



Landpower Essay

No. 02-4
September 2002



An Institute of Land Warfare Publication

Iran: Next in the Crosshairs?

by

Edward B. Atkeson and Douglas Bush

In the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, President George W. Bush designated Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, as a point on a tripartite “axis of evil” and a threat to U.S. national security. By including Iran in the group, the President signaled a significant shift in U.S. policy toward that country, with important implications for the U.S. military in the years ahead. This paper briefly examines the pertinent history of Iran, focusing on factors influencing its relations with the United States, American policy toward Iran, and relevant U.S. security options for the future. The purpose here is to assess the impact of these developments on the Department of Defense as a whole and the U.S. Army in particular.

Iran in Historical Perspective

Historians have a penchant for seizing upon dramatic events in a country’s history to illustrate traits or tendencies in the population under study for dealing with its problems. Such observations are often used to predict the likely behavior of the leaders under various sets of circumstance. The point here is not to debate the validity of the technique, but to note that Iran affords an unusually rich past for the selection of analogies and the forecast of almost any outcome that one may imagine. By and large, the message one gets from Iranian history is one of continuing internal competition between a secular imperium and deep religious faith.

The roots of today’s Iran stretch back through ancient empires, several extending beyond the current international borders of the country. Agriculture and the formation of villages are believed to have begun in the area as early as the 8th millennium BC. The Median and Persian peoples themselves can be traced back as much as a thousand years earlier. But it was not until 550 BC that Cyrus II (the Great) established the first Persian Empire and conquered ancient Babylonia—now Iraq. Cyrus’s successors extended the borders to India in the east and to Anatolia (Turkey) in the west. It was little wonder that the Shah of the mid-20th century, who would be overthrown by Islamic fundamentalists in 1979, fancied that he was in charge of something ancient, something grand.

During the Cold War the “Peacock Throne” of Tehran was the center of a country that mattered. There was oil; there was a sophisticated elite; and these existed in a strategic region between the

The Landpower Essay series is published by AUSA's Institute of Land Warfare. The series is designed to provide an outlet for original essays on topics that will stimulate professional discussion and further public understanding of the landpower aspects of national security. The content represents the personal opinions of the author and not necessarily the position of the Association of the United States Army or its members. Candidate essays of 5,000 words or less may be submitted to: AUSA's Institute of Land Warfare, ATTN: Landpower Essay Series, 2425 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, VA 22201. For more information about AUSA and the Institute of Land Warfare, visit our website at www.ausa.org.

Soviet Union and the Arabian Sea. Earlier, during World War II, Iran had been an important way station for hundreds of thousands of tons of war materiel on its way from U.S. factories to the eastern front. Thereafter, strategic analysts would pour out floods of ink forecasting Soviet invasions to steal the oil, to spread their communist doctrine, or to gain access to a warm ocean. Indeed, in the mid-1980s the Soviet High Command in the Southern Theater of Military Operations (TVD), with over 100,000 troops in Afghanistan, had an additional force of 26 tank and motorized divisions, backed by



680 combat aircraft in a discomforting increasing state of readiness—and aimed south.¹

Once the Shah was deposed, President Jimmy Carter would set the process in motion to create a new East-West frontier, depicting a “Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force,” or RDJTF (later to become the U.S. Central Command, or USCENTCOM) responding to the Soviet threat. Any assault push by the Soviets was deemed likely to reach across the central plateau to the Zagros Mountains, with probable objectives on the coast. With or without the Shah, the U.S. initiative appeared somewhat fanciful, as the Stars and Stripes flew from no more than a small flotilla of four ships based in Bahrain. Among the other Gulf powers, only Iraq (yes, Iraq!) harbored much sympathy for the American problem.

Fortunately, the RDJTF was never tested. By 1990 USCENTCOM capabilities for managing combat forces had grown to the point where it could (and did) handle the largest U.S. combined arms campaign since Vietnam. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the performance of U.S. forces in the Gulf War rebalanced perceptions of power in the region. But Iran continued to harbor grievances. Not only had the United States supported the Shah in the face of the Islamic Revolution, but it had “tilted” toward Iraq during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. Further, in 1988 the USS *Vincennes* mistook an Iranian airliner for a hostile fighter and shot it down with the loss of almost 300 lives. But beyond these matters, Iran’s biggest hang-up has been America’s unstinting support for Israel.

