



Syria Transition Challenges Project

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The Concept of “Forward Defence”: How Has the Syrian Crisis Shaped the Evolution of Iran’s Military Strategy?

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The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

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Executive Summary

Over the past decade, Iranian officials have repeatedly referred to “forward defence” or “offensive defence” as the foundation of Iran’s military strategy. While the concept implies the inclusion of offensive aspects into Iran’s military strategy, which used to have an overwhelmingly defensive nature, it is also increasingly used to justify Iran’s military presence beyond its borders.

This paper begins with a historical overview of the evolution of Iran’s military strategy, especially since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, showing how the concept of “deterrence” has become the cornerstone of its strategic military planning. It also discusses the crucial concept of “strategic depth”. Understanding these basic concepts is essential to be able to analyse the forward defence strategy, its main elements, and the domestic, regional, and international factors contributing to its formation.

The paper also explores how the Syrian crisis has affected Iran’s military strategy in both conceptual and instrumental terms, leading to the formation and consolidation of the forward defence. Conceptually, Iran has justified its direct military presence far from its borders as necessary for confronting threats at their source before they reach Iranian territory. From an instrumental point of view, Iran’s involvement in the Syrian crisis has led to the development of Iran’s regional network of non-state allies and proxies, while adding a new layer to Iran’s deterrence vis-à-vis Israel. The main argument is that forward defence is not a new military doctrine but an evolved and updated form of “deterrence”.

The paper also identifies Iran’s ballistic missile and drone programmes, its support for non-state actors across the region, and its focus on developing cyberwar capabilities as the main elements of its forward defence strategy, rooted in its perception that it is located in an increasingly insecure regional environment. Finally, the paper suggests that, for the United States to reach an agreement with Iran on these missile and regional issues, Washington and its regional allies must make reciprocal concessions to alleviate Iran’s sense of threat to its security and survival. In this case, Iran might be ready to make concessions on its allied and proxy militias in Yemen and Syria, although the more complex security and political situations in Iraq and Lebanon leave Tehran with comparably less leverage. While Iran is not expected to agree on considerably limiting its missile programme, an agreement on the range of its ballistic missiles could be achievable.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the development of Iran's military activities at both operational and technical levels has drawn increasing international attention to the Islamic Republic's military capabilities and approaches. At the operational level, Iran's direct military presence in support of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, as well as its fight against terrorism in Syria and Iraq, has had an undeniable impact on political and security developments in the two countries. Meanwhile, indirectly and through its allied and proxy groups, Iran has become an effective actor in Syria, Iraq, and also Yemen. At the technical level, Iran has been strengthening its missile programme, and making significant progress in this area, which has caused concern among its regional and trans-regional rivals. At the same time, the Islamic Republic has been developing its cyberwarfare capabilities. As such, Iran's regional and trans-regional role as an emerging military power has expanded to the extent that it is practically impossible to discuss Iran's foreign policy without considering its military component.

Unlike many other countries, the Islamic Republic has never published a specific document detailing its national security or military doctrine, meaning that the analysis of Iran's military strategies has been based primarily on secondary sources. However, recently, Iranian authorities have spoken more frequently and more explicitly about the Islamic Republic's military approaches. One such concept described by the Iranian officials as the foundation of the country's military strategy is "forward defence" or "offensive defence". While the concept implies the inclusion of offensive aspects into Iran's formerly overwhelmingly defensive military strategy, it is also increasingly being used to justify Iran's military presence beyond its borders.

The few studies published so far on Iran's forward defence strategy have focused mainly on deciphering the concept and articulating its basic elements. The current paper seeks to provide a more comprehensive portrait of the strategy, as well as analysing the role of the Syrian crisis in the formation and consolidation of this concept. This paper begins with a historical overview of the evolution of Iran's military strategy, especially since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, showing how the concept of "deterrence" has become the cornerstone of its strategic military planning. It goes on to discuss the crucial concept of "strategic depth". Understanding these basic concepts is essential to be able to analyse the forward defence strategy, its main elements, and the domestic, regional, and international factors contributing to its formation, which are discussed in the second section of the paper. The next section explores the impact of the Syrian crisis on the formation and consolidation of Iran's forward defence. The paper concludes by

discussing the implications of this strategy for Iran's foreign policy, as well as stability in the region.

The main argument is that the Syrian crisis has affected Iran's military strategy in both conceptual and instrumental terms, leading to the consolidation of the forward defence. Conceptually, Iran has justified its direct military presence far from its borders as necessary for confronting threats at their source before they reach Iranian territory. From an instrumental point of view, Iran's involvement in the Syrian crisis has led to the development of Iran's regional network of non-state allies and proxies, while adding a new layer to Iran's deterrence vis-à-vis Israel. The main argument is that forward defence is not a new military doctrine but an evolved and updated form of "deterrence". The paper also identifies Iran's ballistic missile and drone programmes, its support for non-state actors across the region, and its focus on developing cyberwar capabilities as the main elements of its forward defence strategy, rooted in its perception that it is located in an increasingly insecure regional environment. The paper suggests that, for the United States to reach an agreement with Iran on these missile and regional issues, Washington and its regional allies must make reciprocal concessions to alleviate Iran's sense of threat to its security and survival.

Conceptual Background: Deterrence and Strategic Depth

Evolution of Military Strategy in Iran: The Emergence of "Deterrence"

From the formation of the first Persian Empire in antiquity to modern times, Iranian history has been fraught with wars, military conflicts, internal revolts, power struggles, and – at times – foreign aggression. In pre-modern times, the military thinking of Iran (Persia) was based on the three elements of trying to increase power, expand territory, and keep its land secure in the face of rival empires. During its heyday, Persia always sought to expand its security buffer against rivals by bringing neighbouring territories under its control, thereby reducing direct threats to the mainland. As such, it could be said that the first cases of a "forward defence" approach directing Iran's foreign involvement date back to that time. Touraj Daryaee, a professor of Iranian history at the University of California, Irvine, points to examples of such thinking in the Sassanid Empire (224–651 AD). According to Daryaee, Sassanid King Khosrow Anoushiravan's conquest of Yemen in 570 AD was aimed at "preventing the Byzantines from infiltrating the Red Sea" and cutting off their access to the east. He sees Iran's conquest of Syria in the seventh century AD in the same way.¹

However, in its modern sense, the roots of Iran's military strategy can be traced back to the establishment of the modern army in Iran about a century ago. In 1901, Reza Pahlavi, then Minister of War in the Qajar government, began his military reforms by creating a unified army. After ascending the throne as the king of Iran, he continued these reforms, including regulating the conscription system, modernising military training methods, and dispatching selected officers to Europe for training. By significantly increasing the country's military budget and purchasing weapons and military equipment from European countries, he also sought to strengthen the armed forces in terms of military hardware. He was also responsible for the creation of Iran's Air Force in 1906. Reza Shah pursued three main goals in strengthening the army: first, strengthening the armed forces against internal opposition, insurgent groups, and separatist forces; second, consolidating Iran's autonomy from the Russian and British empires, which would historically intervene in Iranian politics; and, third, addressing potential external threats.² Although this modern army effectively consolidated Reza Shah's power at home, it failed to prevent the Allied powers from occupying Iran during World War II, and he was unable to establish an effective military deterrence against the great powers of the time.

