range surface-to-air missiles, or major combat ships. Partly because of US efforts, much of its conventional military force is obsolescent or is equipped with less capable types of weapons.

Iran has, however, long been in discussions with Russia over importing advanced types of modern combat aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, and ballistic missile defenses. It actively seeks advanced systems from other countries, and has successfully imported Russian and North Korean submarines, and a variety of Chinese anti-ship missiles. Iran also has acquired modern Russian and Chinese air-to-air, air-to-ground, SHORAD, and anti-armor missiles. It has modern Russian homing torpedoes, and may have advanced types of Russian and Chinese mines.

These capabilities improve Iran's capabilities to threaten and influence its neighbors, improve its ability to deter US naval and air operations against Iran (as well as those of Israel and other states), and give Iran improved military options against Iraq and particularly against targets in the Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and the GCC states. As the Israeli-Hezbollah War and use of shaped-charge IEDs in Iraq, showed, they also allow Iran to strengthen its proxies in other areas.

The end result is a constant and growing challenge to the US in the Gulf region, particularly in terms of air, missile, and naval warfare, as well as a challenge to the US in providing military support and transfer to the GCC states, Israel, and Iraq. It is also a competition that interacts directly with the arms import/export competition discussed earlier.

- *Asymmetric and irregular warfare:* There is no simple way to describe the lower threshold of Iran's military development and ability to use it to pressure, threaten, or attack other powers. Any weapon and any type of force can be used in asymmetric, irregular, or hybrid ways from a terrorist proxy to a nuclear weapon. In fact, Iran has already demonstrated such capabilities in a wide range of ways:
  - Iranian tanker war with Iraq
  - Oil spills and floating mines in Gulf.
  - Use of Quds force in Iraq.
  - Series of IRGC and naval/air exercises in Gulf and Gulf of Oman
  - Iranian use of UAVs over Iraq.
  - Funding and training of Hizbollah; Provision of UAVs, long-range rockets, Kornet ATGMs to Hizbollah.
  - Incidents and demonstrations during pilgrimage in Makkah.

- Transfer shaped charge and other advanced IEDs to Mahdi Army and others in Iraq; training of Iraqi insurgents.
  - Arms flow into western Afghanistan.
  - Shipments of arms to Hamas and Palestinians.
  - Support of Shi'ite groups in Bahrain.
  - Long-range ballistic missile and space tests; expanding range of missile programs. Iranian public description of possible missile attacks on Israel that indirectly demonstrate Iran's capability to attack its neighbors.
  - Naval guards seizure of British boat, confrontation with US Navy,
  - Long series of IRGC and Iranian military exercises in Gulf demonstrating ability to attack coastal targets, shipping, and offshore facilities.
- The most direct threat, however, comes from Iran efforts to build up a mix of military capabilities in the Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Gulf of Oman which give the potential to challenge the US and other Gulf states with threats ranging from free floating mines to small craft with anti-ship missiles, coupled to potential air attacks on key targets like desalination plants.

Coupled to Iran's conventional forces, this gives Iran a theoretical capability to close the Gulf for a short period. It also, however, gives Iran the ability to carry out low level attacks and harassment attacks, with some potential for deniability, over extended periods of time in ways where the US, its allies, and Gulf states may have no easy counter or would have to escalate in ways that might not seem justified.

Iran's military efforts to compete with the US and its Gulf neighbors by developing capabilities for asymmetric warfare cannot be separated from Iran's emphasis on missiles, weapons of mass destruction. Both compensate for the limits of its conventional forces and act as a substitute. Moreover, if Iran does acquire – or is perceived to acquire – nuclear weapons, this will have at least some impact in deterring any response to Iran's use of asymmetric warfare. Iran's neighbors, the US, Britain, France, and Israel must then at least consider the risk Iran will escalate even if they ultimately conclude it will be safe to ignore it.

This scarcely, however, means the US cannot compete. Iran's steadily advancing capabilities for asymmetric and proxy warfare still leave it vulnerable to US conventional forces and devastating precision attacks on its military and economic assets. Acquiring weapons of mass destruction acts as a potential deterrent to US conventional attacks on Iran.