Israel, in the words of one canny author, is seen through Iranian Islamic eyes as the “Western-armed and -supported Zionist state that . . . usurped Jerusalem from the Muslims.”² While historically

moderate toward its own small Jewish minority, Iran has little patience with the story of the 20th century Holocaust or the need for a Jewish homeland. Deeply imbedded in Iranian consciousness is the older and more frightful record of Mongol massacres of the Iranian people 800 years ago, from which the country did not recover its population until modern times. Today, with the Islamic side of the faith-vs.-secular competition in the ascendancy, and the weight of their history upon them, the Iranians find little room for sympathy with Israel's claims for special status.

It is within this context that Tehran supports fellow Muslims in Lebanon intent upon the destruction of the Jewish state. Barely a week after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, Tehran dispatched a group of Revolutionary Guards to begin preaching the ideology of Islamic revival and the evils of the pact between Israel and its patron, the "Great Satan" of the United States of America. The following year Lebanese guerrillas, well trained and indoctrinated, were ready. Their targets included both the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. Using trucks loaded with explosives, they demolished their targets, killing almost 300 Americans.³

From that dreadful sequence of events it became clear that the rise of a powerful, nuclear-armed Israel in the Middle East region, with the obvious backing of the sole surviving global superpower, was sufficient to turn Iran in sharp opposition. The relationships among Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and other shadowy guerrilla groups in Lebanon, on the one hand, and Iran on the other, have since matured to permit closely coordinated actions against Israel and against the United States when circumstances permit.

The Iranian Regime and U.S. Security Policy Today

Since its founding in 1979, the Iranian Islamic regime has evolved with different groups and individuals vying for power. The current situation is largely a product of the 1997 elections, in which President Mohammed Khatami, running primarily on domestic reform issues, won a clear victory. Khatami, an Islamic cleric, has emerged as the leader of the so-called "reformists" inside the government who have sought greater democracy in domestic policy and a more moderate approach abroad.⁴ This group competes with the "conservatives," led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, also a cleric, who support the application of Islamic law and the dominance of religious leaders in the government—especially in the areas of defense and foreign policy. While it is difficult to generalize the views of the conservatives regarding national security, their outlook toward external relations tends to be more pessimistic and suspicious than that of the reformers.⁵

In 2001, despite some counterpressure from Supreme Leader Khamenei against his running again, the reformer, Khatami, was reelected to the presidency by a landslide (77 percent of the popular vote).⁶ This victory was even greater than his first one in 1997, but there was no practical expansion of his powers. In August 2002 he sought to improve Iranian relations with the new government in Afghanistan by paying a visit to Kabul—the first in 40 years by a senior Iranian official. However, he could not avoid dealing with the identification of his country as part of the "axis of evil," by the U.S. President. He strongly criticized the U.S. government for widening the war against terrorism and risking the spread of the conflict to countries other than those clearly harboring terrorists.⁷ In effect, he was obliged to fall back on the political line of the conservatives as soon as he left his country.

Nevertheless, Khatami represents the best and most promising side of the Islamic leadership from the points of view of both the majority of the Iranian people and the Western community of nations. He is currently fighting an uphill battle to restore the powers of his office to those held by his predecessor, Ayatollah Khamenei, now the Supreme Leader. Khamenei has effectively blocked virtually all progressive legislation with his appointment of reactionary mullahs to the Guardian Council. Under

the Iranian constitution, the Guardian Council has oversight of the parliament to ensure that the laws passed are not in conflict with Islamic law. President Khatami is now showing a remarkable willingness to face his opponents head-on.⁸

If and when an equitable and acceptable settlement of the Palestinian question can be developed on the greater stage of the Middle East, the chances for the emergence in Iran of a rational and genuinely popular leadership of the Khatami stripe will be maximized. We should not lose sight of the latent good will felt by many Iranians for the West, and for the United States in particular. They were among the few Muslim peoples to hold spontaneous candlelight vigils in sympathy with Americans after the 11 September 2001 attacks.⁹

U.S. relations with Iran have been a troublesome source of concern for more than 20 years. In 1980, in the wake of the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent hostage crisis, the United States broke diplomatic relations. Since then American policy toward Iran has varied widely between open hostility and cautious optimism. This range of relations between the two countries is not surprising given the complex and enigmatic nature of the Iranian Islamic regime and the multifaceted web of interests, allies and national security issues enveloping U.S. policy toward the entire Middle East.