Reza Shah's son and successor, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who had a military education in Switzerland, was no less interested in increasing Iran's military might. However, especially after consolidating his power following the US-led coup in 1953, he based his military strategy on developing closer ties with the West, and the United States in particular. In the Cold War era, Iran was a valuable ally for the United States in its global rivalry with the Soviet Union. For this reason, and intending to establish a strong security buffer around the Soviet Union, the United States increased its military assistance to Iran. Along with Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom, Iran was also a member of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), a military alliance against the communist bloc. As such, Iran became the mainstay of the US "containment" strategy against the Soviet Union. However, apart from this proxy role, the Shah sought to elevate Iran to the position of a regional hegemon by increasingly strengthening the Iranian army with the help of the United States. To do so, the Shah did not shy away from direct military intervention in regional crises, such as the Dhofar Rebellion in Oman.³

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the fundamental change in Iran's foreign policy also led to a change in its military strategy. The severing of diplomatic ties with the United States, followed by a growing hostility between Tehran and Washington, turned the United States from a major supporter of Iran into a significant threat. This meant the end of Iran's proxy role in the US containment strategy against the Soviet Union as well as the end of Western support for strengthening Iran's armed forces. However, the most notable factor in shaping post-

revolutionary Iran's military thinking was the experience of the eight-year war with Iraq, a period essential to any analysis of the Islamic Republic's military strategy.

Iran's war with Iraq (1980–1988), known as the longest conventional war of the twentieth century, profoundly impacted Iranian leaders' strategic and military thinking. As Iran's armed forces had relied entirely on purchasing arms and military equipment from Western countries, particularly the United States, Iran faced two significant challenges throughout the war with Iraq: first, problems in supplying spare parts for the military equipment – especially in the air force – due to the embargoes; and, second, lack of effective deterrent armaments.⁴ During the war, Iran was particularly vulnerable to Iraqi missile attacks and Baghdad's advanced and state-of-the-art weapons.

Iraq's missile arsenal during the war included, above all, FROG-7 and Scud-B missiles. According to available estimates, Iraq fired 10 FROG-7 missiles in 1980, 54 in 1981, one in 1982, and two in 1984 into Iran. In addition, 3 Scud-B were fired at Iranian targets in 1982, followed by 23 in 1983, 25 in 1984, 82 in 1985, 25 in 1987, and 193 in 1988.⁵ Those missiles caused extensive damage, especially to civilian targets. Therefore, the Iranian authorities realised how vital it was to develop deterrent military capabilities, and “deterrence” became the foundation of Iran's military thinking.

The end of the war in 1988 did not mean the end of Iran's need for effective deterrence. The Saddam regime continued its expansionist policies against Iraq's neighbours, the most notable example of which was the 1990 invasion of Kuwait, while the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan caused Iran to feel threatened from its eastern neighbours as well. Even after the US military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq led to the overthrow of governments hostile to Iran, a sense of strategic siege by the United States reinforced Iran's perception of being under constant threat in the region.⁶ The combination of these factors led to the formation of the Islamic Republic's military thinking based on deterrence.

The Islamic Republic does not have a tradition of publishing individual documents on national security or military doctrine. However, the priority of deterrence is explicitly mentioned in several other strategic documents. Iran's *Twenty-Year Vision Document*, which was published in 2003 as a roadmap for the country's development, presents the principle of “comprehensive deterrence” as the basis of Iran's defence strategy.⁷ In this vein, from an official point of view, different military approaches and strategies, including forward defence, are defined within the framework of this fundamental principle. In other words, the evolving security environment on Iran's periphery constantly affects the Iranian leaders' perception of security threats, and military strategies and approaches are determined and updated accordingly.

However, the main objective is to ensure deterrence, that is, to deter “enemies” from taking aggressive actions against Iran.

Strategic Depth: The Geography of Iran’s Forward Defence

Another concept essential to understanding Iran’s forward defence strategy is “strategic depth” (*omgh*), also called “backup” or “buttress” (*aghabe*) in the Iranian security-military literature. Generally, it refers to the ability to take the fight as close to enemy territory as possible in the event of a conflict.⁸ Senior Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, have offered a wide range of definitions of this concept, which often includes not only military elements but also cultural and economic aspects. However, in almost all of those definitions, Islamic countries, specifically in the Middle East, are identified as Iran’s strategic depth. In a speech in 2008, Khamenei called strategic depth “the mainstay of a nation”, adding that “Muslim nations are the strategic depth of the Islamic Republic”.⁹ In 2014, he mentioned three elements of Islam, the Persian language, and the Shiite religion as factors Iran can use to expand its strategic depth.¹⁰ As for the aim of developing the strategic depth, in 2019, the Iranian leader spoke of the need to deal with threats beyond Iran’s borders, considering it one of the country’s top priorities. “It should not be the case that we limit ourselves to a house and think that it’s no longer our job to find out who is behind the walls, [and] which threats are there,” Khamenei said, adding that “This broad cross-border vision, this extension of strategic depth is sometimes even more necessary than the most important duties of the state.” He further considered the expansion of Iran’s strategic depth to be the task of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).¹¹ Thus, from the perspective of the Islamic Republic’s highest political and military authority,¹² security and military considerations drive Iran’s desire to expand its strategic depth.

In the same vein, in an explanatory article published on the Iranian Supreme Leader’s official website, “supporting popular groups [across the region] who oppose the great powers, especially those [powers] hostile to the Islamic Republic” is referred to as a major instrument for expanding Iran’s strategic depth. Another element mentioned in the text is “to recognise the weak points and vulnerabilities of the adversaries and to take measures to hit their interests, as well as their military and economic facilities, in case of an aggression against Iran”. As for the main objective of expanding Iran’s strategic depth, the article also speaks of the need to enhance the country’s deterrence potential.¹³ In other words, strategic depth refers to a situation in which Iran’s ability to target the enemy’s interests in areas far from its borders deters the other side

from targeting Iran's interests. Thus, in the forward defence strategy, the concept of deterrence is the basis of the "defence" part, while the concept of strategic depth is the basis of the "forward" aspect.

