



Media outlets visit one of the many impact sites created by the recent missile attacks at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, Jan. 13, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Derek Mustard)

# Iran: Framing the Threat

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**H**istorically, the Middle East has been the epicenter of significant political and geographical developments. These include the birthplace of civilizations, clashes between empires, and the rise of three monolithic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam ("Which Religions," n.d.). Today, the region is infamous for its fossil fuels, the Arab-Israeli conflict, terrorism, and war. Iran, in particular, is a dangerous state supporting terrorism, instigating instability, seeking nuclear weapons, constantly violating international law, and attempting to become the regional hegemony (Votel, 2019). Arguably, Iran is the most dangerous adversary in the Middle East.

## Framing the Operational Environment to Understand the Threat

In military planning, planners study the operational environment (OE) in order to understand complex

problems. "The OE is the composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect the employment of capabilities and bear on the decisions of the commander" (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017, p. IV-10). This article uses the DIME framework which consists of Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic variables to examine Iran's potential threat to the Middle East and the rest of the world (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017).

## Background

The political spectrum in Iran is complex with a deep history. However, the most important historical events related to contemporary politics began in 1926 as the Qajar Dynasty was overthrown by Reza Shah, a military officer, who led a coup with the support of Great Britain. Later, during World War II, Iran was invaded by Russian and British forces who placed Muhammad Reza, the Shah's son in charge. The foreign powers also limited

the new Shah's power to ensure compliance.

In 1953, the elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mosaddegh, consolidated power away from the Shah and foreign interests. These policies motivated American and British intelligence agencies to join forces and engineer a coup to overthrow Mosaddegh and return the power to the Shah, and with it "the west's oil interest in the country" (Dehghan & Norton-Taylor, 2013, para. 9). This coup changed the course of Iranian politics and provoked Iran's distrust of the U.S. and U.K. ("How the CIA Overthrew Iran's Democracy," 2019).

In the 1970s, Ruhollah Khomeini replaced the Shah, and converted Iran's constitutional monarchy to an Islamic republic (a sovereign state ruled by Islamic laws) and placed Khomeini as the supreme leader—the highest-ranking political and religious authority of the nation ("A Brief History of Iran," n.d.; Afary, Avery, & Mostofi, 2020). Khomeini died in 1989 and was replaced with former Iranian President Ali Khamenei as the new supreme leader.

## Diplomatic Variables

The history of Iran is important because it provides insight as to why Ayatollah Khomeini structured Iranian power the way he did. The supreme leader surrounded himself with layers of concentric circles of influence and protection. These layers are called the "four rings of power" (Schneider & Post, 2003, p. 143).

- The first ring contains the powerful clerics led by the supreme leader.
- The second ring contains the ranking governmental functionaries at the national and provincial level.
- The third ring is formed around the regime's power base which includes media, security forces, and institutions. This ring is important because it is charged with disseminating the regime's ideology and countering any threats.
- The last ring includes former influential entities that may lead to semi-opposition and peaceful reform (Schneider & Post, 2011).

Iran's revolutionary nature, along with perpetual conflict in the region, keeps the Iranian government



Iranian soldiers march during a military parade in 2018. (Image courtesy of Farzad Menati\*)

anxious of potential regime change. The current political structure is designed to reduce the risk of coups. The Iranian political framework is a mix of both theocratic and democratic structures.

### Supreme Leader:

He holds supreme power and authority over religion and governance. He controls security forces and the media and appoints judicial leaders and half of the Council of Guardians.

### President:

The president is nationally elected and must be a Shia Muslim. They are head of the executive branch, but can be overruled by the supreme leader and is often thought of as a figure head. Iranian presidents are the face of the nation, but it is clear that the supreme leader is the one in control (Berger, 2020).

### Parliament:

Members of parliament are elected but must be approved by the Council of Guardians. They represent the provinces and introduce and pass legislation.

### Assembly of Experts:

This is an 86-member council, appointed by a popular vote, who elect, monitor, and have the power to replace the supreme leader.

### Council of Guardians:

This is a 12-member council with six theologians appointed by the supreme leader and six jurists appointed by parliament. They review political candidates and legislation for consistency with Islamic Laws.