Despite this complexity, the United States has had little choice but to remain engaged with Iran. Security matters, economics and the unquenchable facts of geography combine to demand continuing U.S. attention. The United States has not been able to turn its back on threats involving energy resources, terrorism, nuclear or long-range missile technology proliferation or, selectively, the interests of U.S. allies. These matters, coupled with Iran's strategic location—on the eastern littoral of the Persian Gulf, and bordering on the sensitive Caucasus region and on both Central and South Asia—ensure that relations with Iran will remain an important focal point of American interest for the foreseeable future. There is no way that one of the largest, most populous, oil-rich states of the Middle East can be stashed away in cold storage.

Despite the clear differences between the reformers and the conservatives in Iran, it would be an oversimplification to describe them as two totally separate groups opposing one another at every turn. Instead, the viewpoints of individuals in each group tend to vary greatly depending upon the specific issues in question, and there is significant overlap between the two groups on some matters, especially domestic. With respect to foreign and defense policy, the two groups tend to agree on most matters of fact.¹⁰ However, they are known to differ sharply on occasion, particularly with respect to what to do about particular issues. Areas of disagreement include whether Iran should seek constructive engagement with foreign powers or remain in a quasi-hostile defensive stance with many of its neighbors. President Khatami's recent (and successful) outreach efforts toward the European Union and toward the small Arab emirates of the Persian Gulf represent the more moderate approach of the reformers in foreign policy. In contrast, many conservative leaders oppose such initiatives as naive and misguided.¹¹

While the reformers have gained notoriety in recent years, the actual levers of control and action in foreign and defense policy are in the hands of the conservatives. The regular military, the Revolutionary Guards and the defense industry all remain under the aegis of the religious conservative leadership.¹² This lack of tangible control over major organizational components of political power, combined with the focus of many reformers on domestic issues, appears to have greatly limited President Khatami's influence in key policy areas. As a result, despite the moderating influence of some of the newly elected leaders, Iran's foreign and defense policies have not shifted significantly in recent years, but remain under the domination of the conservative elements who have aggressively pursued missile and nuclear technology in addition to continuing support for terrorist organizations.

Iranian Strategic Interests and Concerns

Most Iranian leaders see their country surrounded by instability and potential threats. To the west they view Iraq as a significant challenge to their security. In recent years, Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has heightened their sense of anxiety.¹³ To the north, continuing problems with a restive Kurdish population, the Armenian–Azeri conflict, and the growing U.S./Turkish influence in the Caucasus region are also areas of concern.¹⁴ Finally, in the east, Iran has been on the receiving end of thousands of refugees from Afghanistan, and has found itself struggling with drug- and arms-smuggling problems. Further to the east, Iran has growing misgivings over Pakistan's nuclear weapons program.¹⁵ While a neighboring state with strong Muslim faith, Pakistan has a sharply different history from that of Iran, different interests, and a different Islamic tradition (Sunni vs. Shia). Iran has been obliged to dispatch large numbers of soldiers to guard its porous borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan. In a report to the United Nations Security Council, the Iranians claimed to have deployed 15 additional battalions to seal their borders. They also claimed to have arrested 160 suspected al Qaeda or Taliban sympathizers.¹⁶

As we have noted, the United States and Israel are high on the Iranian list of potential foes. Iranian perceptions of Israel as an intrusive, anti-Islamic western state with expansive proclivities provide the fundamental justification for Tehran's support for terrorist organizations, particularly Hamas and Hezbollah. In addition, Israel's efforts to prevent Arab states from developing WMD (notably the 1982 Israeli air raid on the Iraqi nuclear facility at Osirak) and continuing warlike rhetoric in the United States underpin Iranian concerns, especially about future Israeli or U.S. military strikes against Iranian missile and nuclear programs. The U.S. military presence and prepositioned stocks of equipment in the region, along with continued American trade sanctions, are viewed as further challenges to Iranian security and its economic interests.¹⁷

U.S. Interests and Concerns

Four key interdependent issues dominate U.S. relations with Iran. The first two are of long standing: the security of Israel and the maintenance of the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. The other two, which impact the first two either directly or indirectly, are the proliferation of missile and nuclear technology and the war on terrorism.

The security of Israel is a well-recognized and virtually nonnegotiable interest of the United States. The United States was instrumental in the creation of Israel and has been the country's strongest supporter ever since, both politically and economically. Each year the United States provides Israel some \$3 billion in credits, predominantly for military purposes. In addition, the United States has provided large quantities of military equipment excess to American requirements, such as F-16 fighter aircraft, on a nonreimbursable basis. The 35 years of Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank of Palestine, to which the United States has expressed its opposition in the United Nations, illustrates the patience with which the latter is inclined to deal with the Israeli government.