In this definition, the geographical area of Iran's strategic depth is often defined from the country's western borders with Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. "Iraq provides strategic depth and a buffer against Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states that are competing with Iran for dominance over the Persian Gulf." In this vein, "Tehran wants to ensure that Iraq never again poses an existential threat to Iranian interests, as [Saddam] Hussein did when he invaded Iran in 1980."¹⁴ Nosratollah Tajik, a former Iranian diplomat, believes that "for Iran, Iraq is the eastern gateway to the Arab world, meaning that Iran could use Iraq's potentials to [develop] political, economic, social and cultural interactions with the Arab world". In his view, having influence in Iraq would allow Iran to be present and active in a wide area from the Oman Sea to Iraq and from Syria and Jordan to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.¹⁵

As for Syria and Lebanon, their significant position in Iran's strategic depth has been emphasised even more explicitly. During a meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in February 2017, Khamenei said Iran and Syria provide strategic depth for each other.¹⁶ In this regard, Iranian analysts point in particular to Syria's record of supporting Iran during the war with Iraq, the two countries' close ties to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and a shared hostility towards Israel.¹⁷ In the case of Lebanon, Hezbollah's ability to pose a persistent and credible threat to Israel is an essential factor, allowing Iran to maintain an effective deterrence against Israel. From this perspective, Hezbollah enables Iran to establish a kind of indirect deterrence at the regional level.¹⁸

However, it should be noted that, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Tehran's perception of the exact range of its strategic depth has undergone various changes. Three main factors have driven these changes: first, the actual situation in the Middle Eastern security environment, in terms of stability and instability in the region in general, as well in individual regional countries; second, the extent of Iran's economic and military power to advance its regional goals; and, third, Iran's evolving perception of regional threats.¹⁹ Nasser Hadian, a professor of international relations at the University of Tehran, says, "We defined our strategic depth based on our perception of threats from the region," adding that "For us, those threats are Israel, the United States, the current global order, as well as regional chaos, respectively."²⁰ In this vein, Iranian authorities believe that post-Arab Spring developments, especially Iran's involvement in Iraq and Syria, have significantly expanded Iran's strategic depth. Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, the Iranian Supreme Leader's top military adviser, argues that Iran's

influence extends to Iraq, Syria, and the Mediterranean. “Our defence line is no longer Shalamcheh. Our defensive border is Lebanon’s southern border with Israel, and the depth of our strategic defence has reached the Mediterranean and close to Israel,” Safavi says.²¹

The Main Elements of Iran’s Forward Defence

To successfully pursue a forward defence strategy, Iran needs to develop those military capabilities that allow it to target its adversaries’ interests in areas far away from the Iranian borders, that is, within the range of its perceived strategic depth. To this end, Iran has focused on developing a set of symmetric and asymmetric military capabilities. This includes continuously improving its missile programme, establishing a regional network of allied or proxy groups, developing cyber-defence and cyberwarfare capabilities, and working on military drone capabilities.

Missile programme

Iran’s missile programme is the pivotal element of the country’s forward defence strategy. Developing missile capabilities allows Iran to establish an effective air deterrence, while providing it with the necessary means of counterattack, should the enemy target its vital interests anywhere in the region. Ballistic missiles have a crucial role in Iran’s deterrence strategy, as they decrease the importance of geography in dealing with the sources of threat.²² Iran has developed its missile programme so that the entire Middle East is in the range of Iranian missiles, including the American military bases in the region. The Islamic Republic also uses its missile programme to assist regional allies like Hezbollah and Yemen’s Houthis.²³ Increased tensions with Washington and its regional allies due to President Donald Trump’s maximum pressure campaign led Iran to further expand its missile capabilities as an effective means of deterrence.

Iran’s first practical efforts to develop an advanced, indigenous missile programme began during the war with Iraq, but this approach gradually found its way into Iran’s strategic policy documents and became part of its official defence policy. Iran’s fourth Five-Year Development Plan, approved by parliament in 2004, explicitly addresses this issue for the first time, emphasising “quantitative and qualitative development and operational stability of missile units”.²⁴ In addition, in the sixth Five-Year Development Plan, approved in 2017, the missile programme is mentioned as one of the main pillars of Iran’s deterrence policy. The document

underlines “the development of missile capabilities, technologies, and the production capacity of superior weapons and defence equipment with a deterrent capability commensurate with all types of threats”.²⁵

Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, who served as defence minister from 1997 to 2005, notes that, due to its inability to upgrade and strengthen its air force, Iran sought an alternative to enhance its deterrence. Thus, Iranian authorities started to show interest in missiles for four main reasons: the enemy’s vulnerability to missiles, the possibility of rapid access, being a shortcut (to deterrence, compared to the air force), and feasibility.²⁶ The process of designing and manufacturing missiles in the Islamic Republic’s defence industry began with assembling imported parts. However, those parts were gradually produced domestically and improved in line with the needs of the day. In 1995, Iran was estimated to have 210 Scud B / C missiles and 200 Chinese-made M-7s (DF-7CSS-8s). By 2005, the number of Iranian-made Scud missiles reached 300.²⁷

In recent years, Iran’s missile programme has developed much faster. There are no reliable statistics on the number of Iranian missiles, but it is believed that Tehran possesses thousands of missiles of more than a dozen different types (see Figure 1). Some of those missiles have a range of more than 2,000 km. In addition, Iran has up to 50 medium-range ballistic missile launchers and up to 100 short-range ballistic missile launchers.²⁸ Meanwhile, as part of its forward defence strategy, Iran has used ballistic missiles on several occasions to strike targets outside its borders. In June 2017, Iran fired six ballistic missiles at ISIS positions in Syria’s Deir ez-Zor in retaliation for a terrorist attack by ISIS-affiliated elements on the Iranian parliament. In October 2018, Iran once again targeted ISIS positions in Syria, in the al-Bukamal area. In September 2018, seven Iranian ballistic missiles targeted the Headquarters of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan and Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq, said to be in response to the killing of Iranian border guards by Kurdish insurgents. Most significantly, in January 2020, Iran launched a missile strike on the American-controlled Ain al-Assad airbase in Iraq. In this attack, carried out in retaliation for the assassination of Iran’s Quds Force Commander Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, 22 ballistic missiles were fired at the base.²⁹