### **Judiciary:**

The supreme court is appointed by the head of the judiciary who is appointed by the supreme leader. The high court acts as a court of appeals and sets judicial precedent (Bruno, 2008).

The intrusive history of foreign intervention in Iran and the Middle East has shaped Iran's political structure and foreign affairs policies. Iran practices both defensive and offensive tactics in its approach to protect itself and gain influence in the region. It takes advantage of conflicts and aligns itself with factions that provide power, access, or support in opposing foreign influence (Katzman, 2020).

According to the Washington Institute, aligning itself with other entities has allowed Iran to create a Shia network of influence from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean (Clawson, Ghaddar, & Uskowi, 2018). Internationally, Iran has led the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that condemns "great power influence over global affairs" (Katzman, 2020, p.7). This means that Iran does not favor publicly aligning with other countries when possible, especially major powers like the U.S. To Iran, diplomacy is a tool for greater access, not cooperation, since Iran frequently violates international law by providing "support for terrorists and militant partners around the world" (Katzman, 2020, p. 3-4). In April of 2019, the U.S. even went so far as to designate the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization (Gearan & Morello, 2019).

### **Information Variables**

In 2010, Iran was the victim of a sophisticated cyber assault that caused damage to their uranium centrifuging equipment. This event was pivotal in Iran's security capabilities because not only did it set Iran's uranium program back, but it also motivated Iran to invest heavily into the cyber security realm (O'Flaherty, 2020).

Since the attack on its uranium program, Iran's offensive cyber capabilities have increased and they have been accused of several sophisticated attacks. "One of the most well-known is the attack on the Saudi Aramco oil company in 2017 utilizing the Shamoon virus—which was so devastating that the network had to be rebuilt almost from scratch" (O'Flaherty, 2020, para. 12). Philip Ingram, a former colonel in British military intelligence, told *Forbes* that "Iran has a very sophisticated broad spectrum of capabilities able to target critical national infrastructure, financial institutions, education establishments, manufacturers and more" (O'Flaherty, 2020, para. 15).

Iran will most likely continue to invest in its cyber capabilities, including propaganda and disinformation campaigns to try and control the public opinion on issues concerning the Middle East and Iran's future (O'Sullivan, 2020).

### **Military Variables**

In its armed forces structure, Iran has layers to ensure its survival. Within Iran's military, there are two main branches: The conventional army, known as the Artesh, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. "Whereas the Artesh is mainly responsible for guarding the independence and territorial integrity of the country, the IRGC is charged primarily with defending and protecting the Islamic regime" (Golkar, 2019, p. 2).

#### **Army of the Islamic Republic (Artesh):**

The Artesh is the conventional military force composed of naval, air, and ground forces with the mission of national defense against an invading force. It consists of roughly 130,000 professional and noncommissioned officers and 220,000 conscripts who serve a mandatory term between 18 and 24 months (Golkar, 2019).

#### **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC):**

The IRGC was created by Ayatollah Khomeini after the 1979 revolution to ensure "continuation of the Revolution at home and abroad," as written in the preamble of the Iranian constitution (Department of State, 2018, p. 8). According to retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the IRGC was directly responsible for training and arming Shia militias in Iraq. This support included Iranian-made bombs that were particularly effective against Coalition-armored vehicles (McChrystal, 2019). The IRGC executes much of Iran's domestic and foreign policy. "The supreme leader uses the IRGC to enforce his will upon the Iranian people and squash any perceived threats, both from inside and outside the country" (Berger, 2020, para. 5).

#### **Internal Defense Strategy**

Since the 1980s, Iran has employed a multi-tiered defense strategy relying on long-range ballistic missiles as a deterrent, and a traditional defense by irregular forces trained in asymmetric warfare (Yossef, 2019). Their deterrence approach includes the largest ballistic missile program in the region. "Iran's ballistic missile programs, which [has] the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the region, poses a threat to countries across the Middle East" (Coats, 2019, p. 10). Its internal defense strategy is more complex.