### **The Impact of Iran's military Efforts on Neighboring States and Sub-Regions of Competition**

The briefing also shows that it is far easier to talk about regional solutions, diplomacy, and dialogue than it is to provide a convincing case that they will work. In fact, one of the striking aspects of Iran's current behavior is just how diverse its efforts have become in given countries and subregions:

- *Gulf Cooperation Council countries:* Iran makes broad efforts to expand its influence, deter US military action and reduce US influence, and establish Iran as the dominant power in the region. Iran's efforts are different for each GCC country:
  - *Bahrain:* Iranian pressure in support of Shi'ite majority relative to ruling Sunni elite, coupled to sporadic revival of claims to Bahrain. US basing of 5<sup>th</sup> fleet; treatment of Bahrain as ally.

- *Kuwait*: Iranian influence is reinforced by a substantial Shi'ite and ex-Iranian population, and by Iran's geographic proximity. But, the US is key guarantor of Kuwaiti security and has two major military bases. Linked to competition in Iraq.
  - *Oman*: Oman recognizes Iran's military presence across the Strait of Hormuz, and has long maintained good relations with Iran, but US has contingency bases in Oman (Masirah & Seeb) and counters Iranian influence. Britain also plays key role in support of the US. Substantial number of Omanis are members of a Shi'ite sect, but are not "twelvers" --as is the case with Iran.
  - *Qatar*: Qatar maintains good relations with Iran to maintain the security of its offshore oil and gas fields, and gain diplomatic leverage on Saudi Arabia. US has major air base and prepositioning facilities for US Army. No significant Shi'ite population.
  - *Saudi Arabia*: Iran and Saudi Arabia compete for status as the preeminent Gulf power. Saudi Arabia no longer has US combat forces based in the Kingdom, but has major advisory missions and close security ties to the US. Iran has long tried to use religion, including the pilgrimage, to embarrass the Saudi regime for its ties to the US and sometimes on the grounds that the ruling elite is not properly Islamic. Tensions over Saudi treatment of a substantial Saudi Shi'ite minority in the Eastern Province.
  - *UAE*: Iran has substantial numbers of Iranians living on its soil, particularly in Dubai, and Dubai is a key trading hub as well as source of re-exports of arms and technology. US, however, has growing security ties to the UAE, particularly Abu Dhabi, and UAE as a whole disputes Iran's seizure of control of Abu Musa and the Tunbs (key islands in the main shipping channels to the west of the Strait of Hormuz.)
- *Yemen*: Iran has been accused of support a Shi'ite tribal uprising in northwest Yemen, and seeking to use Yemen for proxy competition with Saudi Arabia. Yemeni is key issue in the struggle against terrorism because of its internal instability, the role of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen's potential as a broader base for Al Qaeda and extremist movements, and possible ties between a radicalized Yemen and Somalia.
  - *Iraq*: Iran actively seeks to increase its influence over the Iraqi government, over Iraq's security development, and over its political and economic future. Iraq also represents a key area in terms of energy development, trade interests, and Shi'ite religious influence vs. nationalist and Sunni influence. It is part of a potential competition to establish a "Shi'ite crescent" including Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.
  - *Jordan*: Jordan is deeply concerned that Iraq is becoming a Shi'ite and Iranian influenced state which is losing its Arab character and has no economic interests supporting Jordan. There is a significant Iraqi refugee population in Jordan. King Abdullah was the first Arab head of state to make the Shi'ite crescent an issue.
  - *Syria*: Syria's ruling Alawites (which are not Shi'ites) have become close because of the elder Assad's split with Saddam Hussein, and Israel's invasion of Lebanon. They have cooperated in missile procurement and development, other weapons purchases and development, and possibly in some areas of proliferation. Both actively supported the creation and arming of the Hizbollah that help trigger a major Israeli-Hizbollah conflict. Syria uses its ties to Iran to put pressure on Israel and sees the Hizbollah as a joint proxy with Iran.
  - *Lebanon*: Iran's ties to Lebanon date back to the time a Shah imported Shi'ite clergy from the region to help convert his people to the Shi'ite sect. Khomeini strongly opposed the Israeli invasion and occupation of Southern Lebanon, and Iran supported the formation of the Hizbollah to resist. It has since used the Hizbollah as a proxy against Israeli and to win support from Arabs who oppose Israel. Playing a spoiler role in Lebanon also gives Iran the ability to threaten Israel with the Hizbollah, and less directly, the peace process.
  - *Israel*: The US sees Israel as an ally, and a successful Arab-Israeli peace process as critical to preserving Israel's security while ending tensions with the Arab world over US ties to Israel.