The dependence of Western economies on Middle Eastern oil was first highlighted by the Arab petroleum boycott of 1973 in response to U.S. support of Israel in the October "Yom Kippur" War. Oil prices skyrocketed, and virtually all global markets were deeply impacted. The shock of the embargo was also significant in a Cold War context, and in 1980 President Carter declared, "An attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America."¹⁸ The doctrine has since been extended to encompass virtually all powers that might attempt to interdict the flow of oil, including those of the Gulf region themselves.

The third concern, that of the proliferation of nuclear and missile technology, is broadly recognized as a global problem and is covered by the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) of 1987. Originally aimed exclusively at missile technology, the agreement was expanded in 1993 to incorporate all forms of weapon systems for delivering chemical, biological and radiological warheads.¹⁹ Reality, however, stands in some contrast to the intent of the document. Much equipment pertinent to weapons technology is also used for other purposes, hence the regime is inherently difficult to control. Also, there are the very real problems of concealment of equipment and facilities by rogue states and false denial of intent. That is the very problem outstanding between the United States and its allies on one side, and Iran and Iraq on the other. Particularly, the United States believes that Iran's 1,000-megawatt pressurized water reactor under construction at Bushehr, with Russian assistance, could be employed in the development of nuclear weapons.²⁰ For its part, Israel has demonstrated its capabilities for the manufacture of missiles of advanced design, but, to the consternation of its neighbors, it neither confirms nor denies its possession of WMD.

Finally, as we have noted above, Iran makes little effort to conceal its support for extremist Islamic groups dedicated to the destruction of Israel, including those known to employ terrorist techniques. On 21 May 2002, the U.S. State Department identified Iran as "the world's most active sponsor of terrorism," ahead of Sudan, Libya, Iraq, North Korea, Cuba and Syria.²¹ In the wake of the aircraft hijackings and destruction of the World Trade Center buildings in September 2001, President Bush declared war on the worldwide problem of attacks on innocent civilian targets by criminal organizations seeking objectives foreign to modern civilization. His identification of Iran as a member of the "axis of evil" stems directly from that country's support of such groups, reinforced by its inclination to acquire additional weapons, especially WMD.²²

However, it should not go unsaid that not all of Iran's attitudes on the international scene are at odds with American interests. Iran was strongly opposed to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and almost went to war against it in 1999. When U.S. troops arrived in Afghanistan, Iran offered to rescue any American troops or pilots who might come to distress within its borders. Later Iran became a transshipment point for American wheat destined for Afghanistan, and U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell declared that Iran had been helpful during the war.²³ More recently, Iran has demonstrated an interest in playing a part in the war against terrorism. In June 2002 the Iranians announced the turning over of 16 al Qaeda suspects to Saudi Arabia and the deportation of Jordanian and Egyptian suspects to their home countries. But gestures of this sort may become less frequent as the ramifications of being a member of the "axis of evil" sink in. Already suspicions of Iran's providing safe haven to al Qaeda leaders are coming to light.²⁴