After 2003, Iran saw one of its main threats eliminated and replaced with an American presence on either flank. This led to a new defensive strategy called the "mosaic defense," in which "the IRGC and Artesh, through the mobilization of a large, dispersed militia force to engage in attritional warfare against the invading forces" (Yoseff, 2019, para. 4). This strategy includes hit-and-run tactics, guerrilla operations, and mobilizing the population to make any occupation attempt too costly to accomplish.

Where diplomacy is passive, "Iran uses its IRGC-QF to advance its interests abroad, provide cover for intel-



Ayatollah Khamenei, supreme leader of Iran, and other Iranian officials attend the funeral of Qasem Soleimani, a general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, in Tehran, Iran, Jan. 6, 2020. (Image courtesy of Farsi Khamenei\*)

ligence operations, and create instability in the Middle East” (Department of State, 2018, p. 8). But IRGC operations do not end in the Middle East. Iran’s interest in exporting their ideology and countering America’s influence is a global one. Iranian agents have been linked or directly involved in terrorist attacks, plots, and assassinations in over 20 countries over the last 40 years (Department of State, 2018, p. 8).

### Economic variables

The same complex government structure that allows the regime to protect itself, may also be its greatest economic liability. The self-appointing political structure breeds corruption and expensive bureaucracy that impedes private investment and production. “Iran’s economy, one of the Middle East’s most advanced before 1979, has been plagued by mismanagement, international sanctions, and systematic graft” (“Iran,” 2019, para. 3). The 2015 nuclear deal briefly allowed Iran to increase exports and international investments, however, the “U.S. decertification of the JCPOA nuclear deal in 2017 and reimposition of U.S. economic sanctions in 2018 caused inflation to soar and led to rapid currency depreciation” (“Iran,” 2019, para. 2).

While the economy in Iran is not doing well in global markets, there is one organization that has risen to dominate many sectors of the national economy. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, the IRGC has become an economic powerhouse and has expanded its presence beyond its original military and religious preservation role and has become a major player in banking, shipping, manufacturing, consumer

imports, as well as black market activities like weapons acquisitions, smuggling, and covert operations abroad (“Iran’s Revolutionary Guards,” 2019). Its close relationship with the supreme leader places the IRGC in a powerful position to win government contracts and expand its ownership of firms that can provide services in Iran and invest with allies overseas (Rizvi, 2012; Department of State, 2018).

### Moving Forward

Politically and ideologically, Iran has a long history of foreign intervention. Tehran will continue to invest resources and efforts in strengthening its layered defenses while also continuing to build its offensive capabilities through maritime patrolling, ballistic missiles, instigating smaller conflicts, increasing cyber capabilities, and seeking nuclear capabilities (“Iran nuclear crisis,” 2020). While Iran’s military is a major regional power in the Middle East, it is still no match for a head-to-head confrontation with the U.S. and is “hobbled by aging equipment, international sanctions, and restrictions on arm imports” (Friedman, 2020, para. 4).

While both Iran and the U.S. continue to flex their might – the U.S. with its recent assassination of IRGC Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad, and Iran with its retaliatory missile strikes on U.S. military personnel housed in Iraq – they have both since de-escalated the tensions publicly. But one current problem is that “American and Iranian-backed forces operate in close proximity at several flashpoints throughout the Middle East in places like Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and Iraq, where a miscalculation or surprise attack could raise tensions

again” (Dozier & Walcott, 2020, para. 8).

Because Iran cannot win a direct conflict with a military super power, their cyber capabilities will more than likely continue to increase and it is probable they will form relationships with other cyber aggressors like Russia (O’Flaherty, 2020). They will also most likely go back to their proxy attacks. In using proxy fighters, Iran can deflect blame and is shielded by plausible deniability because it can’t be proven that they were directly involved. A global security expert, and senior fellow at John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, said “the Islamic Republic of Iran has for four decades

demonstrated an extraordinary skill for survival. They do not want war with the most powerful military on the planet” (Dozier & Walcott, 2020, para. 13).

Historically, Iran’s propoganda, combined with its recent actions (missile strikes against U.S. troops, shooting down a Ukrainian passenger plane, drone strikes against Saudi oil facilities, Iran’s presence in Syria, the U.S. designating the IRGC as a terrorist organization, etc.), are why the U.S. and its international partners should recognize Iran as the most dangerous adversary in the Middle East. ■

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