Iran's Strategic Thinking

Origins and Evolution

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Key Findings

- Iran is a **fundamentally defensive state.** It is principally concerned with its own stability and regime survival, and its main strategic goals are to mitigate its relative isolation while deterring potential attack from multiple regional adversaries. Iran's relative insecurity fuels its search for regional strategic depth and preference for military self-sufficiency.

- Iran's foreign and security policies are shaped by **dual factors of national interests (expediency) and ideology**. The tension between these poles of thought defines the national security debate within the regime, though expediency will trump ideological concerns whenever the leadership believes there is a real conflict. The soft- and hard-power activities employed by Iran's Resistance Network of proxies and partners, such Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shia militias, represent both these factors in Iranian strategy.

- Iran prioritizes **internal security concerns above external ones**. Vigilance against subversion and preserving domestic stability dominate security policy-making and military planning.

- Iran's **consensual decision-making style is becoming more coherent** as the senior leadership becomes tighter and its security organizations evolve and professionalize.

- Iran's behavior is driven by its **perception of threats to national interests and core ideological principles**. Recognizing when the state; the continuation of the revolution; Iran's economic viability; or its leadership among Muslims, Shia Muslims, or regional neighbors is at risk is crucial for analysts and policymakers in deciphering and anticipating Iran's security decisions.

- Iran has a historical **preference for conducting low-intensity, proxy, and asymmetric warfare**. Using others to fight its conflicts and keep adversaries occupied away from its borders is a logical response to Iran's difficult strategic position and helps limit escalation of conflict.

- **Iran's military strategies and doctrines are reactive to the regional dominance of the United States and its allies**. Iran invests in military capabilities and develops operational art intended to mitigate US superiority in conventional power.

Executive Summary

Iran is not an unpredictable, irrational, rogue nation. It is simply inadequately understood. By analyzing Iran's strategic culture, we can assess the regime's threat perceptions and strategic calculus.

Iran's national consciousness is defined by its longevity and resilience as a nation and a civilization, along with modern Iran's inability to regain the relative power it possessed during the early centuries of the Persian Empire. Iran's geographic and strategic position in the Middle East provides a natural defense against invasion but also a sense of isolation and a historical lack of natural allies. Iran's foreign policies are also complicated by the multiple and, at times, contradictory identities the nation has acquired throughout its history: Persian, Islamic, Shiite, and revolutionary. Tehran's revolutionary principles provide the basis of the regime's legitimacy and most of its foreign policies while demarking key parameters for the leadership decisions. Ideology will be trumped by national interests (expediency) when the two conflict, however.

The Iranian regime's decision making on security and strategic issues is best described as a consensual process among the key political and military leaders. Decisions to use conventional force, shift major foreign policies, or direct the actions of the Islamic Republic's paramilitary and covert organizations are made and executed through both direct and indirect channels, all under the supreme leader's guidance. Iran's legacy conventional military, the Artesh, is becoming more integrated with the elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, although this unique bifurcated military structure still complicates Iran's strategy, planning, and command and control.

This paper explores the origin and nature of Iranian military and security strategy since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. It identifies the historical and cultural drivers of Iran's strategic culture, explores the nature of Tehran's decision-making processes, reviews the evolution of the regime's threat perceptions, and examines Iran's strategic calculus during three historic case studies: the Tanker War, the US war in Iraq, and the current Syrian crisis. During these periods, Iran's leaders felt regional developments posed an existential threat to Iran's stability and security. These cases have forced operational evolution within Iran's military and spurred strategic evolution among its leadership.

Even if the world powers complete a successful comprehensive nuclear agreement with Tehran, policymakers should expect Iran to continue its low-intensity, covert, global conflict with the United States and its allies, along with a long-term effort to improve deterrence against Western conventional military power.

Foundations of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Strategic Culture

An understanding of Iran's strategic calculus has long eluded Western analysts. What drives a state to go to war? When does a state sue for peace? What shapes a government's decision to prioritize investment in ballistic missiles over fixed-wing air power? Why would a navy prefer to fight with small vessels in swarms? Why would a state build proxy forces to fight in conflicts that pose an existential threat rather than directly intervene? Why would the most important mission of a nation's ground forces be controlling their own population rather than fighting and winning wars against foreign enemies? Why would a state pursue nuclear weapons, and how would it employ such weapons if it acquired them?

Answering these questions begins with understanding a state's strategic culture. The concept of strategic culture is not easily defined in political science but can be best described as the worldview and policymaking patterns of a state's political and military leadership.[1] A strong grasp of the historical legacies, shared beliefs, collective experiences, and modes of decision making that shape a nation's threat perceptions and strategic thinking will give powerful insight into its security behavior.

Understanding Iran's strategic culture poses unique challenges to analysts and policymakers for two reasons.[2] First, there is no defined Persian canon through which contemporary Iran's military strategy can be understood. Like China's, Iran's civil and military history extends over two and a half millennia. In Chinese culture, the study of war as a philosophic discipline is most famously represented by Sun Tzu.[3] Persian history has no clear analogue. Students of modern European, American, or Russian-Soviet military strategy will also struggle to find Persian equivalents of Machiavelli, Clausewitz, Mahan, or Ogarkov.

Second, although scholars of Russian and Chinese strategic studies are spread across academic institutions, government, and think tanks, scholars in Western universities rarely focus on Iranian strategic studies.[4] Instead, almost all Iran specialists in the academy focus their research on Persian politics, history, archeology, culture, or poetry.[5] The few experts in the field of Iranian strategic studies reside inside government, think tanks, or similar institutions.[6] Iran's relative isolation from the world since 1979 only adds to researchers' difficulties.

Iran's strategic thinking is predictable despite these handicaps. Understanding how historical legacies, geographical realities, religious and ideological tenets, and national interests shape the Islamic Republic's threat perceptions and its leadership's worldview will illuminate the drivers of Iran's security behavior since the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

The Historical Legacy

Iran's national consciousness is defined by its longevity and resilience as a nation and a civilization, along with modern Iran's inability to regain the relative power it possessed during the early centuries of the Persian Empire. The glories and achievements of the Achaemenid Empire, founded by Cyrus II in the sixth century BCE, provided the original basis for a sense of national greatness. Alexander the Great's defeat of Persia in 334 BCE ended Achaemenid rule but began a long pattern of Persian elites successfully surviving foreign conquest as the conquerors adopted Persian culture and appropriated existing modes of governance to rule more effectively. The great Persian empires of the Parthians and Sassanids that arose later continued these legacies, vying for centuries with the Roman and Byzantine empires for dominance in western Eurasia.

The Arab conquest of the Sassanids in the middle of the seventh century CE was a humiliation, however. The population's subsequent conversion to Islam (from Zoroastrianism) was slow, and resistance to Arab rule was

constant until the beginning of the Abbasid Caliphate in 750 CE. Like the Greeks before them, the Abbasids admired Persian ways of governance and became dependent on Persian bureaucrats to manage their empire. The caliphate also esteemed Persian art, science, architecture, and philosophy, which all became dominant influences of the emerging pan-Islamic culture. The post-Sassanid Persians adopted very little of Arab language or culture, in contrast to the Persianization of the Arab Islamic world that began in eighth century.

The subsequent waves of Turkic and Mongol invaders from the 10th through 15th centuries CE—including Genghis Khan's conquest in the early 13th century CE—demonstrated similar patterns of foreign rulers adopting Persian culture. When the Safavid Empire was founded in 1501 CE, Iran returned to Persian rule for the first time since the Arab conquests almost nine centuries earlier. Under the Safavids, Iran became a world power rivaling the Ottoman Empire and underwent a forcible conversion from Sunni to Shia Islam.

The Safavid dynasty ended when rebellious Pashtun subjects from Afghanistan conquered the Persian capital of Esfahan in 1722. A tribal chief from eastern Persia, Nader Shah, defeated the Pashtuns in 1729 and brought Iran under his rule. During his time, Persia reached its greatest extent of power and territory since the Sassanids.

After several decades of civil war, a branch of the Qajars (a Persianized Turkic clan in northwest Iran) established a new dynasty in 1794. The Qajars ruled Iran until the early 20th century, but they oversaw a steady erosion of Persian power, with significant losses of territory to the Russian Empire and concessions to the British Empire on trading rights and other economic activities. By the 19th century, the scientific, technological, manufacturing, and military capabilities of European powers began to significantly outpace those of Iran, and Qajari rulers attempted to modernize the state and society. Iranian clerical, business, and other elites resented Qajari submissiveness to foreign powers, strengthening nationalist sentiment and sparking a revolution that established a short-lived constitutional monarchy and a parliament (the *majles*) in 1906. The discovery of oil in Iran led to greater Russian and British interference, and foreign occupation during World War I ended effective constitutional government and, eventually, Qajari rule itself.

Military leader Reza Khan led a coup backed by Russia and Britain to depose the existing prime minister and assume the role of commander of the Iranian Army in 1921. Khan became prime minister in 1923 and was appointed as the new shah (king) in 1925, formally deposing the last Qajar king and establishing the Pahlavi dynasty, which would rule Iran until the Islamic Revolution in 1979. A joint Russian-British invasion during World War II deposed Khan and installed his son Mohammad Reza as shah in 1941. Both Pahlavis attempted to modernize Iran during their reigns but met with limited success. Instead, their policies alienated the more conservative elites, especially the clergy.

Unlike his father, Mohammad Reza did not generally resist the heavy British—and later American—role in Iranian affairs, which exacerbated tensions with the political left. He was also a relatively weak ruler early on, which allowed the *majles* a good deal of power. Leftist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh nationalized the Iranian oil industry in 1951, removing it from British control, and pursued an aggressive and secular legislative agenda. In 1953, the United States and the United Kingdom—aided by members of the Shia clerical leadership, the military, and other conservative elites—led a coup to depose Mossadegh. Following Mossadegh's departure, Mohammad Reza Shah became a more autocratic, though modernizing ruler, closely aligned with the United States.