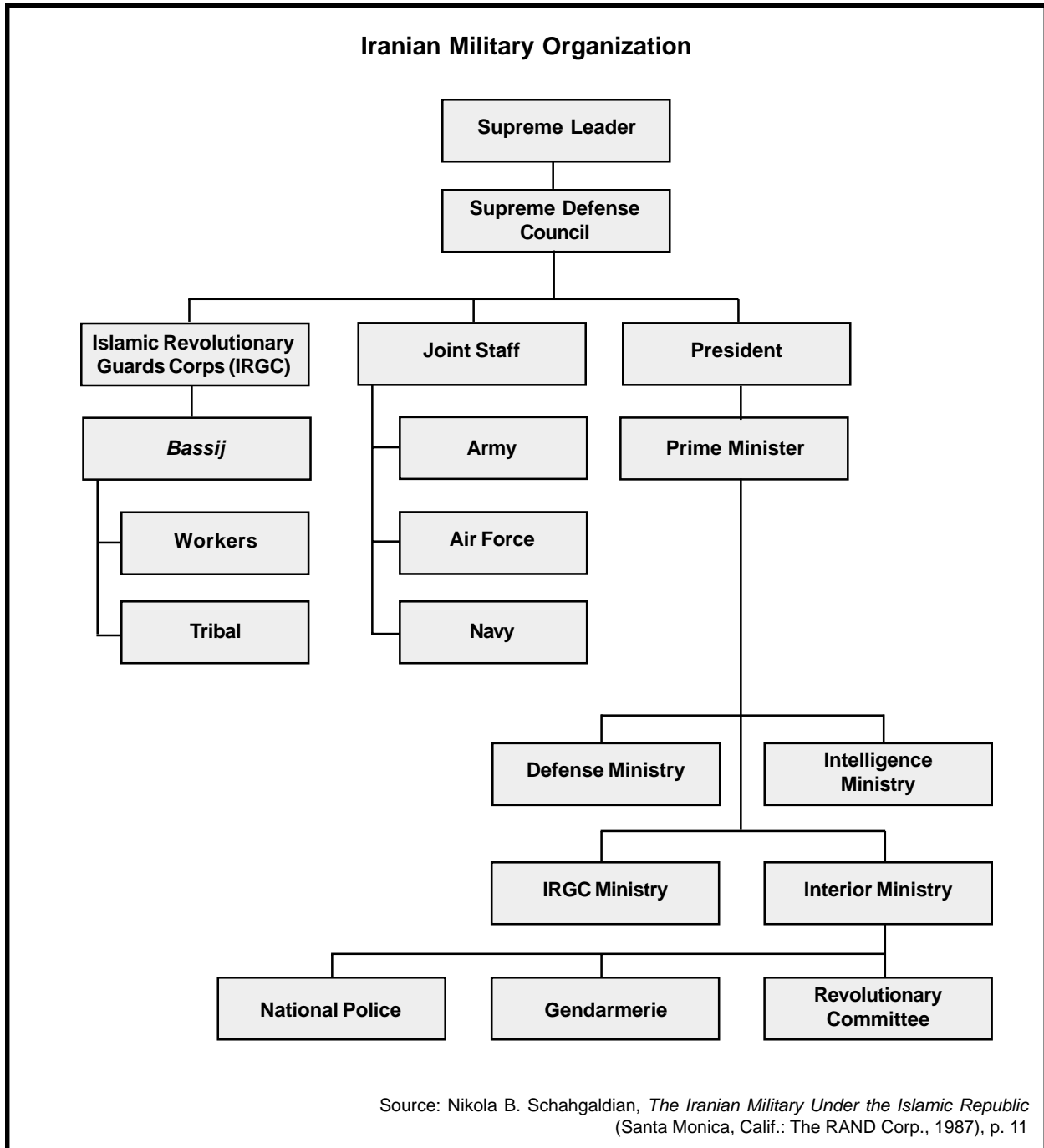
In recent months the United States has indicated that it may have a fifth interest, one focused on the democratization of the Middle East. Whether this will gain equivalency with the other four is yet to be determined. "In poverty [the people of the Islamic nations] struggle," the President said in June 2002 in a graduation address at the U.S. Military Academy. "[They] want and deserve the same freedoms and opportunities as people in every nation, and their governments should listen to their hopes."²⁵ An optimistic analyst at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London surmised, "If the U.S. played it right, [the Iranians] could actually be helpful [in the democratization of Iraq]."²⁶

A senior U.S. State Department official elaborated: "Too often across this region, the groups that are well-organized are radical Islamist groups, in part because the religious outlet has been the only acceptable outlet for dissent. What the United States can effectively do is open up the public space for debate and help moderate voices be heard." But Edward S. Walker, former assistant Secretary of State, cautioned that too much pressure on the Muslim states for liberalization could backfire. "By all

indications,” he said with respect to Iran, “[the President’s speech] has strengthened the conservatives and weakened the forces of democracy.”²⁷

The Armed Forces of Iran

Reformist President Khatami of Iran has control over most organs of government with the notable exception of the armed forces. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei is the commander in chief of the armed forces, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, plus the *Bassij*, or “Guardians of the Revolution”—a 300,000-member group of young religious militants charged with enforcing the ways of Islam.²⁸ (See figure below.)



The Iranian armed forces have undergone substantial expansion and modernization since the war with Iraq. While personnel increases have not been great (about 15 percent), the inventory of key weapon systems has grown by several multiples. In the army, the number of main battle tanks and artillery pieces has tripled, and the number of armored infantry fighting vehicles has increased over sevenfold. Combat aircraft in the air force have more than doubled, including some that were flown to Iran from Iraq to avoid destruction by the coalition during the Gulf War.²⁹ Further, as noted below, Iran has recently acquired submarines for its fleet for the first time.