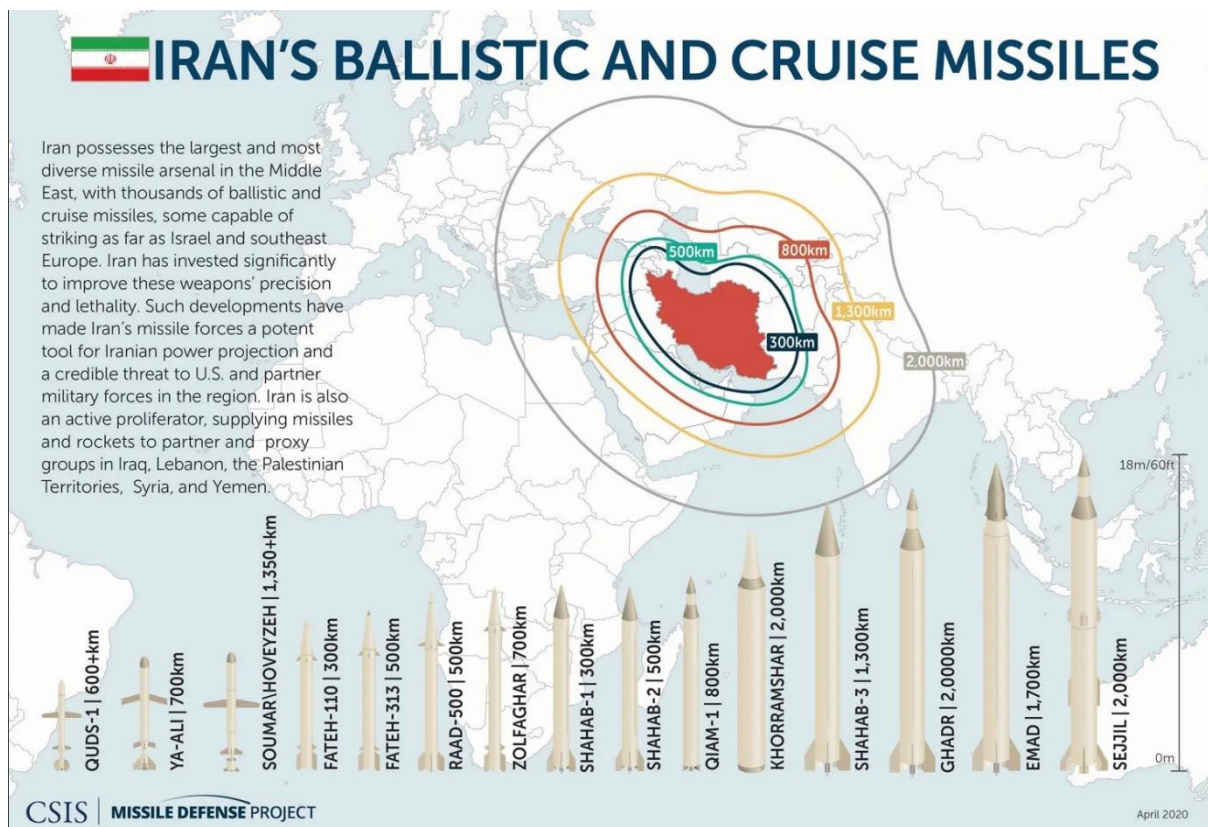


Figure 1 – Types and range of Iranian missiles³⁰

Iran's missile systems are designed according to the types of the threat it faces, and it has developed different missiles capable of targeting land, air, and sea targets. The main targets at sea are the enemy warships. "Our surface-to-surface missiles can cover the width and length of the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman. No ship or vessel can cross the Persian Gulf unless it is within range of our coastal missiles," says Rahim Safavi, who is also a former IRGC chief commander.³¹ As for ground targets, acquiring the ability to target US military bases in the Middle East has been a major focus for Iran. According to Brig. Gen. Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, commander of the IRGC's Aerospace Force, "If war breaks out, US bases in neighbouring countries will be targeted." He emphasises that "In our opinion, those bases are the territory of the United States, and if we get involved [in a war], we will definitely hit those bases. We consider those bases to be on the US soil, not in Qatar, Bahrain, or Afghanistan."³² The third aspect, namely, aerial targets, refers to Iran's air defence systems. During and after the war with Iraq, Iran sought to strengthen its air defence with Russia's help and through purchasing Russian-made defence systems, including the Russian S-300 system. However, Iran has also developed indigenous air defence systems and military satellites, and it has so far unveiled two

advanced homegrown missile defence systems, “Third of Khordad” and “Bavar 373”. In June 2019, the Third of Khordad system successfully shot down an RQ-4A Global Hawk American military drone in the Strait of Hormuz.³³ As such, ballistic missiles and air defence systems together provide two main elements of Iran’s forward defence strategy: the ability to strike at enemy interests outside the borders, while reducing potential vulnerabilities inside Iranian territory.

The network of non-state allies

The second element of Iran’s forward defence strategy is a network of non-state allies throughout the Middle East, referred to in the Islamic Republic’s official narrative as the “axis of resistance”, a term coined in response to the former US President George W. Bush’s designation of Iran as a member of the “Axis of Evil”. In general, this concept refers to Iran and a set of state and non-state actors that have a common ground in opposing the American-led international order. However, it has gradually evolved and is now specifically used to refer to a set of actors working in various Middle Eastern countries in line with Iran’s foreign policy goals and against the United States and its allies.³⁴

From the Iranian authorities’ point of view, this network enables Tehran to project its power and influence across the region at a low cost to itself, while increasing the cost of confronting Iran for its rivals and adversaries.³⁵ This network consists of dozens of militias, as well as political factions all over the region, which have strong ideological, political, and even military ties with Iran. Some of these groups act as Iranian proxies, such as Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun brigades in Syria, while others, such as Lebanon’s Hezbollah, are considered Iran’s allies.³⁶

The axis of resistance’s importance in the Iranian military strategy stems from three main factors. First, it is used as a means for asymmetric deterrence against the United States and its regional allies. The direct US military involvement in the Middle East, in the form of establishing military bases and Washington’s continued military support for its regional allies, in terms of strengthening and updating their military capabilities, are seen by Iran as a severe and persistent threat. However, there is a considerable disparity between Iran and the United States in terms of military power. Meanwhile, unlike regional rivals, the international arms embargo on Iran has not allowed it to upgrade its symmetric/conventional military capabilities. However, controlling a network of armed groups in the region enables Iran to target not only regional rivals but also Washington’s interests in the region, if necessary, in a faster and easier way and at a lower cost. Perhaps this situation is best reflected in the continuous targeting of

US military and non-military targets in Iraq by Iran-backed groups following Soleimani's assassination in January 2020.³⁷

The second factor is the role of the resistance axis in expanding Iran's strategic depth. As noted, from the military point of view, Iran's understanding of strategic depth is the possibility of dragging a conflict into enemy territory. Expanding the network of allied and proxy armed groups could well serve this purpose. Iran's support for the Palestinian armed groups and Hezbollah in Lebanon is primarily aimed at maintaining a credible threat near the Israeli borders. Iran's efforts to deploy its proxy groups in southern Syria has the same aim.³⁸ Similarly, the Islamic Republic's full support for the Houthis in Yemen is primarily aimed at expanding its influence in Saudi Arabia's neighbourhood. From this perspective, one could argue that the value of this network of armed groups for Iran is equal to the value of ballistic missiles, as both of these elements contribute to the expansion of Iran's geography of deterrence.

Third, there is the possibility of achieving military – and, indeed, political – goals without engaging in direct conflict with other states. As a general principle, the use of proxies allows the patron to enjoy plausible deniability and avoid accountability for aggressive actions abroad.³⁹ The Islamic Republic has always denied any connection to attacks on American targets in Iraq.⁴⁰ This was also the case in the missile strike against the Saudi Aramco oil processing facilities in 2019, in which Iran denied any direct or indirect involvement.⁴¹ This element of plausible deniability reduces the risk of a direct response by the other side, which could lead to escalation and full-blown conflict. In the case of Iran's allies, such as Hezbollah, this particular aspect applies even more than for proxies, as their organisational autonomy makes it hard to accuse Iran over their activities in the first place.