Domestic resistance to Mohammad Reza's rule occurred from several fronts. Iran's clergy resented the shah's secularizing social agenda, leftist and nationalist politicians criticized the government's close relationship with the United States, and the general population chafed under the regime's oppressive internal security forces. These grievances facilitated the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which initially had support from across the political spectrum.

What is the impact of 2,500 years of history on the Islamic Republic's leadership's worldview, at least in general terms? Iran's decline in relative power and frequent interventions by the great powers over the past two centuries have instilled elements of insecurity, resentment, and distrust toward the West and Russia. The achievements and resiliency of the Persian state

FIGURE 1
IRAN'S GEOGRAPHIC ENVIRONMENT

Source: Author

(and empire) until the Qajar dynasty and the continuing vibrancy of its culture give Iran a sense of inherent national greatness, however. Iranians expect to return to the position as natural leaders of the Middle East and play a primary role in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Their leaders are very sensitive to actions perceived to undermine their rightful place in regional and world affairs. Such beliefs are compounded by Iran's sense of strategic isolation and historical lack of natural allies. Since the 1979 revolution, for example, Syria has been Iran's only reliable partner.

The Geographic Environment

Iran's geography plays a central role in its history and its current strategic thinking. The Iranian plateau formed by the Zagros and Alborz Mountains and situated between the Caspian Sea in the north and the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea in the south is a natural chokepoint in Southwest Asia (figure 1). Transcontinental trade routes passed through this area for millennia, and whoever controlled the plateau held the strategic high ground in the region. The mountains also provide a

natural defensive advantage against invasion from the north, west, and south, although the advances of Alexander the Great and the Arab armies demonstrated the region is not impenetrable.

Iran's long, mountainous coastline also gives it a dominant position in the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Gulf of Oman. Tehran need project its naval power only relatively short distances to control or disrupt waterways crucial to the flow of international petroleum products. To preserve freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, the United States and other world powers consistently maintain naval strength along Iran's coastline, which Iran's both resents and fears. The region's rugged terrain allows Iran to conceal its activities, forces, and assets. During the past two decades, Iran has exploited this advantage, constructing underground facilities for its nuclear, missile, naval, and strategic industry programs.

Tehran seeks a preeminent, even hegemonic, role in Middle Eastern political and security affairs and maximum freedom to act in its surrounding region. These objectives reflect both a national sense of historical leadership in southwest Asia and a need to prevent being surrounded by more powerful states. Iran has intense rivalries with major Sunni Muslim states like Saudi Arabia and, to lesser degree, Turkey and Egypt, for the dominant political, military, and religious leadership position in Middle East. Iran's aspirations in this regard are complicated by its role as the leading Shia Islamic power.

Shared Beliefs and Contradicting Identities

Iran's foreign policies are also complicated by the multiple and, at times, contradictory identities the nation has acquired through its history: Persian, Islamic, Shiite, and revolutionary. The reconciliation of Persian nationalism to Islamic cultural and political preeminence after the Arab conquests has been a long, and perhaps still incomplete, process. Contemporary Iranian nationalism and national interests remain in conflict with the Islamic Revolution's more universal goals. Iran's Shi'ism frequently handicaps its pan-Islamic messaging toward the region's majority Sunni population, while its revolutionary religious doctrine separates it from fellow

Shia in Iraq and elsewhere.[7] How Iran incorporates and prioritizes these overlapping worldviews and conflicting aspirations is crucial to understanding its security priorities and strategic calculus.

Religious Unity. Despite converting to the Muslim minority sect of Shia Islam only 500 years ago, Iran sees itself as the leader and defender of Shia worldwide. Tehran believes it has special moral responsibilities to protect the important Shia shrines in Iraq and Syria; larger Shia populations in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon; and smaller Shia populations elsewhere in the world. Practical considerations temper Tehran's desire to aid and influence foreign Shia communities, however. Iran has relatively easy access to Shia groups in the Levant and Iraq, especially following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Communities in the Arabian Peninsula, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have been much more difficult for Iran to influence because of logistics, the security environment, and the hostility of the local governments.

Iran aspires to lead the Islamic world, but its regional policies frequently undermine this goal and fuel unwanted sectarian conflict. Tehran's overt and covert work with Shia groups in multisectarian states like Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen drives Sunni Arab suspicions of fifth columns and fears of attempted Iranian dominance of the region. Extremist groups like the Islamic State build support among Sunnis by exploiting resentment of Iran's political interference.

Religious Sacrifice. Concepts of martyrdom can also have a powerful influence on the Iranian worldview. Shia venerate Hussein, son of Ali the fourth caliph and grandson of the Prophet Mohammed. Hussein considered the Umayyad Caliph Yazid I to be unjust and refused to pledge allegiance to him. In response, Yazid's forces ambushed and killed Hussein in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. Hussein's followers believed the leader of the Islamic community, the imam, should be just and come from the Prophet's family. They considered Hussein the third imam (after Mohammed and Ali) and the first imam of their new sect of Shia Islam. The remembrance of Hussein's martyrdom became a central focus of Shia Islam.

The Islamic Republic drew extensively on this tradition during the Iran-Iraq War. Suffering injustice and enduring great loss demonstrated the righteousness of the war's cause. The esteem of martyrdom was used by the regime's leadership to prolong support for military campaigns long after they ceased achieving their objectives. Martyrdom took a new form when the first modern suicide bombers—members of Iran's proxy group Lebanese Hezbollah—began operating in the early 1980s. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) members killed abroad in the line of duty aiding or fighting in Iran's proxy wars are termed martyrs. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has even called IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Suleimani a living martyr for risking his life building proxy groups to promote the revolution and defend Iran and its allies.[8]

Shia and Iranian martyrdom raises difficult questions, however. Does the concept of martyrdom change the way Iran's leaders evaluate policy achievements? If individual loss can indicate collective righteousness and divine support, when do Iran's leaders consider strategic or tactical failures to be actual defeats requiring a change in policy? How distinctive is this perspective from Sunni Muslim ideas of success or failure as a sign of divine will? The answers to these questions have important implications for US diplomatic and military strategies aimed to disrupt, defeat, or by other means prevent the success of Iranian policies or operations. A careful comparative analysis of Iranian leaders' rhetoric and policies during times of crisis, accounting for domestic context, will be required to provide clarity on these issues.

Religious Rule. The concept of guidance by the Islamic jurist or *velayat-e faqih* is the Islamic Revolution's most important principle. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and other Shia clerics championed *velayat-e faqih* in the 20th century as a more just and righteous form of government. A worthy cleric (a supreme leader), or even theoretically a group of clerics, guides the people and government but does not normally manage state affairs directly. An important exception to this rule is the supreme leader's role as commander in chief of the armed forces. As a jurist, the supreme leader adjudicates Islamic law, giving him great latitude to interpret, apply, and even override teachings and doctrine as he sees fit.[9]

All policy decisions made by government officials must stay within the boundaries established by the supreme leader. This concept of governance was a radical shift from Shia Islam's traditional "quietest" principles that held the clerical leadership should remain separate from politics.

Revolutionary Ideals. As a revolutionary state, Iran sought to change not only its own form of governance but also the governments and larger international political system surrounding it after 1979. The ideology that Ayatollah Khomeini and his fellow revolutionaries espoused and codified into the new Iranian constitution was universalist in its nature and deeply shaped their worldview. If the ideals of the Islamic Revolution did not advance into other countries and remain robust inside Iran, the entire enterprise Khomeini began could be at risk. The regime exists because of the revolution, so maintaining the leadership's and the Iranian population's commitment, or at least adherence, to the Islamic Revolution's ideology becomes an existential challenge for the regime. This does not mean Iran's governing philosophies are inflexible. Certain core ideological principles, however, not only shape the regime's worldview but also create redlines defined by the supreme leader that foreign and domestic policies cannot violate.

Revolutionary ideals inform the previously discussed quest for religious leadership. Iran's leaders feel that by continuing to export and defend the revolution at home and abroad, Iran can become the leader of the global Islamic community. In a classic soft-power approach to this foreign policy, Tehran has an array of clerical, educational, financial, and humanitarian organizations devoted to promulgating *velayat-e faqih* and other Islamic revolutionary ideals.[10]

Iran established the IRGC shortly after the revolution to provide the hard-power component of this policy. The IRGC preserves the revolutionary state; keeps the Islamic Republic's adversaries, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, at bay; and ensures Tehran's influence abroad through a web of political alliances, paramilitary proxies, and terrorist groups called the Resistance Network. This network includes Lebanese Hezbollah; President Bashar al Assad's government in Syria; the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement; and a host of Shia militia groups in Iraq, the Levant, and Yemen.

The IRGC, along with its subordinate paramilitary organization the Basij, is also structured and tasked to maintain Iran's internal stability and combat domestic forces or foreign activities that would threaten the Islamic Republic. The IRGC maintains a close relationship with the supreme leader and a powerful role in Iranian political and economic life. It can be considered—and is often referred to as—the embodiment of the Islamic Revolution.

Finally, contesting the United States (the Great Satan) and Israel (the Little Satan) remains a bedrock principle for the Iranian regime. Iran's anti-Americanism originates from not only the revolutionary leaders' hatred and distrust generated by US support of the shah's regime but also an adopted Marxist critique of the US-led political-economic-security system that Iran believes promotes exploitation and neocolonialism of developing countries. This latter idea resonates well with Iranian resentment of the humiliation it suffered at the hands of world powers during the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties. Tehran is willing to work closely with rogue states (like North Korea and Venezuela), the Non-Aligned Movement, and any other countries or international organizations willing to challenge US and Western predominance, whether or not they are Muslim.