The army, with about 325,000 active members, is organized into four corps with four armored divisions, six infantry divisions and an airborne brigade. The Revolutionary Guard Corps of about 125,000 has another 16 to 20 divisions, including two armored and five mechanized. It also has 15 to 20 independent specialized brigades. Most notably, the Guard Corps has six artillery groups, including surface-to-surface missile (SSM) units. Iranian SSM units include both the Soviet-designed SCUD (280km-range) and the CSS-8, an air defense missile (also of Soviet design) converted to the SSM role, with a range of about 150km. Virtually all Iranian missile development programs have benefited from aid from both China and North Korea. Newer, longer-range weapons, of foreign design but indigenous manufacture, are now believed to be available in moderate numbers.³⁰

Most important within Iran's growing missile arsenal is the 800–1,300km-range *Shihab* (Meteor) 3, which probably entered production in early 2001.³¹ At the expected rate of assembly, the inventory could have reached 25 missiles by now. The principal significance of the weapon, from both military and political points of view, is its range, which includes potential targets in Israel. It is also a good indication of the increasing level of sophistication of the Iranian arms industry.³² Whether these weapons have nuclear warheads or not is problematical. The Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad, is reported to estimate that Iran will become a nuclear power by 2005, with a fully operational arsenal.³³ Last June Mossad director Ephraim Halevy told a NATO group that Iran "represented the most serious threat to stability in the Middle East and [was] a danger to the West as well." However, U.S. intelligence agencies are reported to be less alarmed, estimating that an Iranian nuclear weapon is unlikely before the end of the decade.³⁴

Notable within the Revolutionary Guard Corps structure is a naval force of some 20,000 men. Units of this force are equipped with small, fast attack boats with missile systems, including 10 *Hudong*-class boats equipped with Chinese C-802 antiship missiles. It also has a land-based coastal defense force with both conventional artillery and missiles.³⁵ Reportedly, Iran is developing a new ground-launched antiship cruise missile based on a Chinese model. The new weapon, powered by a turbojet engine, is expected to have a range of up to 310 miles.³⁶

The air force has nine fighter-interceptor squadrons, with F-4s and -5s and Su-24s and -25s, plus a number of former Iraqi aircraft, including some Mirage F-1s. Most of these aircraft carry missiles of U.S. design. It also has seven surface attack squadrons with F-14s, F-7Ms and MIG-29s. The latter carry air-to-surface weapons of both U.S. and Soviet design. The total personnel strength of the air force is about 45,000.³⁷

The navy has a force of six submarines, three frigates and some 53 patrol and coastal combatants. It also has six mine/countermine vessels (plus one in the Caspian Sea for training purposes) and a small number of fighter aircraft and helicopters. The total naval strength is about 18,000.³⁸

A key element of Iranian military strategy is presumed to be the closure of the Strait of Hormuz in time of emergency. In this connection, Iran occupies three disputed islands between its southern shore and the United Arab Emirates, and is reported to have heavily fortified them. Since 1995 the

Iranians have held a number of exercises described as “tactical operations, sea war games, communications techniques and enemy evaluation actions” there.³⁹ They appear to have developed a serviceable doctrine for combined forces operations to underpin these activities.

U.S. Policy Options

Current U.S. policy toward Iran consists of a mix of military, political and economic “containment” mechanisms designed to limit Iranian influence in the region, reduce its capabilities for support of terrorist groups and slow its programs for the development of long-range missiles and WMD. While both Iraq and Iran have been designated as potential targets for American military action, it is apparent that the United States is disposed to focusing its attention against Iraq first, if matters must be decided by force. In the meanwhile, the presence of U.S. troops in the Gulf region, together with significant air and naval forces and logistics infrastructure, serves to deter Iran from actions inhibiting the flow of oil or the intimidation of neighbors friendly to the United States. Similarly, U.S. force deployments to states of Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, serve to inhibit Iranian adventures to the north or to the east.

The United States has not had diplomatic relations with Iran since 1979. Instead, it has funded both overt and covert programs fostering the toppling of the Islamic regime. America’s equally long-running embargo on Iran—expanded to include penalties against foreign companies doing business with Iran by the 1996 Iran–Libya Sanctions Act—and the maintenance of a “freeze” on millions of dollars of Iranian assets in the United States are the primary tools of economic containment.⁴⁰ In addition, the United States has sought to slow Iran’s pursuit of WMD and missile technology by bringing pressure to bear on third parties, particularly Russia, China and North Korea, which have long supported Iran’s ambitions in these areas.