It is difficult to provide accurate statistics on the number of forces in Iran's network of non-state allies. However, it is estimated that, between 2011 and 2019, the number of troops in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Pakistan increased from around 75,000 to more than 250,000.⁴² Groups active in the first four countries are of greater significance in Iran's military strategy. In fact, even Afghan and Pakistani proxies have been increasingly used in recent years to fight in the Middle East on Iran's behalf.

In Iraq, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), formed in 2014 with the primary aim of countering ISIS, have close ties to Iran. Among them, four of the most well organized and powerful factions are Iran's close allies: The Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades), Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. Following Soleimani's

assassination, several new and unknown pro-Iran armed groups also emerged in Iraq, targeting US military interests and bases in the country.⁴³

In Syria, Iran organised a force of around 100,000 local Syrian troops under the banner of the National Defence Forces (NDF) to help the Assad government fight the armed rebel groups.⁴⁴ Iran has also formed two brigades of Afghan and Pakistani Shia forces, Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun, to fight alongside the Syrian army.⁴⁵ In Lebanon, Hezbollah, the most powerful non-state actor in the Middle East, remains the Islamic Republic's most important ally. Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian crisis showed that the organisation is ready to intervene effectively outside Lebanon to help advance Iran's policies. The Yemeni Houthi movement is another important member of Iran's network of non-state allies. Unlike Hezbollah, the Houthis have fewer established and organisational ties to Iran. However, between 2011 and 2014, the IRGC and Hezbollah provided the Houthis with military and political support, which has continued since the beginning of the Saudi-led military invasion of Yemen in March 2015. Tehran sees the Houthis' ability to strike vital targets inside Saudi Arabia as an important tool to contain Riyadh.⁴⁶

Cyberwarfare capabilities

The third element of Iran's forward defence strategy is the development of cyberwar and cyber-defence capabilities. Iran's sixth Five-Year Development Plan explicitly details the need to develop cyber power as an essential means of deterrence. The document underlines "increasing soft power and cyber-defence capabilities and providing cyber defence and security for the country's infrastructures".⁴⁷ Indeed, cybersecurity concerns have long existed among Iranian policymakers. The 2010 cyberattack on Natanz nuclear facility by the Stuxnet virus – attributed to the United States and Israel – exposed Iran's cybersecurity weakness at the time.⁴⁸ Stuxnet ruined at least 1,000 centrifuges, equivalent to 10 per cent of the centrifuges operating in Natanz at the time.⁴⁹ However, the malware was especially important because, for the first time, it showcased the possibility of using sophisticated cyber capabilities to achieve military goals.

The Stuxnet incident can be considered the starting point of Iran's serious and systematic focus on cyber defence. About a year after the incident, in November 2011, Iran established a "cyber-defence headquarters" tasked with "monitoring cyber threats against Iran's national security infrastructures". The primary duties of this newly formed institution were "Issuing nationwide alerts in case of cybersecurity threats against the country, securing the country's infrastructures against cyber threats, and creating a deterrent capability in the cyberspace". The

headquarters was a joint initiative of the Ministries of Information, Communications and Technology, Defence, Industry, as well as the Passive Defense Organization.⁵⁰ This indicates that, for Iran, cyber defence has technical, security, and military aspects. According to some reports, in late 2011, Iran invested \$1 billion in cyberspace infrastructure and technology. In addition, in 2012, the Iranian Armed Forces recruited 120,000 people to work in cybersecurity.⁵¹

At the same time as improving its cyber-defence potential, Iran has also worked on developing offensive capabilities in cyberspace, which allows it to target the interests of its adversaries indirectly and at a potentially lower cost. Iran's offensive moves in cyberspace are often carried out indirectly and through informal means. However, the IRGC is believed to be responsible for monitoring and coordinating offensive cyber activities. These activities are often carried out through an informal organisation called the "Iranian Cyber Army", which includes a group of IT specialists and professional hackers. "The Cyber Army has not been directly linked to the IRGC, but Iranian government officials refer to using it to hack enemy sites."⁵²

So far, several cyberattacks have been attributed to Iran, the most serious of which have been against Saudi Arabia and Israel. In October 2012, a cyberattack on Saudi Arabia's Aramco oil facilities using a virus called Shamoon wiped out data on 75 per cent of its computers. A group called the Cutting Sword of Justice claimed responsibility. However, Washington saw the attack as Iran's retaliation for the Stuxnet incident – as well as another attack against Iranian oil companies by "Flame" malware.⁵³ In April 2020, a cyberattack was reported on Israel's water and sewage treatment facilities. According to official reports, the attack led to limited disruptions in local water distribution systems. Israeli media blamed Iran for the attack. Less than two weeks later, Shahid Rajaei port in southern Iran, a hub for maritime trade, came under cyberattack, in an incident seen as a retaliatory move by Israel.⁵⁴

In August 2020, after the Iranian and Israeli cyberattacks against each other became known, the General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces in an official statement – the first of its kind – elaborated the country's military policies in cyberspace. While extending the principles of territorial sovereignty and state jurisdiction to all components of cyberspace, the statement stressed that "Any deliberate use of cyber-force resulting in physical or non-physical consequences, which is a threat to national security or leads to political, economic, social, or cultural instability, violates the sovereignty of the state." However, the most important part of the statement explains Iran's view of the criteria for considering a cyberattack a use of force, which would justify resorting to the right to self-defence. In this vein, "Those cyber operations that result in material damage to properties or damage to persons to a certain extent and severity,

or are reasonably likely to produce such effects, are considered to be the use of force.” The statement goes on to warn that “If the intensity of cyber operations on the country’s vital infrastructures escalates to the threshold of a conventional armed attack, the armed forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran will have the right to self-defence”.⁵⁵ As such, along with the evolution of its forward defence strategy, Iran considers cyberspace an emerging arena for both defensive and offensive activities.

Military drones

Iran has worked to expand the geographical scope of its military strategy in the development of military drones. Using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for military purposes in Iran pre-dates the 1979 Islamic Revolution. At the time, Iran purchased a number of MQM-107 Streaker and BQM-74 Chukar drones from the United States to train and test its fighter jets, particularly the F-14.⁵⁶ During the Iran–Iraq War, the first domestic efforts were made to build reconnaissance drones, which led to the manufacture of the first models of “Mohajer” drones. More serious and structured efforts to build combat drones began in the early 2000s by the Ministry of Defence and the IRGC.⁵⁷ In 2012, Iran unveiled the “Shahed (Witness)-129” drone, the first Iranian combat drone capable of firing at ground targets using “Sadid” precision-guided bombs. With a 24-hour endurance, the drone has a flight range of between 1700 and 2000 km. In addition to the IRGC’s Aerospace Force, the Iranian Navy also began using this drone in 2019.⁵⁸

One of the events that seems to have had a significant impact on the development of Iran’s drone capabilities was the capture of an American Lockheed Martin RQ-170 Sentinel in December 2011. Iran claimed to have brought down the UAV, which had entered Iranian airspace from Afghanistan, by infiltrating its navigation system. Although Washington disputed this claim, it acknowledged that the UAV had fallen into Iran’s hands almost intact and without severe damage.⁵⁹ Iran claims to have employed the American UAV’s technology in a number of its drones via reverse engineering (see Figure 2). “Shahed 191” is a reconnaissance drone that is said to have used this technology in its manufacture. Another model of this drone is called “Saegheh (Thunderbolt)”.⁶⁰ In addition, “Shahed-171 Simorgh” is known as an exact copy of the RQ-170, which, according to Iranian officials, also has combat capabilities.⁶¹ However, the exact capabilities of this drone are still disputed.