Anti-Zionism and advocacy for the destruction of Israel are pillars of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy and identity. The IRGC's Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah command Iran's efforts to support Palestinian resistance groups and build proxy forces capable of striking Israel. Iran's ideological legitimacy as leader of the Islamic world is inseparable from its campaign against Israel.

National Interests and Expediency. Like all states, Iran possesses national interests in addition to its particular ideological imperatives. The protection of the country from invasion or attack and the preservation of the government in Tehran are paramount. Iran needs a solid economic base to ensure domestic stability and to support its security and foreign-policy goals.

National interests inevitably conflict with Iran's ideological objectives. Principles may need to take second priority to more crucial concerns, especially if the security of the nation is at risk. Khomeini was forced to recognize that continuing the Iran-Iraq War could jeopardize the stability of his government, even though the objective of spreading the revolution into Iraq had not been achieved. Khomeini acknowledged that preservation of the state is necessary for the revolution to continue and established the Expediency Discernment Council in 1988 to advise him and broadly oversee government decisions to ensure adequate consideration of national priorities. This action also codified the governing philosophy the supreme leader already enjoyed under *velayat-e faqih*: that he can determine the applicability of Islamic principles when national interests are at stake.

The idea of expediency—that the state must take actions that are to its greatest advantage regardless of principles—remains in constant but managed tension with ideological concerns in Iran's decision making.[11] This construct allows Iran a great deal of flexibility in conducting its foreign policies and security activities until those policies hit redlines established by the revolution's ideals and the supreme leader. Understanding those fixed principles allows external observers to better anticipate the boundaries of Iranian strategic behavior.

Consensual Decision Making

In addition to learning about historical legacies, shared beliefs, and collective experiences, understanding the modes of decision making within a state is key to constructing a model for strategic culture. The Iranian regime's decision making on security and strategic issues is best described as a consensual process among the key political and military leaders. This consensual decision-making process can seem opaque and unwieldy, but in practice the regime can make decisions very efficiently.

Iran's leadership and security organizations have evolved and professionalized over time. As Iran's senior leadership becomes more closely knit, Iran's consensual decision-making style is becoming more efficient and coherent.

National Security Policy. The supreme leader of Iran, like the president of the United States, is the commander in chief of all military and security forces. Decisions to use conventional force, shift major foreign policies, or direct the actions of the Islamic Republic's paramilitary and covert organizations are made and executed through both direct and indirect channels under the supreme leader's guidance. However, the supreme leader does not act with singular executive authority in directing Iran's armed forces. Instead, that power is partially diffused through overlapping formal structures, such as the Supreme Council for National Security, the Armed Forces General Staff, and the Expediency Council, as well as informal decision-making processes.
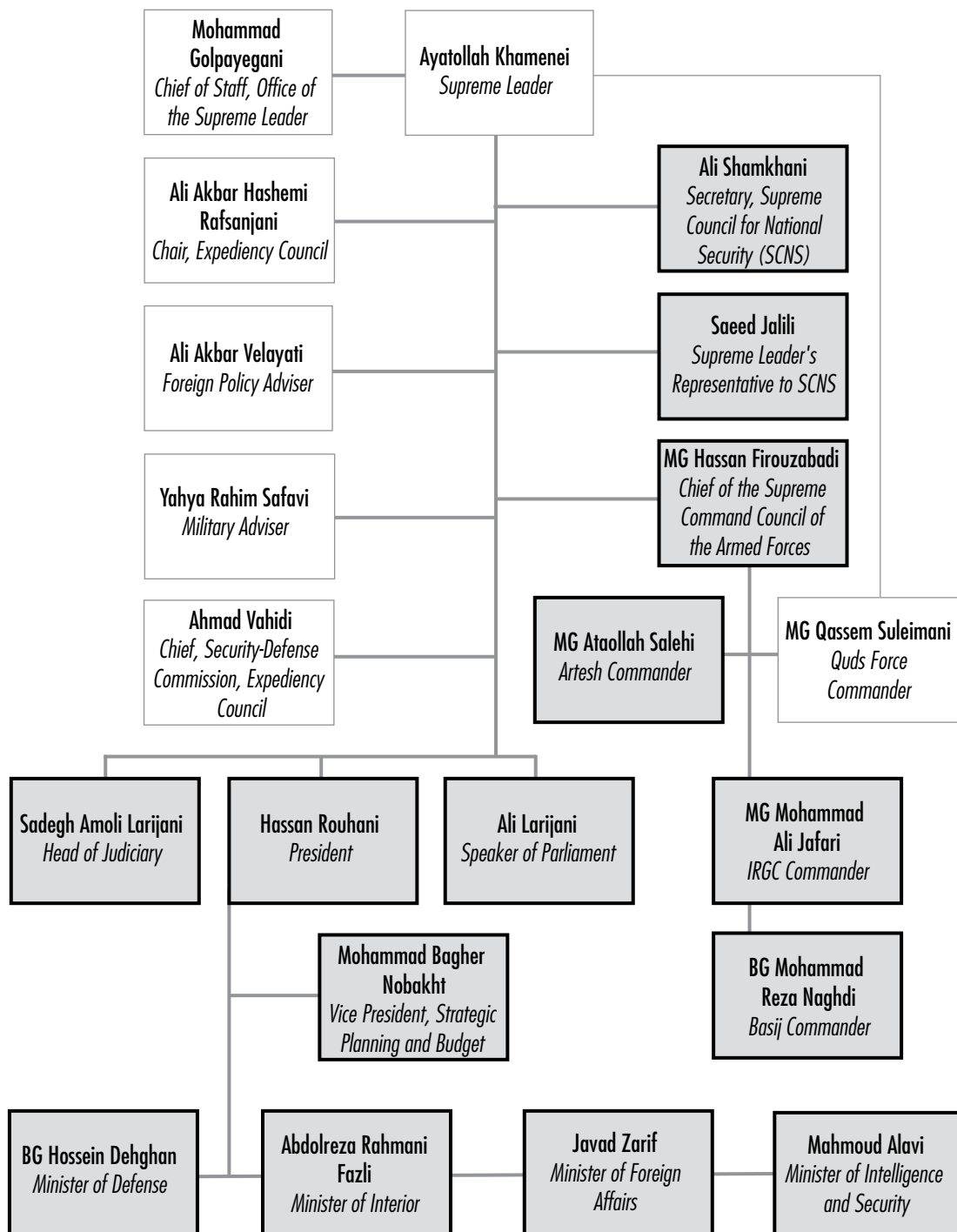
The Supreme Council for National Security. The most crucial decisions normally center on the Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS). (See figure 2.) This body emerged from the earlier Supreme Defense Council after the Iran-Iraq War and was constituted in 1989. The SCNS's formal membership includes the senior leadership of the Iranian military, heads of each branch of government (executive, legislative, and judiciary), and several cabinet ministers, including those for defense, foreign affairs, interior, and intelligence. The secretary of the SCNS chairs the body and normally plays a powerful role in driving and implementing policies. Former IRGC leader and Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani currently holds the position and has been prominent in executing and representing the regime's response to the Islamic State since June 2014.[12]

The supreme leader does not attend or preside over the SCNS but instead has an official representative who participates on his behalf.[13] Currently, Supreme Leader Khamenei's official representative on the SCNS is former SCNS secretary and lead Iranian nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili. Khamenei also maintains his own personal communication channels with many SCNS members. Major national security decisions appear to be made through direct or indirect dialogue between the SCNS and the supreme leader.[14] The supreme leader remains aware of SCNS debates on policy options, while the SCNS accepts the supreme leader's broad preferences and guidelines. SCNS members typically gauge their arguments and advocacy within the context of their understanding of the supreme leader's preferences. The supreme leader is also sensitive to the mood and opinions of the SCNS.[15] Although certain SCNS members may support different policies early in the decision-making process, official decisions of the SCNS reflect the consensus of the regime.

Broader Decision-Making Network. Iran's national security decision making is also influenced by a number of key individuals who are not formally SCNS members. These include the foreign policy adviser to the supreme leader, Ali Akbar Velayati; his military adviser, Yahya Rahim Safavi; the chief of staff of his office, Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani; the chair of the Expediency Council (and former

FIGURE 2

IRAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY DECISION MAKERS

Mohammad Golpayegani
Chief of Staff, Office of the Supreme Leader

Ayatollah Khamenei
Supreme Leader

Ali Shamkhani
Secretary, Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS)

Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani
Chair, Expediency Council

Saeed Jalili
Supreme Leader's Representative to SCNS

Ali Akbar Velayati
Foreign Policy Adviser

MG Hassan Firouzabadi
Chief of the Supreme Command Council of the Armed Forces

Yahya Rahim Safavi
Military Adviser

MG Ataollah Salehi
Artesh Commander

MG Qassem Suleimani
Quds Force Commander

Ahmad Vahidi
Chief, Security-Defense Commission, Expediency Council

Sadegh Amoli Larijani
Head of Judiciary

Hassan Rouhani
President

Ali Larijani
Speaker of Parliament

MG Mohammad Ali Jafari
IRGC Commander

Mohammad Bagher Nobakht
Vice President, Strategic Planning and Budget

BG Mohammad Reza Naghdi
Basij Commander

BG Hossein Dehghan
Minister of Defense

Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli
Minister of Interior

Javad Zarif
Minister of Foreign Affairs

Mahmoud Alavi
Minister of Intelligence and Security

Denotes formal membership in the Supreme Council for National Security

Source: Author

president), Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani; the chief of the Expediency Council's Security-Defense Commission (and former minister of defense) Ahmad Vahidi; and perhaps most well-known, Qassem Suleimani, commander of the elite, expeditionary IRGC Quds Force.