How effective have these policies been? Depending upon how this can be measured, the answer would seem to lie somewhere between “limited” and “a failure.” Clearly the mullahs are still in charge in Tehran and, for all the evidence of popular internal dissatisfaction, the leadership does not appear seriously threatened. However, if at any time Iran has been tempted to play the role of a regional hegemon, it has been obliged to think better of it, except for its continuing support of terrorist elements operating in the Levant. Neither has it sought to challenge the United States in any field in which the United States has chosen to play an active part.

However, Iran has managed to avoid political isolation from most other countries, including America’s closest ally, the United Kingdom. Also, its programs for outreach to the Persian Gulf states, to the European Union and to Russia have met with considerable success. U.S. economic sanctions have had minimal effect since many nations are prone to exploit the absence of American competition in Iran, thereby solidifying profitable business deals, especially in the energy area. Most nations view the extraterritorial provisions of the U.S. Iran–Libya Sanctions Act as a violation of international law, and they largely ignore them.

Finally, in addition to continuing its support for terrorist groups, Iran has evidenced no inclination to slow its programs for development of long-range missiles or WMD. Thus, the success of U.S. policy toward Iran has been confined to a narrow sector in the military field, specifically to the business of U.S. deterrence of aggressive acts by Iran within the region. Considering this very modest level of success, what policy options remain open for exploitation by the United States?

Option One: Containment. Clearly, the United States can continue with its current policy of containment in the hope that if Iran cannot be pressured into taking actions more favorable to U.S.

interests, the potential negative impact of its actions can at least be minimized. Continued containment of this sort will probably require continued presence of U.S. forces in the region, renewed American efforts to reduce foreign assistance to Iran in the fields of nuclear technology and missiles, and a parallel effort to encourage further development among Iran's democratic elements. This approach could allow the United States to minimize the dangers of Iranian advances in military technology while "waiting out" an internal regime change.

The advantages of this path include the fact that it is an established practice and a well-recognized one of relatively low cost. Further, there is every indication that it enjoys consensus in Congress, especially in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks and recent terrorist activity in northern Israel. While it is modestly reactive in some respects regarding a regime change in Tehran, it has a strong element of deterrence built in with respect to possible Iranian military adventures beyond its borders. It is also attractive in that it avoids many of the pitfalls of options requiring greater U.S. military activity. Finally, such a wait-and-see approach, focused on continued efforts on containment, may yield better results over the longer term, considering the burgeoning youthful population in Iran. Many in the younger generation favor some degree of rapprochement with the United States. They will in time rise to positions of influence and power in the public and private sectors, and may well prove more tractable than their seniors.⁴¹ Under this option there is a minimal level of punishment inflicted upon the Iranian people to give cause for long-term estrangement.

However, there are many disadvantages to this approach. Continued American avoidance of engagement of Iran may lead to further erosion of the anti-WMD and missile restraint regimes, which are already of questionable efficacy. If more nations choose to ignore U.S. economic sanctions, the United States could find itself imposing greater penalties on increasing numbers of foreign firms, a process that muddies the waters of trade relationships and is counterproductive at its core. Within Iran, conservatives may succeed in further marginalizing the reformers while the United States remains aloof, outside the theater of diplomatic and social interaction.

Option Two: Active Containment. A second option for the United States involves a combination of actions designed to reduce the threat that Iran poses to U.S. interests and simultaneously to promote the overthrow of the Islamic regime. This more active form of containment would blend psychological, political and diplomatic offensives with selective military strikes and covert operations against high-value targets (long-range missile sites, WMD facilities and terrorist support structure). The United States could work with democratic elements in Iran politically and psychologically to discredit and undermine the legitimacy of the conservative leadership. Diplomatically, the United States would seek to isolate the regime from its current supporters, especially Russia. On the economic front, the United States would pursue more aggressive penalties on foreign firms and governments doing business in Iran.

While this option would mark a dramatic shift in U.S. policy, the rewards of the effort, if successful, could be significant. Ideally, these would include the reduction of the military and terrorist threats posed by current Iranian weapons programs and the raising of the prospects for the formation of a friendlier, more democratic regime in Tehran. On the other hand, this is a high-risk scheme. There is no guarantee that any phase of the operation would accomplish its intended purpose, and it is difficult to assess the prospects for an overall favorable outcome. The Iranians might choose to move their advanced weaponry into hardened shelters or into populated areas to confound attempts to target them. If the WMD or their delivery means were not destroyed early on, depending upon their level of development at the time of the onset of operations, the intensity of the conflict could escalate

exponentially. Like Iraq, Iran has employed poison chemicals in military operations in the past, and might not be inhibited from doing so again.