Although Iran’s military drone programme is much more recent than its missile programme, Iranian drones have already been used in military operations outside its borders. In 2014, Iran, for the first time, dispatched two Shahed-129s to Syria. In 2015 and 2016, six more of these

drones were employed in Syria.⁶² So far, at least two of these drones have been shot down by the US Air Force during reconnaissance operations in Syria.⁶³ In addition, in 2018, at least one Saegheh drone was used during an IRGC strike at ISIS positions in eastern Syria.⁶⁴ In February 2018, Israel claimed to have shot down an Iranian Saegheh drone that had entered its airspace from southern Syria.⁶⁵ Besides, Iran has used its military drones to arm Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁶⁶ It is also believed that the technology used in the Yemeni Houthis' drones, used against Saudi Arabia, has been provided by Iran.⁶⁷

IRAN'S DRONE CAPABILITIES

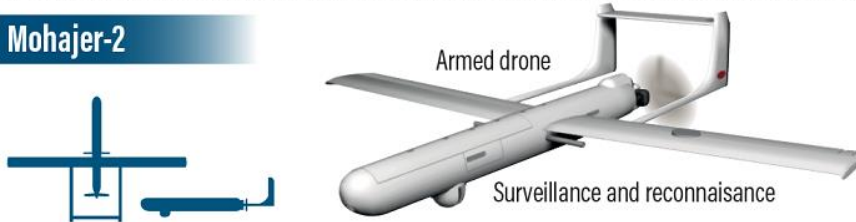
Shahed 129



Specifications

Crew	none	Height	3.1 m	Endurance	24h
Capacity (payload)	400kg	Cruise speed	150kph	Bombs	4xSadid-345 PGM
Length	8m	Combat range	1,700km	Service ceiling	7,300m
Wingspan	16m	Ferry range	3,400km		

Mohajer-2



Crew	none	Empty weight	70kg	Endurance	1.5hr
Capacity (payload)	15kg	Propellers	2-bladed	Max speed	200kph
Length	2.91m	Range	50km	Service ceiling	3,350m
Wingspan	3.8m				

The Mohajer-6 has two hardpoints which can each carry one Qaem guided missiles

Ababil-1



Crew	none	Height	0.91m	Endurance	1.25-2hr
Capacity (payload)	40kg	Wing area	3.25m	Propellers	2-bladed
Length	2.88m	Fuel capacity	16L	Cruise speed	250-350kph
Wingspan	3.25m	Combat range	120km		

Shahed 171 Simorgh

Based on the Sentinel stealth unmanned vehicle which the Iranians say they shot down over Iran



Figure 2 – Iran's main combat drones⁶⁸

The Syrian War and the Development of Forward Defence Strategy

As noted, the Iranian leaders' perception of their own military strength and that of their adversaries, as well as their perception of potential security threats, determine the nature of Iran's military strategy. Iran finds itself in a potentially threatening environment, surrounded by US military bases, as well as Washington's close allies. Besides, the Middle East has always been prone to asymmetric threats, such as terrorism and armed separatism. All of these issues affect Iran's perception of its security environment. Iran neighbours five potentially unstable regions, namely, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, South Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Middle East. In addition to the US influence in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf, NATO is present in various structures in Iran's neighbouring regions. Iran's fiercest enemy, Israel, has favourable relations with some of Iran's neighbours, such as Azerbaijan and, more recently, the UAE and Bahrain. Most regional structures, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), have been formed without Iran's presence – and, in fact, as a counterweight against Tehran. In this regional environment, Iran faces three types of military threats: first, limited guerrilla and terrorist attacks by insurgent and armed separatist groups on the eastern and western borders; second, the possibility of a military strike by regional adversaries, especially Israel; and, third, the possibility of a limited or large-scale military strike by the United States. In the worst-case scenario, a combination of all these incidents could occur.⁶⁹

Such a threatening security environment has caused the Islamic Republic to base its military doctrine on deterrence. However, within the framework of this doctrine, changes in the intensity and urgency of threats at different points in time have led to the evolution of Iran's military strategies. As a result, it could be said that Iran's military strategies are essentially reactive and are based on a continuous assessment of threats.

Although Iran's focus on developing its deterrent capabilities was initially a direct result of the war with Iraq, two critical developments over the past two decades have impacted Iran's threat perception in the regional environment. The first development was the increase in the direct US military presence in the region following the 9/11 attacks. The US military invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq eliminated two potential threats against Iran, namely, the Taliban regime and Saddam's regime. However, the Doctrine of Pre-emptive Strike, coined by Washington to justify its military intervention in Iraq, raised serious concerns among Iranian authorities that Iran might be the next regime to which the doctrine was applied. After all, in January 2002, then US President George W. Bush had called Iran, along with Iraq and North

Korea, members of the “Axis of Evil”. Under such circumstances, Iran’s controversial nuclear programme could provide the United States with sufficient excuse to attack the country. These developments led Iran to strengthen its air defence capabilities, while further developing its missile programme. According to Rahim Safavi, “After the military occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, we changed our strategy and [started to] equip the IRGC with [the capabilities] to counter trans-regional powers, especially with offensive airborne and seaborne systems.”⁷⁰ In addition, by trying to keep the Americans as busy as possible in Iraq, Iran sought to minimise the possibility of the United States taking a new step in its aggressive doctrine. This meant supporting Shiite militias that were actively fighting against US forces in Iraq.⁷¹

The second development was the outbreak of the Syrian crisis. Iran’s involvement in the Syrian crisis and its impact on the evolution of Iran’s military strategy can be analysed within the same framework of Iran’s changing threat perception in the region. From the outset, Iranian officials, including Ayatollah Khamenei, saw the Syrian crisis as a foreign “plot” to undermine Iran and the axis of resistance.⁷² On the one hand, the fall of Bashar al-Assad could have significantly strengthened Iran’s regional rivals, especially Turkey and Saudi Arabia. While shifting the regional balance of power to Iran’s detriment, such a scenario would have posed a set of serious threats to Tehran. Meanwhile, by cutting off Iran’s direct access to Lebanon’s Hezbollah, the fall of Assad could have deprived Iran of its most effective means of deterrence against Israel.