These individuals normally have a direct line of communication to Khamenei as well as to several SCNS members. Their attendance at SCNS meetings is not always necessary, however. The extensive informal networks among the Iranian elite also allow certain constituencies to influence the decision-making process. Constituencies with such influence include the current IRGC and former IRGC leadership, portions of the business and clerical communities favored by the regime, and even former presidents and members of their administrations.

Iran's decision makers have long histories with one another, usually going back to the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. Their collective ambitions and fears, as well as informal alliances and rivalries, form a larger ecosystem from which policies, and consensus over those policies, develop. During his 25 years as supreme leader, Khamenei has been tending to this ecosystem and defining its boundaries: which ideas are acceptable, which leaders within the political system should be supported, and which leaders should be shunned (at least temporarily). He has become more adept at ensuring this ecosystem supports him politically, reflects his vision for the republic and the Islamic Revolution, and does not allow any one faction to become too strong. He accomplishes this all without exerting direct autocratic rule. As presidential administrations, parliamentary leadership, and military commands have changed over the past quarter-century, Khamenei has arguably shaped Iran's decision-making elite into a more homogenous family, cultivating the regime's preference for consensus.

Characteristics of Iranian Decision Making. How do the characteristics and structures of governance affect decision making? First, the regime maintains fairly consistent and coherent policies that reflect the supreme leader's will. Observers should not be overly distracted by the visible squabbles among the so-called "reformists," "moderates," and "hardliners" or between

different components of the regime, such as the president and the IRGC. These arguments are normally real and passionate, but any competing policy visions will ultimately be funneled through the SCNS process and mitigated by the direct relationship each leader has with Khamenei. Early on in a new policy debate, or as circumstances around an existing policy change, individual leaders may publicly express their diverging views as a means to anticipate, test, or possibly shape the supreme leader's decision on the issue. But once Khamenei and the SCNS make a collective decision, no one can stray from the supreme leader's guidelines.

Second, Iran's decision making can be rapid despite the need for consensus. The positions of key leaders and the supreme leader's receptiveness to various policy options can be quickly discerned given their existing informal channels and the group's long collective history. This is especially true during times of crisis, most recently seen during the Islamic State's rapid invasion of northern Iraq in June 2014. The event caught Iran by surprise, and its leadership appeared to be in an initial state of confusion immediately after the fall of Mosul.[16] Within approximately 72 hours, the SCNS met and came to a decision on the need for very robust political and military roles in the unfolding Iraq crisis. SCNS Secretary Ali Shamkhani drove the policy debate at the SCNS, and Quds Force Commander Suleimani executed this effort.[17]

Third, public opinion has limited influence on foreign policy decisions. Fears of internal unrest and antiregime activities drive Iran to monitor and manage popular sentiment through its internal security forces, intelligence services, and control of social media. Iran's tight-knit and ideologically committed senior leadership will not, however, alter a national security decision to placate public opinion absent a perceived risk that continuing that policy could spark large-scale instability. Supreme Leader Khomeini's decision to end the Iran-Iraq War, for example, was driven largely by recognition that the Iranian people were no longer willing to make the sacrifices necessary to continue the conflict.

Finally, Iranian decision makers respond to the internal boundaries (or redlines) set by the supreme leader and the regime's ideological, national, and strategic objectives. Tehran's security policies are more consistent

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF DEFENSE BUDGETS FOR 2012, 2013, AND 2014 (IN US DOLLARS)

	Ministry of Defense	Armed Forces General Staff	Artesh Joint Staff	IRGC Joint Staff	Basij Organization
2012 (no. 1392)	$638,162,987	$325,547,579	$1,249,013,635	$1,998,408,021	$264,204,262
2013 (no. 1393)	$704,318,199	$357,162,656	$1,893,389,921	$2,376,542,174	$308,897,703
2014 (no. 1394; estimate)	$964,920,286	$678,759,962	$1,923,199,055	$6,311,627,181	$320,588,333

Note: Conversion was made with X-Rates Conversion Generator, at February 2015 currency rates.

Sources: Khabar Online, December 9, 2014, www.khabaronline.ir/detail/389247; and *Financial Tribune*, January 20, 2015, http://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/9391/outlines-2015-16-budget-approved-focus-increasing-tax-revenues.

and predictable than those of other regional or world powers as a consequence of both a fairly stable group of decision makers and the need to adhere to the core tenets of the Islamic Revolution. Iran is not opaque or irrational. It is a state that can be understood and anticipated.

Military Decision Making

Iran's distinctive form of governance extends into its military. The Islamic Republic inherited the former regime's conventional Army, Navy, and Air Force, commonly referred to as the Artesh (Persian for "army"). It retains an organization and command structure similar to most European models, a legacy of the dominant role the United Kingdom and the United States played in building Iran's modern military in the 20th century.[18] The Artesh differs from Western militaries in important ways, however. The Artesh Air Defense service is a separate yet equal partner to its Air Force service, reflecting Iran's defensive strategic orientation.

A Split Military. While the Artesh retains the mission of defending the state and protecting its borders, the IRGC was created shortly after the 1979 revolution to protect the regime and ensure the continuation and export of Iran's new Islamic system of governance. The IRGC retains a much closer relationship with the supreme leader than the Artesh. In particular, Quds Force Commander Suleimani's relationship with the supreme leader and his position within Iran's national
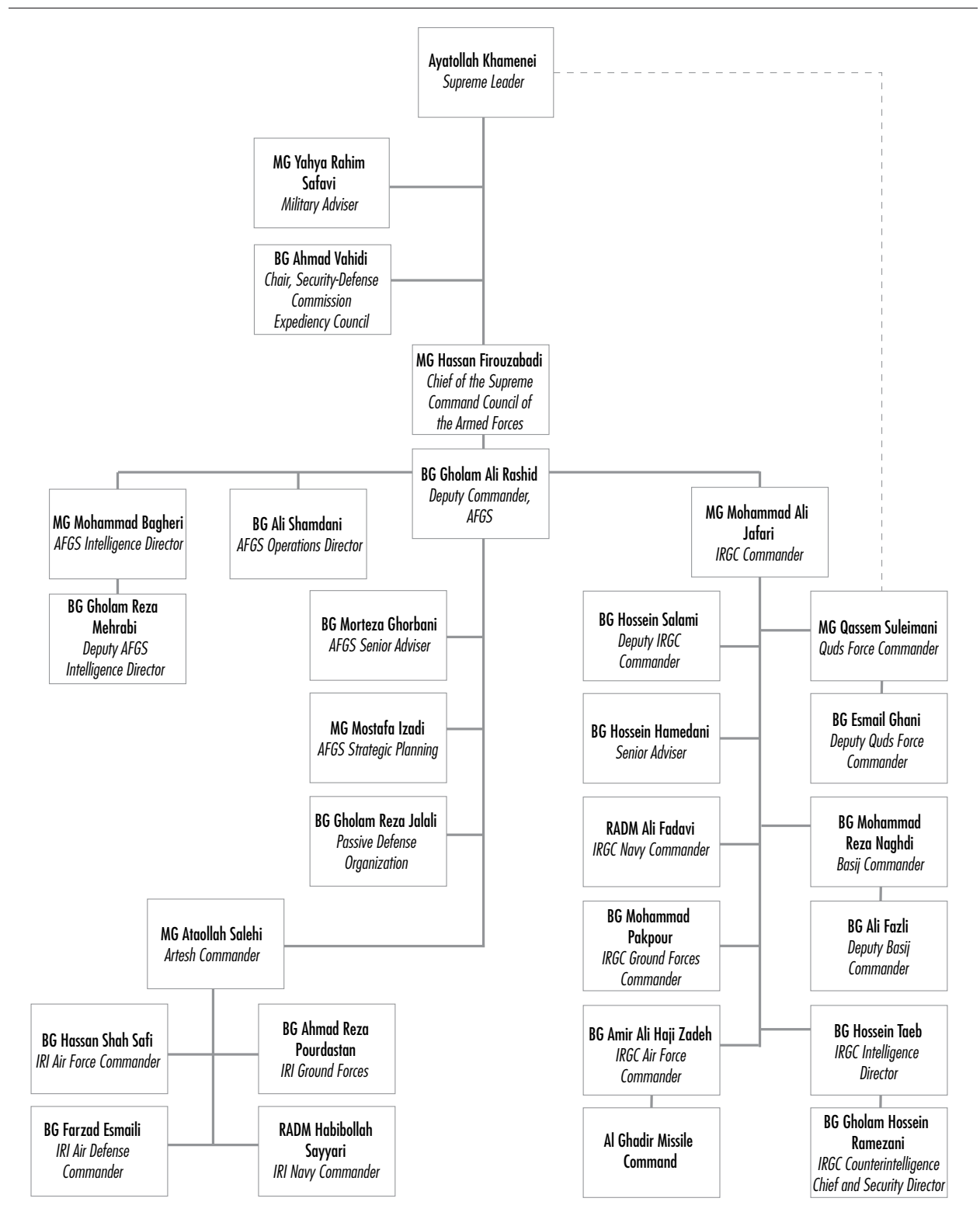
security decision-making infrastructure are much more prominent than those of similarly ranked Artesh leaders.

The first three decades after the revolution saw significant competition and distrust between the Artesh and the IRGC regarding decisions on military strategy, operations, and resources. Even following extensive purges of the Artesh's more independent-minded leaders, or those with connection to the former regime, Iran's new leadership lacked trust in the Artesh and granted the IRGC preferential investment. The competition between the two groups was exacerbated by the IRGC's expansion into the Artesh's traditional mission when the IRGC Navy gradually assumed full control of sea and littoral defense of the Persian Gulf. The IRGC was also granted possession of Iran's primary means of conventional power projection, its ballistic missile force.