Iran's leaders probably sincerely oppose Israel's existence, but also find a strident anti-Israeli posture as a way of winning domestic and Arab political support, and as a cover for the build-up in Iranian military forces and Iranian efforts to acquire nuclear weapons.

Iran's anti-Israeli rhetoric may be more of a cloak for actions that give Iran power and influence over its immediate neighbors, and the potential ability to deter the US, than any real focus on Israel either ideologically or in a warfighting sense. Nevertheless, Iran's actions may well trigger a nuclear arms race between Israel and Iran or Israel preventive strikes on Iran. This arm race could also lead other regional states to pursue their own nuclear weapons. This would heighten US and Iranian competition far more than the *threat* that Iran might acquire nuclear weapons

- *Gaza and West Bank*: Iran uses Hamas and the Israeli-Palestinian issue to mobilize internal political support in Iran,
- *Pakistan*: Not an area of direct competition, but Iran has accused Pakistan of support Baluchi separatists in Iran. Iran does not support any increase in the US role in Pakistan, even to help it fight violent Sunni extremists.
- *Turkey*: Growing competition for influence as Turkey "looks east" in reaction to de facto rejection by EU, tensions with US since invasion of Iraq, and deals with Islamist vs. secular tensions in Turkish politics. Iran seeking to exploit this situation – and weaken Turkish ties to US and Israel. Limited success with Islamist government in Turkey, and Turkish anger at US remains an issue.
- *Afghanistan*: Iran has built up major influence in northwestern Afghanistan and with the Hazara Shi'ite minority in other part of the country. Some indications of arms transfer and Al Quds advisors but uncertain. No overt challenge of the US. Iran more concerned with Taliban and Sunni extremist threat than US influence, and US more focused on Taliban and Sunni extremist threat as well.
- *Central Asia*: Iran is seeking to expand its trade and regional influence and is an observer at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Not a major area of competition, but the US is concerned with possible Iranian influence.
- *Europe*: Iran seeks European investment in petroleum and industry and to use Europe to deflect or prevent major sanctions and military action against Iran for its nuclear programs. The US seeks British, French, German and other support for sanctions, its efforts to prevent Iranian proliferations, and blocking arms and dual-use technology transfers. Missile defense has also become an area of competition, although Russian pressure to block US programs has had far more impact.
- *Russia*: Proliferation and sanctions, trade and energy deals, reactor and nuclear technology sales, arms sales, missile defenses in Europe, and US vs. Russian influence in the Gulf and Middle East.
- *China*: Competition over proliferation and sanctions, trade and major energy investments, and arms sales. Emerging tensions over US vs. Chinese influence in the Gulf and Middle East.

### **Keeping Iran's Efforts In Proportion**

Iran's security efforts need to be kept in careful perspective. These developments indicate that outside states need to plan for prolonged strategic competition with the Iranian regime. At the same time, they are not a case for military options, for rejecting dialogue and diplomacy, or hard-line positions that will make it difficult for any new regime to change its policies and alienate the Iranian people. There are a case for containment, and deterrence, but the use of force already involves so many risks that it must be seen as an option that will only be used when there is no other choice

An understanding that Iranian behavior involves a wide range of interrelated military developments and goals, and is unlikely to change under Iran's current regime, should

not lead its neighbors and other state to rule out the search for diplomatic options.. This puts a heavy emphasis on careful, well-planned efforts to compete, rather than dramatic, impractical solutions like forcing regime change. It puts a similar premium on graduated military action to contain, deter, and de-escalate, rather than initiating or prolonging armed conflict.