As such, from the Iranian authorities’ point of view, the Syrian crisis demonstrated a high level of common interests among all of Iran’s regional rivals and adversaries. The basis of this attitude is that Iran considers Syria a strategic ally, part of the axis of resistance, and a land of high strategic value. In this view, Syria, whether alone or in association with Hezbollah, helps Iran enhance its regional deterrence against Israel. Meanwhile, maintaining strategic ties with Syria, while at the same time expanding its influence in Iraq, gives Iran land access to the Mediterranean. This is of great importance for Iran, both economically and militarily, namely, the possibility of transferring troops and equipment to Syria and Lebanon. Therefore, the Islamic Republic believes that, by intervening in Syria, the United States seeks to undermine the axis of resistance in Israel’s favour. At the same time, Israel itself also tries to enhance its security by weakening Syria. In the same vein, Saudi Arabia strives to expand its regional influence by supporting radical Sunni groups, while Turkey seeks to expand its influence in the Middle East as part of its “neo-Ottomanism” ambitions. In this view, all these actors share the goal of restricting Tehran’s regional influence and, ultimately, weakening Iran.⁷³

As such, the Syrian crisis affected Iran's threat perception in a way that was unprecedented since 9/11. The first signs of a change in Iran's military strategy were seen in 2011. In a speech in November 2011, Khamenei said, "The firm Iranian nation is not one to sit back and observe threats by fragile and material-minded powers," adding that Iran would "respond to threats by threats".⁷⁴ Following the speech, senior IRGC commanders spoke of a new military strategy, called "threats in response to the threats". For instance, while acknowledging the change in Iran's military strategy, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Brig. Gen. Mohammad Hejazi said, "Our strategy now is that, if we feel our enemies want to endanger Iran's national interests and want to decide to do that, we will act without waiting for their actions."⁷⁵

In a research article published in the IRGC-affiliated Imam Hossein University's journal, Fathollah Kalantari and Asghar Eftekhari examine the elements of the "threats in response to the threats" strategy. In this article, based on a survey of 69 Iranian military and security experts, the priority of each of these elements in the strategy has also been determined. According to the study, the use of foreign proxies and the development of missile capabilities have been identified as the most important elements. Meanwhile, based on this strategy, Iran tries not to provoke the adversaries as much as possible but to identify its own strengths and its rivals' weaknesses to establish an effective deterrence. Another element of this strategy is to move sources of potential threats to areas as far away from Iran's borders as possible. In fact, this element means trying to expand strategic depth. The development of both symmetric and asymmetric deterrence capabilities is another key element of this strategy. Trying to reduce the military presence of enemies in Iran's neighbouring regions is another important element mentioned in this study.⁷⁶ Looking at these elements, it could be said that this was the first stage in developing a forward defence strategy in the Islamic Republic.

Another shift in Iran's military strategy and the consolidation of forward defence was caused by the exacerbation and continuation of the Syrian conflict, especially the rise of radical terrorist groups like ISIS. The growing expansion of the territories under ISIS control, which at some point caused the terrorists to come as close as 40 km off the Iran-Iraq border,⁷⁷ convinced the Iranian leaders that, to prevent the threat of terrorism from spilling over into Iran, the terrorists must be fought in Iraq and Syria. Since then, high-ranking Iranian officials, especially senior military commanders, have repeatedly spoken of the need to combat the threat of terrorism in Syria and Iraq to prevent it from spreading into Iran.⁷⁸ This issue was also directly mentioned by Khamenei, who said, "If the enemy [ISIS] had not been countered, we would have fought with them here in Kermanshah and Hamadan and other provinces."⁷⁹

However, it has been only since 2016 that forward defence or “offensive defence” has been officially referred to as Iran’s new military strategy. In September 2016, while emphasising the need to enhance Iran’s defence potential, Khamenei, for the first time, stressed the need to increase the offensive capabilities of the armed forces. According to him, “Given the Islamic Republic’s strategic position, as well as the sensitivity of the West Asian region (the Middle East) and the constant greed of the domineering powers, in addition to defence, we need to increase our offensive power, so that we can ensure the security of the nation, country and [our] future.”⁸⁰ Since then, the concept of forward defence has often been referred to as “offensive defence” by Iranian military officials.

Senior Iranian military officials have commented on various aspects of the strategy. “We do not intend to invade or attack any country, and we do not eye any country’s soil because our country’s grand strategy is a defensive strategy,” says Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, chief of staff of the Iranian Armed Forces. However, he emphasises that “In protecting our interests, we may have an offensive approach so that adversaries, seeing the [potential] repercussions, do not even think about encroaching on our national interests.”⁸¹ In the same vein, IRGC Commander-in-Chief Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami says, “We won’t threaten any country and won’t start any war in the first place,” while reiterating that “If a country makes a miscalculation, our strategy will be offensive.”⁸² This change in strategy has already affected the nature of military exercises of the Iranian Armed Forces. According to Brig. Gen. Kioumars Heydari, deputy commander of the Iranian Army Ground Forces, the operational strategy of the Iranian Armed Forces “has been shifted from a threat-oriented and defensive management of the exercises to a target-oriented and offensive mode”. In this regard, the Iranian army has developed “rapid reaction forces, mobile assault platoons, and mechanised infantry units”.⁸³ Advocating that “attack is the best form of defence”, Brig. Gen. Mohammad Pakpour, Commander of the IRGC Ground Forces, argues that “When the enemy has an intention against our country, we must attack; because this can create deterrence.” He further emphasises that “Whenever we find out that the enemies have evil intentions, we will attack them.”⁸⁴ These remarks indicate that, in addition to the development of retaliatory capabilities, the possibility of “pre-emptive actions” is also envisaged in Iran’s forward defence strategy.

Thus, over nearly a decade of involvement in the Syrian war, Iran’s military strategy has gradually evolved to include more offensive elements. There is little doubt that, in addition to the Syrian crisis, other developments in Iran’s security environment, including the ongoing crisis in Iraq, growing hostility between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, and especially, the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign have contributed to Iran

adopting a more defiant and offensive military strategy. However, since the Syrian crisis practically encompasses aspects of those other conflicts (e.g. cross-border terrorism, the involvement of regional actors, and the United States), it has played the main role in the conceptual evolution of Iran’s military strategy and the emergence of forward defence. Syria is so important to Iran that Mehdi Taeb, head of the IRGC-affiliated Ammar Strategic Headquarters, sees Syria as “Iran’s thirty-fifth province”, defending which is prioritised over defending Iran’s southwestern Khuzestan province. Explaining this controversial claim, he says, “If we keep Syria, we can take Khuzestan back later; but if we lose Syria, we won’t even be able to keep Tehran.”⁸⁵

Apart from the conceptual aspect, the Syrian crisis has also had a practical impact on Iran’s forward defence, in terms of upgrading the strategy’s main elements. Iran’s use of ballistic missiles and drones to target ISIS positions in Syria was an unprecedented and significant development. In addition, the Syrian crisis led to more cohesion and further expansion of Iran’s network of non-state allies. For the first time, almost all the key elements of this non-state network, from Lebanon’s Hezbollah to Iraq’s PMF, joined forces to defend the Assad regime in Syria. Meanwhile, by establishing the Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun brigades and the National Defence Forces, Iran also expanded its proxy network. Finally, yet importantly, although Iran’s involvement in the Syrian crisis was essentially a reaction to the imminent threats against its interests and those of its ally Bashar al-Assad, it is now seeking to turn Syria into a new layer of deterrence against Israel by extending its influence in southern Syria. As such, the Syrian crisis played an important role in the evolution of Iranian military thinking. It also led to the development of new aspects and elements of deterrence for the Islamic Republic.