Several factors have recently reduced the tensions between the two militaries. Competition over resources declined as the regime began to publicly express greater confidence in the Artesh and invest more in its modernization (table 1).[19]

IRGC efforts to improve the professionalization of the organization as it matures have helped bridge the military cultural gap with the more-established Artesh and mitigated divisions over military strategy. The merger of the IRGC and Artesh Command and General Staff Colleges in 1990 is one example of this trend, as officers from both militaries now receive the same training.[20] Senior Artesh leaders now have more professional connections with the IRGC or are former IRGC officers themselves. Finally, the increasing sophistication of Iranian military capabilities and operations, as

FIGURE 3
IRAN'S MILITARY DECISION MAKERS

Ayatollah Khamenei
Supreme Leader

MG Yahya Rahim Safavi
Military Adviser

BG Ahmad Vahidi
Chair, Security-Defense Commission Expediency Council

MG Hassan Firouzabadi
Chief of the Supreme Command Council of the Armed Forces

BG Gholam Ali Rashid
Deputy Commander, AFGS

MG Mohammad Bagheri
AFGS Intelligence Director

BG Ali Shamdani
AFGS Operations Director

MG Mohammad Ali Jafari
IRGC Commander

BG Gholam Reza Mehrabi
Deputy AFGS Intelligence Director

BG Morteza Ghorbani
AFGS Senior Adviser

BG Hossein Salami
Deputy IRGC Commander

MG Qassem Suleimani
Quds Force Commander

MG Mostafa Izadi
AFGS Strategic Planning

BG Hossein Hamedani
Senior Adviser

BG Esmail Ghani
Deputy Quds Force Commander

BG Gholam Reza Jalali
Passive Defense Organization

RADM Ali Fadavi
IRGC Navy Commander

BG Mohammad Reza Naghdi
Basij Commander

MG Ataollah Salehi
Artesh Commander

BG Mohammad Pakpour
IRGC Ground Forces Commander

BG Ali Fazli
Deputy Basij Commander

BG Hassan Shah Safi
IRI Air Force Commander

BG Ahmad Reza Pourdastan
IRI Ground Forces

BG Amir Ali Haji Zadeh
IRGC Air Force Commander

BG Hossein Taeb
IRGC Intelligence Director

BG Farzad Esmaili
IRI Air Defense Commander

RADM Habibollah Sayyari
IRI Navy Commander

Al Ghadir Missile Command

BG Gholam Hossein Ramezani
IRGC Counterintelligence Chief and Security Director

Note: AFGS=Armed Forces General Staff, IRI=Islamic Republic of Iran, IRGC=Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.
Source: Author

seen in Iran's recent campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq, requires deeper coordination among IRGC and Artesh leaders, at least at the strategic level.

The Armed Forces General Staff. The Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) is commanded by Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, who also oversees Iran's bifurcated military as the chief of the Supreme Command Council of the Armed Forces (figure 3). Firouzabadi is the highest military authority short of the supreme leader.[21] He is also one of the most incongruous figures in Iran's national security apparatus. A veterinarian by trade, Firouzabadi had minimal military experience before becoming the head of the AFGS. He has a very close relationship with Supreme Leader Khamenei, however, which is the basis for his role and influence within the upper ranks of the armed forces.

The deputy commander of the AFGS, Brigadier General Gholam Ali Rashid, is a noted military thinker and operator, in contrast to his boss Firouzabadi. Rashid is arguably at the heart of Iran's military strategy and planning. Aiding Rashid in the management of the Artesh and, to a lesser degree, the IRGC is the AFGS itself.

Several of these officers, including AFGS Intelligence Director Major General Mohammad Bagheri, Operations Director Brigadier General Ali Shamdani, Strategic Planning Director Major General Mostafa Izadi, and Senior Adviser Brigadier General Morteza Ghorbani, are part of what has been described as the IRGC Command Network.[22] The few dozen IRGC officers in this informal network have had a consistent association with one another since the Iran-Iraq War. Individuals within the network now dominate key leadership positions not only within the IRGC, but also in the AFGS, the Ministry of Defense, and the SCNS (such as Ali Shamkhani) and as senior advisers to the supreme leader (such as Yahya Safavi).

The placement of so many Command Network members in senior AFGS positions demonstrates a principal method for the Iranian leadership to mitigate concerns about Artesh loyalty and incorporate the more traditional military elements into the regime's ideologically based governance structures. A relatively homogenous leadership corps across Iran's uniquely complex military organs, all tightly connected to the supreme leader and his inner circle, also aids in finding consensus on security issues in both peacetime and crisis.

Command and Control. The IRGC retains a degree of autonomy from the AFGS in its operations as a result of both the special relationship its commanders have with the supreme leader and the role it plays in protecting the regime and exporting Iran's influence and revolutionary ideals abroad. The Quds Force's covert and clandestine operations are often fairly independent of even the IRGC, with Suleimani taking his orders directly from Khameini. The supreme leader likely uses this compartmentalization to control information and prevent the formation of any strong opposition within the senior ranks, even if it runs contrary to Iran's preference for consensus decision making.

Iran's consensual, diffused strategic decision making and bifurcated military structures have posed distinctive challenges to the regime in responding to crises and executing campaigns since the 1979 revolution. Iran's leadership has adapted to evolving threats by modernizing and professionalizing Iran's security organizations. Whether Iranian decision making becomes more efficient and effective as the senior leadership continues to adapt their processes remains unknown.

Evolving Threat Perceptions

In the first decade of the Islamic Republic, Iran's security decision making was dominated by the war with Iraq, neutralizing the revolution's internal enemies, and defending against US or Soviet intervention. In the 1990s, the IRGC and Artesh developed defensive strategies to deter the superior US conventional power displayed in the 1991 Persian Gulf War and expanded Iran's covert and clandestine proxy wars against Israeli, Saudi Arabian, and Western interests. After the al Qaeda terrorist attacks in 2001 and the US-led campaign that overthrew Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran attempted to neutralize the American threat on its doorstep through a deescalatory political posture and a covert campaign to coopt the new government in Baghdad and undermine the willingness of the US to stay in Iraq. Tehran also sought to defend against increasing fears of Western led-subversion and conducted an asymmetric military buildup to dissuade American naval and air power in the region. Following the 2011 uprisings in Syria, Iran's most crucial ally and its entire Resistance Network were at risk, a challenge only compounded by the Islamic State's rapid capture of northern Iraq in 2014.

To better understand how Iran's leaders understand their strategic environment, this section examines the two most direct confrontations between the United States and Iran since the revolution: the Tanker War and the Iranian proxy campaign in Iraq after 2003. I will also discuss the challenge the Iranian regime faces in preserving the Assad government in Syria.

The Iran-Iraq War and the Tanker War: 1980–88

For Iran, the Iran-Iraq War began as a defense campaign against Saddam Hussein's invasion of the country in September 1980. It was an existential threat to the state and the revolutionary regime. After Iranian forces had retaken almost all their lost territory in 1982, Tehran continued the war despite Iraqi offers of—and United Nations Security Council calls for—a ceasefire. The senior leadership fiercely debated this decision, but Supreme Leader Khomeini wanted to secure a stronger position on the ground against Iraq before any peace settlement, and he retained hopes of overthrowing the Iraqi government and establishing an Islamic Republic in Baghdad as the next step in the revolution. Six more years of bloody fighting resulted only in another stalemate.[23]

The so-called Tanker War began in 1984 under these circumstances. Iraq sought to disrupt Tehran's ability to fund and sustain the war by targeting Iran's energy and economic infrastructure. Iraq attempted to disrupt international shipping (especially oil tankers) to and from Iran. Iran executed a limited retaliation campaign with attacks on Iraqi or Iraq-allied (mainly Kuwaiti and Saudi Arabian) shipping and eventually blockaded the northern Persian Gulf. The Artesh relied on mainly ship- and land-based antiship missiles in its strikes, mitigating the relative superiority of the Iraqi and Saudi air forces. The newly formed IRGC Navy deployed large groups of small boats with rocket launchers and other lighter arms against both enemy and neutral shipping.[24]

Iran's strategic thinking in conducting the Tanker War campaign is easily discernible. Iran had to preserve its economic and war-fighting ability, so a response to Iraqi actions against its oil-exporting capacity was essential. Tehran had to limit retaliation, however, to avoid the United States directly entering conflict in support of Iraq.[25] Saddam Hussein allegedly wanted to provoke an Iranian overreaction, like closing the Strait of Hormuz, to trigger precisely such an international response.[26]

From an operational perspective, Iran exploited its geographic advantage and its adversary's economic

vulnerability by attempting to cut off the practically landlocked Iraq from Persian Gulf shipping. Iran also needed to demonstrate its naval strength, especially its ability to control the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, to deter foreign intervention. The use of armed small boats against large ships—a guerilla war at sea—showed the innovative warfare styles that would become the IRGC's hallmark and eventually developed into more formal doctrine. The IRGC's low-intensity, asymmetric approach also aided Iran in avoiding escalation of the maritime fight, at least for the first three years of the Tanker War.

