

Iran Deploys its War Machine

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TEHRAN – For Hossein Shariatzadeh, a veteran of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, now navigating Tehran’s traffic-choked streets as a taxi driver, the issue of whether the United States will strike Iraq is hardly a frightening prospect.

“This is Iran,” he roared. “It is fire. It is a nuclear bomb. Don’t look at my sitting behind the wheel of this car. I would get up in a second and head off to the front to fight.”

During his 18 months of service at the front, Shariatzadeh claims to have fought in several flashpoint events. Before being evacuated to Tehran after taking a bullet in the stomach, he participated in the 18th Mah, Fath-ul Mubin and Fajrs 1, 2 and 4 offensives, some of the most horrific campaigns of a drawn-out war characterized by trench warfare and tens of thousands of dead in return for minuscule advances.

Despite Shariatzadeh’s lust to head to the front and defend his homeland, Iran’s strategic planners are acutely aware that a military confrontation with the technologically more advanced US Army would be as rapid and multi-fronted as the Iran-Iraq War was static and slow-paced. Quite simply, there would not be a single front.

Neither the US nor Israel has ruled out taking military action against nuclear-related targets in Iran if ongoing diplomatic efforts to freeze Tehran’s nuclear program do not prove successful.

Accordingly, Iran has been quietly restructuring its military, while carrying out a series of military exercises testing its new military dogma. In December, more than 15,000 members of the regular armed forces participated in war games in northwestern Iran’s strategically sensitive East Azerbaijan and West Azerbaijan border provinces that focused on irregular warfare carried out by highly mobile and speedy army units.

In another telling development, a second exercise was launched in the majority-Arab province of Khuzestan, reportedly aimed at quelling insurgencies in areas subject to ethnic unrest and prone to foreign influence. Involving 100,000 troops, the exercise provided a taste of how the Islamic Republic would respond to further disturbances in the strategic, oil-rich province.

The exercise came on the heels of news that the irregular Basij forces that led Iran’s offensives against Iraq were being bolstered by so-called Ashura battalions with riot-control training.

It is all part of a fundamental transition that Iran’s Revolutionary Guard (RG) is undergoing as it moves away from focusing on waging its defense of the country on the borders – unrealistic in view of the vast territory that requires securing and the gulf separating Iranian

and US military capabilities – and toward drawing the enemy into the heartland and defeating it with asymmetrical tactics.

At the same time, the RG is moving away from a joint command with the ordinary army and taking a more prominent role in controlling Iran's often porous borders, even as it makes each of Iran's border provinces autonomous in the event of war. Iranian military planners know that the first step taken by an invading force would be to occupy oil-rich Khuzestan province, secure the sensitive Strait of Hormuz and cut off the Iranian military's oil supply, forcing it to depend on its limited stocks.

Foreign diplomats who monitor Iran's army make it clear that Iran's leadership has acknowledged it stands little chance of defeating the US Army with conventional military doctrine. The shift in focus to guerrilla warfare against an occupying army in the aftermath of a successful invasion mirrors developments in Iraq, where a triumphant US campaign has been followed by three years of slow hemorrhaging at the hands of insurgents.

Tehran argues that it is at a high level of preparedness and points to a number of war games carried out in recent months along its coastal zones, from Bandar Abbas and the Strait of Hormuz in January to the Persian Gulf theater in April and the Khorramshahr naval base and the northwestern parts of the Persian Gulf as of Sunday.

From several interviews with Iranian officials, researchers and foreign diplomats, it is clear that the Iranian army considers itself ready to repel a US land offensive and increasingly sees itself as the main regional power.

In line with the new feeling of invulnerability sweeping through Iran's military elite, RG commander-in-chief Yehya Rahim Safavi warned last month that "the Americans should accept Iran as a great regional power, and they should know that sanctions and military threats are not going to benefit them but are going to be against their interests and against the interests of some European countries".