Table 1 sets out an overview of how certain developments have impacted Iran’s military strategy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution:

Table 1

Year	Development	Response
1979	The Islamic Revolution/The end of Iran’s military ties with the West	The start of attempts to revise the military strategy based on new realities, especially the loss of Western technical and military support
1980–1988	The Iran–Iraq war	The beginning of Iran’s missile and drones programmes/ Helping to establish Hezbollah in Lebanon and organising

		anti-Saddam Shiite militias inside Iran
2001	US invasion of Afghanistan	The establishment of “deterrence” as the official foundation of Iran’s military doctrine
2003	US invasion of Iraq	Accelerating and developing the missile programme/Increasing support for the Iraqi Shiite militias
2011	The Syrian crisis and the Arab Spring	Forward defence as the pivotal concept in Iran’s military strategy/The establishment of Iran’s proxy network in Syria
2011	Cyberattacks on Iran’s nuclear facilities	Beginning to develop cyberwar capabilities
2014	ISIS emergence	Iran’s active and direct military presence in Syria and Iraq/The expansion of Iran’s network of proxies and non-state allies in Syria and Iraq
2018	US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the start of “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran	Moving toward an “offensive defence”: Acceleration of missile, drone, and cyber programmes/Increased support for the allied and proxy groups
2019–2020	Israeli attacks on Iranian targets in Syria and Iraq	Steady efforts to establish Iran’s position in Syria’s southeast and further stretching towards the Israeli borders in the south

Implications for a US–Iran Compromise

Since the end of the Iran–Iraq war in 1988, deterrence has been the foundation of Iran’s military doctrine. However, Iran’s evolving perception of the regional security environment has led to changes in its military approaches and even strategies. Accordingly, and as a constant pattern, the increase in threats in Iran’s periphery strengthens the offensive aspects of the country’s military strategy. The US withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran (JCPOA) in 2018 and the start of the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign had a serious impact on Iran’s threat perception. From the Iranian leaders’ perspective, the ultimate goal of maximum pressure is not to bring Iran to the negotiating table but to bring about regime change.

Meanwhile, the supportive stance of Iran's regional rivals – especially Saudi Arabia – toward Trump's Iran policy⁸⁶ further increased Tehran's sense of threat at the regional level. The assassination of Iran's Quds Force Commander Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani by the US in January 2020 led Iran to conclude that Washington would not hesitate to resort to direct military action to achieve its goals. Therefore, based on the pattern mentioned above, Iran has increasingly found it necessary to resort to aggressive measures to retain the balance of power in the region. The May 2019 sabotage operation against oil tankers in the UAE's port of Fujairah,⁸⁷ the Yemeni Houthis missile strike against the Saudi Aramco oil facilities in September 2019, and finally, Iran's direct missile attack on Ain al-Assad base, a US military base in Iraq's Anbar province, in January 2020, all followed the same logic. According to Gen. Hussein Daqiqi, a senior adviser to the IRGC Commander-in-Chief, had Tehran not attacked the Ain al-Assad base, Iran's security would have been threatened.⁸⁸

American politicians, both Republicans and Democrats, insist that any deal with Iran – whether in the form of returning to the JCPOA or a new deal – should address not only Iran's nuclear file but also its missile programme and regional activities. As for Syria, Washington emphasises the need for Iran to leave the country. However, even if Iran agrees to enter new negotiations with the United States, it is not expected to make concessions on the ballistic missiles, its support for the non-state militias, and Syria, as it considers these are matters of national security. The only conceivable way to reach an agreement with Iran on those issues is for the United States and its regional allies to make reciprocal concessions to alleviate Iran's sense of threat to its security and survival.

In fact, Iranian officials have already raised the idea of entering into a set of reciprocal security commitments in the region. For example, in 2018, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif proposed a “regional dialogue forum” in the Persian Gulf.⁸⁹ While criticising the arms race in the region, Zarif's proposal rejected “reliance on extra-regional powers, exclusion-based coalitions, and the illusion of purchasing security”. Iran has also put forward the idea of a non-aggression pact between Iran and its neighbours in the Persian Gulf.⁹⁰ If Iran proves serious about entering into meaningful and credible security arrangements with its neighbours, this could be the basis for a more comprehensive agreement with Tehran, addressing European and US concerns about regional peace and stability. Otherwise, expecting that increasing pressure would lead Iran to make unilateral concessions does not seem realistic.

Finally, for any future diplomatic track involving Iran – whether between Iran and its Arab neighbours or a wider framework including the United States and other global powers – to be successful, it is important to have a realistic view on what kind of concessions Iran may/can

actually make if the level of threats against its security is reduced. At first glance, convincing Iran to reduce its direct and indirect military presence in the region, via the Quds Force and the proxies, respectively, may appear to be a more achievable goal, as it is secondary to safeguarding the country's homeland security compared with the other elements of the forward defence strategy. Indeed, a decreased Iranian role in Syria and Yemen could contribute to solving the longstanding crises in the two countries. Both the Yemeni Houthis and the Iranian proxies in Syria are strongly dependent on Tehran's financial and military support, which gives Iran enough leverage to make a compromise. In the case of Yemen, in particular, such a compromise seems to be more of a possibility, as the country's strategic value within Iran's strategic depth is comparably less than Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. As such, an Iranian compromise on Yemen could be expected within the framework of a possible trust-building format with the participation of its Arab neighbours in the Persian Gulf. In addition, in Syria, if Iran's firm desire to be accepted by the West as a part of the future political solution for the Arab country is satisfied, concessions by Tehran on its Syrian proxies are also expected. However, Iran's leverage over the Lebanese and Iraqi militias is far more limited, as their reliance on direct Iranian support is less than their Syrian and Yemeni fellows. Both the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi PMF have become rather autonomous military and even political actors, whose role is expected to continue even under reduced Iranian support.

As for Iran's missile programme, expecting a major compromise from the Iranian side is even more unrealistic. After all, it is the cornerstone of Iran's deterrence and, in the absence of an effective air power, its only viable option to withstand any conventional military conflict. As such, Tehran is expected to continue working on its missile programme and air defence systems. The only possible concession Iran might be ready to make is to not develop the range of its ballistic missiles beyond a certain limit. Iranian officials have already declared that they currently see no need to extend the 2,000 km range of their missiles.⁹¹ Turning this verbal statement into an official commitment could be part of a potential comprehensive agreement with the Islamic Republic.

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