The aftermath of an IRGC small-boat attack on a Kuwaiti ship in September 1986 prompted US intervention.[27] When Operation Earnest Will began in March 1987, the US Navy began flagging Kuwaiti and other allied or neutral ships with US colors and provided military escorts in the Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf. In September 1987, the United States observed an Iranian ship laying mines in the Strait of Hormuz, and in October, an Iranian missile struck a US-flagged oil tanker. The United States responded by destroying two Iranian oil platforms in the Gulf. When the US frigate *Samuel B. Roberts* hit a mine in April 1988—a mine traced to the batch of mines captured the previous September—the US retaliatory operation was swift and decisive. American naval forces sunk an Iranian frigate and damaged another, two of the most capable ships the Artesh Navy possessed. The United States also destroyed several small boats and damaged oil platforms used as Iranian command-and-control centers. The Artesh and IRGC navies carried out no significant engagements for the rest of the Iran-Iraq War.[28]

The Iran-Iraq War helped the more radical clerical elements under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini consolidate their control of the state and the direction of the revolution at the expense of secular, liberal, and moderate groups. The conflict, which the Iranian government refers to as the Imposed War and the Sacred or Holy Defense, took a devastating toll on the country. The brutal trench warfare, the loss of more than one million lives, the destruction from ballistic missiles and chemical warheads, and the absence of allies other than Syria shaped the new Islamic Republic's worldview and approach to military issues. The war left Iran's first generation of leaders with a deep suspicion of regional Arab states, a dedication to resilience and independence, and a wariness of trusting the West.

Iran did not want the Tanker War. It was a defense campaign with limited strategic and operational success, and it permanently hobbled the Artesh Navy. The four-year conflict showed, however, the resilience, creativity, and vulnerability of Iran's postrevolution hybrid military and established doctrinal approaches, operational art, patterns of engagement, and escalation management that would characterize US-Iranian confrontations at sea for decades to come.

After the Iran-Iraq War ended and Khamenei successfully transitioned to supreme leader following Khomeini's passing, Iranian leaders solidified the regime's structures and expressed greater confidence in the stability of the state and the revolution. The war also codified Iran's unique dual-military structure. The Artesh survived purges of much of its senior leadership after the revolution and retained its role as the conventional defender of the Iranian state. The IRGC, charged with protecting and promoting the revolution, evolved from a paramilitary organization at the beginning of the revolution to a more traditional military force that could collaborate with the Artesh. The IRGC became proficient in both ground and naval unconventional warfare and specialized in creating proxy forces in Iraq, the Levant, and elsewhere along the front lines of Iran's revolutionary struggle against Israel, the United States, and US Arab partners.

This low-intensity, covert, global conflict with the United States and its allies, along with a long-term effort to improve deterrence against Western conventional military power following quick defeats of Saddam Hussein's forces by the US in 1991 and 2003, has defined Iran's security situation and strategy since the end of Iran-Iraq War.

The "Great Satan" in Iraq and the Region: 2003–11

The US invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 was a mixed blessing for Iran. Tehran's most militarily powerful Arab rival was toppled, but in the process the army of its greatest enemy, the United States, was now on its western border. Following the

US-led coalition's rapid defeat of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran initially feared its regime was again at direct risk. The Iranian leadership recognized the enormous threat and opportunity in these circumstances and developed a multipronged strategy in response.

Diplomatically, Iran attempted reconciliation, most famously by the (allegedly ignored) fax to the US Department of State Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs in Washington, DC. The fax arrived shortly after US forces captured Baghdad in mid-April 2003, and offered a comprehensive deal regarding their nuclear program, a more conciliatory position towards Israel, and an end to Iran's support for Palestinian resistance groups.[29] Militarily, Iran escalated, launching an aggressive IRGC-led clandestine political and military proxy campaign to undermine the coalition in Iraq. The IRGC developed defense concepts, such as the Mosaic Doctrine, to survive invasion and eventually expel the invader through guerilla warfare. The success of the Sunni insurgency and IRGC proxy war against the United States alleviated Iran's concerns of any imminent regime-threatening attack.

Between 1990 and 2000, Iran's military decentralized its operational decision making.[30] After observing the US campaigns against Iraq to liberate Kuwait in 1991 and to overthrow Saddam Hussein in 2003, as well as operations in the former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, the IRGC recognized a need to mitigate the vulnerabilities of the regime's communications and military command and control.

This process accelerated following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. As part of the Mosaic Doctrine, developed in 2005 by future IRGC Commander Mohammad Ali Jafari, Iran began in 2008 to divide its subordinate military commands into 31 provincial-based units.[31] These new command centers are intended to operate flexibly and independently from Tehran. The concepts in the Mosaic Doctrine also further operationally integrated the Artesh and the IRGC in case of an invasion, with the former providing the initial defense of the country and the latter tasked with creating an insurgent resistance front to wear down and push back the invaders.

Tehran pursued a deescalatory approach toward the United States in the months leading up to and immediately following Saddam's defeat, responding to fears the United States could shift its military campaign to

Iran next. The previously mentioned Iranian fax to the US State Department in which Iran offered a compromise on the impasse over its nuclear program is an (in)famous example of Iran's more conciliatory diplomatic posture in 2003.

A number of Shia Iraqi political and paramilitary opposition groups—with Tehran's direction or encouragement—aided the coalition during and after the invasion, even though the Iranian leadership rhetorically opposed the US-led operation.[32] These organizations, such as the Badr Corps, Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and Dawa political party, had long relationships with Tehran going back to the Iran-Iraq War. SCIRI and Dawa would form the core Shia political block in Iraq's new government. The first posttransition prime minister, Nouri al Maliki, headed the Dawa party, for example. The US and its coalition partners were initially receptive to the role these groups could play in helping to build the post-Saddam Iraq.

A possible permanent US military presence in Iraq and a Western-aligned government in Baghdad (which could return hostile Sunnis to power) were not acceptable to Iran, however. Both scenarios could pose eventual existential challenges to the Islamic Republic. An Iraq free of US forces and closely tied to Tehran, in contrast, would provide a level of physical security and strategic depth that Iran had not seen since the 1979 revolution. It would also offer unprecedented opportunity to expand the reach, capacity, and freedom of movement of Iran's regional Resistance Network.

These were the principal incentives for an aggressive clandestine Iranian campaign to push out coalition forces and secure deep influence within the new Iraqi government. The chance to build a much stronger base of influence among Iraq's majority Shia populations and important religious institutions, in addition to the economic opportunities offered by the Iraqi oil sector and consumer market, provided the motivation for a major parallel soft-power campaign.

Iran's effort to shape Iraqi politics to its favor was the centerpiece of the strategy. Tehran supported Iranian-aligned parties like SCIRI and Dawa in the electoral process and worked to ensure it had allies in major cabinet departments such as the transportation and interior ministries. Iran retained a deciding voice

on who becomes prime minister of Iraq. Nouri al Maliki's ascension to this position in 2006 and his removal in 2014, as well as the subsequent appointment of Haider al Abadi, all required Iran's blessing.

This political effort encountered the typical handicaps Tehran faces when asserting Islamic and regional leadership in multisectarian Arab societies. Iran's heavy political hand and a perception of Persian condescension toward Arabs became a liability for its allies and drove resentment among Iraqi Shia and fear among Sunnis. To officially disassociate from Iran, SCIRI changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and switched its official source of religious emulation from Ayatollah Khamenei to Grand Ayatollah Sistani, head of the Shia seminaries (*hawza*) in Najaf, Iraq. Muqtada al Sadr, leader of the largest Shia political movement and militia army in Iraq, Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM), and ardent Iraqi nationalist, frequently rebelled against his Iranian patrons. Many Sunnis despised Prime Minister al Maliki and his government as representing an extension of Iranian regime and feared the Shia militias. This political landscape is partly why Iran was never able to build a Lebanese Hezbollah–like organization that could unite all the Iraqi Shia and establish Islamic governance in Iraq.

Tehran's hard-power campaign focused on creating or sponsoring existing proxy forces to coopt Iraqi security structures and strategically target the United States. Groups such as Badr and JAM integrated into Iraq's national police and army and the senior leaderships of the ministries of Interior, Intelligence, Defense, and other key departments. The IRGC Quds Force partnered with Arabic-speaking Lebanese Hezbollah officers to train the militias. The Quds Force also created elite special groups, or cells, such Asa'ib Ahl al Haq that would lead the operations against US and coalition forces and provide Iran a direct-action terrorist arm if needed. The IRGC supplied large amounts of weapons to these groups, most notably the improvised explosive devices known as explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) through smuggling networks associated with Badr.[33]

Hundreds of coalition military personnel were killed and thousands wounded by EFPs and other weapons used by Iranian-affiliated groups. Tehran wanted the coalition forces to bleed until they left and deter the United States from permanently staying in the country. Iran, however, needed to keep the conflict with the coalition from escalating to a direct confrontation with the United States. The Quds Force modulated proxy operations against the coalition and retained an amount of plausible deniability about Iran's role in supplying EFPs and other weapons. Iran was less successful in restraining local Shia militias like JAM.

Al Qaeda in Iraq bombed the holy Shia shrine in Samarra in February 2006, hoping to provoke a sectarian war with the Shia that would ultimately bring down the new Iraqi government. A two-year sectarian conflict ensued among Sunni and Shia militia groups in the neighborhoods of Baghdad and other mixed-confessional areas of Iraq, though the government never fell. Iran and its sponsored proxies could claim the mantle of protector of the Shia and the shrines, but this phase of the war left deep sectarian scars in the polity that harmed Tehran's long-term goals of having a unified Iraq under its sway.

Quds Force Commander Suleimani led both Iran's hard- and soft-power campaigns. He brokered major appointments within Iraq's government and advised Iraq's leadership while running the proxy war against the United States and overseeing the infiltration of allied groups into Iraqi security forces. His management of the entire Iraq portfolio is another unique feature of the Islamic Republic's command-and-control patterns. The supreme leader entrusts the Quds Force to secure and promote the Islamic Republic's interests and goals in the states most strategically and ideologically important to Iran and the Resistance Network: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestinian territories. In other crucial theaters that are not (yet) part of the Resistance Network—such as the Arabian Peninsula; Egypt; Afghanistan; Turkey; and nonaligned countries in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia—the Quds Force will often share the responsibility with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other parts of the Iranian government.