Iran's new asymmetrical-warfare plan appears to be aimed at neutralizing possible US-led offensives across the Mandali-Ilam (central Iraq-central Iran) axis. The Iranian Zagros mountain range offers a natural first line of defense. It has been reported that the RG is constructing new bases at Khorramabad, Pessyan, Borujerd, Zagheh and Malayer in the province of Lorestan, which would assure the logistics of a quarter of a million troops and provide temporary shelter for half a million refugees from the border. These bases are supposedly complementing older ones further west at Sahneh and Kangavar.

"We know for a fact that no two Western wars are similar," said Hossein, a member of the RG, "and we know there are at least three possible scenarios of attacking these [nuclear] sites, including using their submarines in the Persian Gulf, commandos from the sea, or Mujahideen-e-Khalq trained in Israel and Azerbaijan to destroy the Bushehr nuclear power plant from the inside."

Even while Iran's military is choosing to go low-tech, the country's leadership is continuing to apply advanced technology to military uses. Tehran is continuing with development of its long-range missiles and is forging ahead on its indigenous satellite program that centers on Russian-supplied technology.

In addition, Tehran's aging air-defense system will be boosted by Russian-supplied land-to-

air rockets. Also, Iran has aging Chinese missiles that it upgraded and could deploy on coastal batteries, fast attack boats or even warplanes. Finally, were Iran to possess the fearsome Russian-made 3M-82 Moskit anti-ship missiles, it could turn the Persian Gulf into a death trap for the US fleet.

“While Iranian air power is somewhat limited, it has much in terms of land-to-air weaponry and has improvised much as well,” Abdurrahman Shayyal, a Saudi Middle East and North Africa analyst, told Asia Times Online. “Furthermore, Iran has proved rather hard to infiltrate, and its military installations and bases are very well protected.”

With the confrontation between Washington and Tehran escalating, a new, US-inspired plan to establish an anti-Iranian security regime has further raised tension in the Persian Gulf region. Aside from running covert operations inside Iran’s ethnically mixed border provinces, the US administration is marshaling an alliance of Iran’s Arab neighbors in the intensifying face-off.

The US media reported last weekend that the United States was trying to create a regional missile-defense system for the Gulf that would be integrated with real-time intelligence using sophisticated US Navy Aegis cruisers.

“Any security regime for the Persian Gulf that doesn’t include Iran will not succeed,” said Muhammad Reza Saedabadi, an assistant professor at the Institute of North American and European Studies at the University of Tehran. “It’s splitting the region. It’s good for the arms race and for arms sales to Persian Gulf states, but not for regional security.”

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice continued ratcheting up the tension by refusing to offer Iran a guarantee that the United States would not attack it. “Iran is a troublemaker in the international system, a central banker of terrorism. Security assurances are not on the table,” she said.

While seen as potentially threatening by several Gulf Arab governments, Iran commands significant popularity among indigenous Shi’ite Arab populations in Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. To a lesser extent, Sunni Arabs in the Gulf region and the wider Middle East applaud Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad for his strident anti-Western rhetoric, which emphasizes his country’s independence and echoes the anti-imperialist liberation ideology of 1960s pan-Arabism.

Reflecting this mood, the English-language Gulf News published an editorial on Tuesday titled “An American offer we must refuse”. It said, “As if the region was not volatile enough, the US now wants to install an advanced missile system in GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] states.

“Gulf countries have enough problems trying to walk a narrow path between the various positions ... so there is no need to exacerbate things further by introducing into the region such controversial measures as heightened security controls and advanced missile systems,” the newspaper said.

At a “consultative summit” in Riyadh on May 6, the GCC countries indicated that they did not want Iran to have a nuclear weapon, but were also opposed to the use of force against it. Their position with regard to Iran, so far, bears greater similarity with the stance taken by Russia and China than the one adopted by the US and its European allies.

The GCC is a regional organization comprising the six Persian Gulf Arab states. Created on May 25, 1981, the council's members are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

"The US is being completely ridiculous. While it wishes to police the region, it is dealing with a country that is significantly more powerful than Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Vietnam, and every other country bar Germany that it has ever fought," said Abdurrahman Shayyal.

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