By the time American forces left Iraq in 2011, Iran had achieved most of its objectives. Tehran needed to deter and the push out the United States, build a friendly government, ensure freedom of movement for its operatives and the Resistance Network, and preserve the Shia population and shrines. This was Iran's

strategic calculus. Tehran achieved this though a concerted campaign to coopt the Iraqi government and security forces, build proxies, strategically target the United States while managing escalation, and spread its soft-power influence throughout Iraqi Shia society. This was its operational calculus.

This eight-year campaign under Suleimani was a continuation of the proxy conflict Iran conducted against Baghdad during and after the Iran-Iraq War. Suleimani's operations in Iraq did not end in 2011, but they continued with a lower profile until being dramatically reinvigorated and redirected to fight the Islamic State after the fall of Mosul.

Iran's need to deter the United States in the region also did not end with the success of its Iraq campaign. As the threat of an invasion that would potentially overthrow the regime declined, Tehran's military threat calculus shifted to dissuading or disrupting US conventional naval and air power in the region from coercing the regime or conducting limited strikes on its nuclear program. Iran accelerated its investment in ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, armed small boats, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), submarines, and other capabilities that could put US and allied air and naval forces in the region—and the Strait of Hormuz—at increasing risk.

The desire to neutralize the threat of a strike on its nuclear facilities was a factor in Iran's decision in 2013 to have direct talks with the United States and seek a diplomatic agreement to relieve sanctions.[34] How much Iran believes the United States or Israel is still prepared to conduct an attack after a year and half of negotiations could be an important factor in its willingness to make significant concessions at the table.

Of even greater concern in Iran's strategic calculus toward the United States in recent years is the fear of covert and cyber activities aimed at undermining the regime and the promotion of Western and un-Islamic culture and political thought through the Internet and traditional media, the so-called soft war.[35] Defending against the West's supposed soft war against Iran has been an increasingly dominant theme in the supreme leader's speeches and the IRGC's rhetoric and writing. Tehran ultimately fears its own people more than US bombs.

Syria, the Islamic State, and Continuing Iranian Evolution: 2011–15

The 2011 uprising in Syria during the Arab Spring quickly became an existential threat for Iran. Syrian President Bashar al Assad's brutal response to peaceful protests sparked a widespread revolt against Assad and his minority Alawite-led (a branch of Shia Islam) government. Multiple rebel groups formed, most of which were Sunni who ranged from moderate and secular to more Islamist in character. Al Qaeda also gained a foothold in the conflict with its official affiliate of Jabhat al Nusra and the more independent-minded Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (Levant), now known as ISIS or the Islamic State and previously known as al Qaeda in Iraq or the Islamic State in Iraq.

By the end of 2011, Syria was embroiled a multi-front civil war, and Assad was fighting for his life. A Sunni-led government in Damascus opposed to Iranian interests was a devastating prospect for Iran. Syria is the IRGC's primary forward-operating base in the Middle East and forms the political and logistical backbone for Iran's activities in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. Iran calculated that the loss of Syria could fatally damage the Resistance Network.

Syria and Iran's mutual isolation in the international community and need for collective deterrence against common enemies such as Israel and West forms a very stable basis for an alliance. Both states have threatened in the past to escalate conflict regionally in the other's defense, for example. This is the strategic depth that Syria provides Iran. The loss of Syria could bring all of Iran's of opponents to its doorstep. Although Assad's secular Baathist regime is far different from the Islamic Republic's model of governance, Syria and Iran also provide each other important ideological support in confronting Israel; the United States; and the US-led global political, economic, and military system.

Under the direction of Quds Force Commander Suleimani, Iran constructed a multipronged campaign to preserve an Iranian-aligned government in Damascus and the Resistance Network. Tehran would also work to deter external intervention from the West, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other adversaries. Protecting the holy Sayyidah Zaynab mosque outside Damascus would become a symbolic and logistical

focal point for the soft-power rhetoric of Iran's hard-power campaign.

The Islamic Republic began an expansive effort to stabilize, strengthen, and augment the Syrian regime's security forces to execute this strategy. Iran provided money, weapons, and free or discounted petroleum products. Tehran recognized that Assad's failures of judgment had helped create the crisis and that his forces were ill prepared to fight a sustained counterinsurgency, so the IRGC Quds Force sent some of its best leaders to advise. IRGC ground forces deployed expeditionary units with experience fighting Iranian Kurdish and Baluchi separatists to Syria. This was an unprecedented move representing an evolution in Iranian operational capabilities.[36]

Iran's entire Resistance Network was mobilized for the fight. The Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah built a new network of Syrian militia groups and facilitated the movement of other groups from Iraq and even Afghanistan to join the defense of Assad and the Sayyida Zaynab mosque. Iranian advisers helped the Syrian regime develop better strategies to exploit divisions within the opposition, including avoiding major confrontations with the Islamic State and Jabhat al Nusra to allow the two groups to focus on defeating the moderate rebels.

By the end of 2012 it was clear the Resistance Network's collective effort had proved insufficient to preserve Assad's position. Lebanese Hezbollah fighters entered the fight directly in early 2013, and since late spring of the 2013, the Syrian regime's hold on Damascus and key Alawite territories in the western part of country has not been seriously at risk. The ability of Assad and allies to recapture the rest of the country held by the Islamic State, Jabhat al Nusra, and the moderate rebels remains doubtful, however.

This situation was compounded when the Islamic State captured Mosul and most of northern Iraq in June 2014. The loss of Iraq to Sunni extremists represents a far greater existential threat to Iran than the loss of Damascus. Suleimani has shifted large numbers of the Shia militia back to Iraq, now the front line in the Resistance Network's and Iran's fight against their enemies.

Iran may have to settle for a rump Syrian state, but its core goals of preserving an aligned government in Damascus and the Resistance Network's viability while preventing major external interventions and protecting a key Shia shrine have been largely achieved so far. Under Suleimani's oversight, this recent conflict has seen an expansion of Iran's operational capability.

The past year has been the most significant test of Iran's military decision making and national security policies since the Iran-Iraq War. Since the fall of Mosul, the Iranian campaign against the Islamic State has required a significant level of coordination between the IRGC and the Artesh. Under Suleimani's direction, the Quds Force and other elements of the IRGC have worked with their Iraqi partners and proxies to build a militia army that augments and, in some cases, supplants the Iraqi security forces in the fight against the Islamic State. The Artesh has concurrently directed a major effort to defend Iran's border with Iraq and has conducted the military's first airstrikes outside Iran's borders in 26 years. The overall planning and coordination for the campaign is presumably conducted by the AFGS, but many questions remain about whether Suleimani or someone in Tehran, such as Rashid or Jafari, has full operational command of the forward effort.

The conflict in Iraq may help not only reveal the nature of Iran's modern command and control but also drive further innovation in its operational decision making.

Conclusion: Toward a Framework for Iranian Strategic Thinking

There is no ready-made algorithm for how any state—including Iran—makes decisions on national security policy and the use of military force. This does not mean, however, that such decisions are incomprehensible or inherently unpredictable. Analyzing patterns of historical behavior, the evolution of worldview and threat perceptions, and the key personalities and processes comprising state decision making can provide reasonable parameters for anticipating a state's policies and actions. I have argued in this paper that Iran's historical legacies, geographical realities, religious and ideological tenets, and national interests shape the Islamic Republic's threat perceptions and its leadership's worldview. Understanding these elements of Iran's strategic culture can help US policymakers understand Iran's security-related thinking, policies, and actions.

Given Iran's strategic culture, what are the primary characteristics of Iranian strategic and military thinking? First, Iran is a **fundamentally defensive state**. Iran is principally concerned with its own stability and regime survival, and its main strategic goals are to mitigate its relative isolation while deterring potential attack from multiple nearby military adversaries. A sense of relative insecurity can be seen in much of Tehran's behavior, including its search for greater strategic depth in the region and preference for self-sufficiency in military capabilities.

Second, Iranian foreign and security policies are shaped by **dual factors of national interests (expediency) and ideology**. The tension between these poles of thought defines the national security debate within the regime, though expediency will trump ideological concerns whenever the leadership perceives a real conflict. The state must be preserved for the revolutionary principles of the Islamic Republic to survive. Ideological principles cannot be wholly set aside, however. The loss of *velayat-e faqih*, presumption of Islamic

leadership, anti-Americanism, or anti-Zionism would challenge the raison d'être of the supreme leader, the IRGC, and other unique features of the Iranian regime.

The Resistance Network of proxies and partners is the most distinctive feature of Iran's foreign and military policies and reflects this duality of ideological and national interests. Iran prefers to exercise soft power rather than hard power in these efforts but employs both with vigor. The network projects Iranian influence and ideas while providing Tehran with lethal and clandestine means to project power, deter its adversaries, and compete with rivals. If Iran is defensive in a conventional military sense, its asymmetric regional and global campaigns through the IRGC and the Resistance Network can be very aggressive.

Third, Iran prioritizes **internal security concerns above external ones**. As a revolutionary state, the greatest threat to the supreme leader will come from divisions among the regime's elites or from the population. Vigilance against subversion and preserving domestic stability dominate security policymaking and military planning. These concerns are not limited to times of crisis, for defense against sedition originating from foreign powers is especially important. In conflict, Iran will likely see the battle lines drawn both inside and outside its borders.

Fourth, Iran's **consensual decision-making style is becoming more coherent** as the senior leadership group becomes tighter and its security organizations evolve and professionalize. This trend will inevitably impact the speed and characteristics of Iranian decision making, but exactly how remains uncertain. In future crises or conflicts will decisions to use force be quicker? Will they be more susceptible to groupthink? Will military campaigns become more integrated, or will Iran's bifurcated command and control remain an operational obstacle? Will these patterns survive the passing

of Supreme Leader Khamenei? These are important questions for US defense and military planners.

Fifth, the regime's **perception of threats to national interests and core ideological principles drives Iran's behavior** both internationally and domestically. Recognizing when the state; the continuation of the revolution; Iran's economic viability; or its leadership among Muslims, Shia Muslims, or regional neighbors are at risk is crucial for analysts and policymakers in deciphering and anticipating Iran's security decisions. If Iran's fear of US military attack or intervention continues to decline, for example, Washington may see new shifts in Tehran's diplomatic and military posture. If fighting unconventional groups like the Islamic State becomes the dominant threat, Iran may need to shift its military posture to focus on hybrid warfare in the region and improve its ability to project conventional air and ground power in conjunction with its proxy forces. These two trends in threat perceptions may also diminish the relative strategic value of acquiring a nuclear bomb if Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability has been tied to deterring a potential regime-threatening conventional military attack.

Sixth, Iran has a historical **preference for conducting low-intensity, proxy, and asymmetric warfare**.

Using others to fight your conflicts and keep adversaries occupied away from your borders is a logical response to Iran's difficult strategic position in the region. As seen in the IRGC and Artesh's conduct in the Tanker War and the Iraq campaign post-2003, having some plausible deniability and keeping the conflict level restrained allows Tehran to manage escalation with more powerful adversaries like the United States.

Finally, **Iran's military strategies and doctrines react to the regional conventional military dominance of the United States and its allies**. Tehran needs to deter the United States and its allies and has built its force posture—ballistic missiles, antiship cruise missiles, swarming armed small boats, mines, and cyber capabilities—in response. Passive defense and the Mosaic Doctrine are fundamental to Iran's strategic doctrine and were built specifically to respond to the American way of war since 1991. Iran also shows increasing sophistication in its military strategy and doctrine writings.

These factors, characteristics, and principles should help policymakers and analysts better understand and model Iranian strategic thinking and behavior. They are, however, only a thesis or framework, and one that requires deeper empirical and historical study.

Notes

1. See, for example, Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," *International Security* 19, no. 9 (Spring 1995): 32–64; or Willis Stanley, "The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *Comparative Strategic Cultures Curriculum Project*, ed. Jeffrey A. Larsen (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Threat Reduction Agency, October 2006), www.fas.org/irp/agency/dod/dtra/iran.pdf.

2. Iran and Persia are used interchangeably in this report to denote the empire, nation, or state prior to the Pahlavi dynasty's strictly referencing the state as "Iran" in the early 20th century.

3. Sun Tzu's classic work, *The Art of War*, was first translated into English in 1910 by Lionel Giles, an assistant in the Department of Oriental Printed Books in the British Museum, in London.

4. Academics studying China's strategic culture include Thomas J. Christensen (Princeton University), Alastair Iain Johnston (Harvard University), David Shambaugh (George Washington University), Christopher P. Twomey (US Naval Postgraduate School), and Susan H. Whiting (University of Washington). Those specializing in Russia's strategic culture include Jacob W. Kipp (University of Kansas), James J. Schneider (US Army Command and General Staff College), and Sergei M. Plekhanov (York University). There is no clear analogue for Iran studies.

5. Some academics based in the North America, Europe, or Australia occasionally address Iran's strategic culture, but it is generally not their primary focus. Examples include Roham Alvandi (London School of Economics), Steven Ekovich (American University-Paris), Fariborz Mokhtari (University of Vermont), Richard L Russell (National Defense University), Jalil Roshandel (East Carolina University), and Adam Tarock (University of Melbourne).

6. Key examples include Michael Eisenstadt (Washington Institute for Near East Policy), Michael Connell (Center for Naval Analyses), David Crist (Joint Chiefs of Staff Historian), Alireza Nader (RAND Corporation), and Alex Vatanka (Middle East Institute).

7. Michael Rubin and Ahmad K. Majidyar, *The Shi'ites of the Middle East: An Iranian Fifth Column?* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, July 2014), www.aei.org/publication/the-shiites-of-the-middle-east-an-iranian-fifth-column/.

8. Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *New Yorker*, September 30, 2013, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander. For a discussion in Persian, please see "Chera Qassem Suleimani khatarnak tarin mard saal az negah amrikast?" [Why Is Qassem Suleimani the Most Dangerous Man of the Year in the Eyes of America?], n.d., Khat-e Emam [Foundation for Understanding the teachings of the Imam in Universities], www.khatteemam.ir/fa/?p=15258. The Persian article relates a 1995 meeting with staff members and officials wherein Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei called Suleimani a "living martyr" in commemorating the 8,000 martyrs and generals from Kerman, Hormozegan, and Sistan-Baluchistan provinces.

9. For a more extensive examination of expediency and the supreme leader's approach to Islamic law and governance, see Mehdi Khalaji. *Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Policy* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2008), 28–29, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/apocalyptic-politics-on-the-rationality-of-iranian-policy.

10. Danielle Pletka and Frederick W. Kagan, *America vs. Iran: The Competition for the Future of the Middle East* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, January 2014), www.aei.org/publication/america-vs-iran-the-competition-for-the-future-of-the-middle-east/.

11. See Michael Eisenstadt, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Operational and Policy Implications* (Marine Corps University Middle East Studies Monograph No. 1, August 2011), www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/4e60ff471079a.pdf.

12. David Ignatius, "An Iranian Who Could Balance Tehran's Factions?" *Washington Post*, October 30, 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/david-ignatius-ali-shamkhani-is-a-rising-figure-in-iranian-nuclear-talks/2014/10/30/b6ea1238-606e-11e4-9f3a-7e28799e0549_story.html; and Alex Vatanka, "Ali Shamkhani: Rouhani's Bridge-Builder to the Arab World?"

National Interest, October 20, 2014, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/ali-shamkhani-rouhani%E2%80%99s-bridge-builder-the-arab-world-11500.

13. "Supreme National Security Council," Global Security, last modified September 7, 2011, www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/sndc.htm; and Daniel Byman et al., *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), 21–25, www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1320/.

14. Byman et al., *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era*, 25–26; and Frederic Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009): 9–10, www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG821.html.

15. See discussion of the 1998 Afghanistan crisis in Byman et al., *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era*, 24.

16. Frederick W. Kagan, *Khamenei's Team of Rivals: Iranian Decision-Making, June-July 2014* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute Critical Threats Project, July 2014), www.aei.org/publication/khameneis-team-of-rivals-iranian-decision-making-june-july-2014/.

17. Ibid.

18. Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 125–210.

19. Alex Vatanka, "Ayatollah Khamenei's Advances toward the *Artesh*," in *The Artesh: Iran's Marginalized Regular Military* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2011), 55–58, www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/-the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military_171758621702.pdf.

20. "Daneshgah farmandehi va setad aja" [Command and Staff College] official website, accessed January 26, 2015, http://dafoosaja.ac.ir/about.

21. Although this position has existed since 1988, when the unified General Staff was created to oversee command of Iran's armed forces, it remained a weak position. The regular armed forces and the IRGC maintained separate headquarters and joint staffs, limiting the real power of the chief of the General Staff. With Firouzabadi's appointment in 1992, the position was strengthened, outranking both the commander of the IRGC and the regular army's chief of staff. See Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran's Military Forces in Transition: Conventional Threats and Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999): 32–36.

22. Will Fulton, *The IRGC Command Network: Formal Structures and Informal Influence* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, July 2013), www.irantracker.org/analysis/fulton-irgc-command-network-july-22-2013.

23. Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1990), 353–411.

24. David Crist, *The Twilight War* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 207–10; Cordesman and Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II*, 271–74.

25. Fariborz Haghshenass, "Iran's Asymmetric Naval Warfare," *Policy Focus*, no. 87 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2008): 6, 20, www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus87.pdf.

26. Cordesman and Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II*, 174.

27. Ibid., 277: Crist, *The Twilight War*, 210.

28. David Crist, *Gulf of Conflict: A History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2009), www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/gulf-of-conflict-a-history-of-u.s.-iranian-confrontation-at-sea.

29. Glenn Kessler, "In 2003, U.S. Spurned Iran's Offer of Dialogue," *Washington Post*, June 18, 2006, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/17/AR2006061700727.html.

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org/resource/irans-military-doctrine.

32. See Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and "Other Means"* (West Point, NY: United States Military Academy, Combating Terrorism Center, October 13, 2008), www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/iranian-strategy-in-iraq-politics-and-%E2%80%9Cother-means%E2%80%9D.

33. Ibid. See also Kimberly Kagan, *Iran's Proxy War against the United States and the Iraqi Government* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, August 2007), https://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/reports/IraqReport06.pdf.

34. J. Matthew McInnis, *ISIS, Israel and Nukes: Iran Faces Crisis* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, November 2014), www.aei.org/publication/isis-israel-nukes-iran-faces-crises/.

35. See for example Monroe Price, "Iran and the Soft War," *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 2397–415, http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1654/799; Nima Adelkhah, "Iran Integrates the Concept of the "Soft War" Into its Strategic Planning," *Terrorism Monitor* 8, no. 23 (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, June 2010): 7–9, www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM_008_46.pdf; and Amir Toumaj, *Iran's Economy of Resistance: Implications for Future Sanctions* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute Critical Threats Project, November 17, 2014): 5–8, www.irantracker.org/sites/default/files/imce-images/ToumajA_Irans-Resistance-Economy-Implications_november2014.pdf.

36. See Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer, *Iranian Strategy in Syria* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War and American Enterprise Institute Critical Threats Project, May 2013), www.aei.org/publication/iranian-strategy-in-syria/; and Will Fulton, *The Assassination of Iranian Quds Force General Hassan Shateri in Syria* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute Critical Threats Project, February 28, 2013), www.aei.org/publication/the-assassination-of-iranian-quds-force-general-hassan-shateri-in-syria/.

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