Another troublesome aspect of Iranian capabilities is Tehran's ability to destabilize the newly established Karzai government in Afghanistan. Iranian leaders have relationships with various Afghan warlords, particularly those who were active with the Northern Alliance in opposition to the Taliban. Conceivably, some disaffected Afghans might be tempted to cooperate with Tehran in an effort to oust "the American puppet," Hamid Karzai.

There are, of course, tactical aspects of the problem which may be no less vexing. Iran does not have an army with a capability for fighting effectively against a modern Western force. It does, however, have capabilities for blocking the Strait of Hormuz and interdicting the flow of oil, if only intermittently. There is plentiful evidence that Iran has a respectable mining ability and a combination of submarine, surface and air units which could substantially raise the costs of maintaining the sea lanes free of danger, even in the face of modern naval and air forces. As noted above, Iran has made a point to develop and drill its forces for this specific type of operation.

Military aspects of the matter aside, Iran poses another threat that could greatly complicate the accomplishment of the U.S. mission. There is considerable danger that in time of emergency the Supreme Leader and his staff would crack down on all reformists, perhaps incarcerating or executing leaders and activists. Considering the temperament of the *Bassij*, the "Guardians of the Revolution," the Iranian facility for such reaction may be high. If this were to occur, a major justification for mounting the attack in the first place could be lost. Instead of a surviving populace happy to be "liberated" by a successful campaign led by the United States, Iran could be converted to a remnant of a defeated nation with a residual hatred for the invading "infidels."

At a minimum, under the active containment option, the reformists would likely be discredited, and the possibility of the emergence of a friendly state at the close of the conflict might be greatly reduced. Further, U.S. relations with other important countries with interests in the region, particularly Russia, would likely suffer serious setbacks. Many other issues, such as the expansion of NATO and the cooperation of other states in a variety of actions, could be affected, complicating world affairs in unpredictable ways.

Option Three: Contain and Engage. A third option for U.S. policy toward Iran entails a mix of containment and engagement strategies. Under this option, in those areas where the United States and Iran are at odds—including the topics of WMD, missile proliferation and terrorism—the United States would continue its containment programs. However, in areas where U.S. and Iranian interests intersect or overlap, efforts would be made to develop channels for dialogue aimed at achieving agreements where such might be possible. Failing that, the two parties would seek to gain mutual recognition and definitions of interests. Areas of potential cooperation stemming from such dialogue include the stability of oil transport from the Persian Gulf, the stability of the Karzai government in Afghanistan, and reduction of regional threats posed by Iraq.⁴² As Dr. Ray Takeyh of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy has pointed out, such an approach would be similar to the Sino-American relationship in which dialogue and engagement continue in areas of policy agreement and disagreement simultaneously.⁴³ This strategy would require a "decoupling" of areas of concern where agreement is unlikely from those where agreement and cooperation appear possible. The long-term goal would be to achieve shifts in Iranian behavior from unfavorable to favorable with respect to U.S. interests. However, the path to this objective would rely on sustained diplomatic and political engagement in lieu of military containment and intimidation.

The potential advantages of a contain-engage regime could be significant. It would allow the United States to contain Iran's least favorable practices while steadily working to encourage Tehran to select more moderate paths toward its neighbors and toward the United States. It could also reduce strains in U.S. relations with friendly nations that have chosen to engage Iran on their own behalf. Finally, a sincere effort to achieve political dialogue with Iran could produce benefits to both nations in areas where agreements are possible. Progress in these areas could lead to the development of confidence for dealing with tougher issues as the occasions might arise. And in time it could also lead to serious discussions of issues presently quite beyond the reach of either party, considering the current political climate. This was the general strategy the United States employed successfully with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It led to sharp reductions in global tensions and may have contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Implications for the U.S. Military

U.S. forces will be affected whatever policy choices are made regarding U.S.–Iranian relations. Even the maintenance of the current containment regime would require continued presence of substantial U.S. forces in the Gulf region, and probably in Central Asia as well, for the foreseeable future. In addition to the direct costs involved, the services may experience increasingly high levels of personnel turnover as they strive to maintain strength in the face of troop fatigue stemming from repetitive unaccompanied assignments to an increasing number of unsettled areas of deployment. Only the participation of other interested friendly nations with well-trained forces would seem to offer relief to the pressures of an undertaking of this scope.

Second, a more active containment policy would raise the possibility that the interactive process of friendly–enemy initiatives would lead to a creeping escalation, possibly bringing the issue to undesirable levels of warfare. In any event, the force requirements would likely increase over time, with no clear limit to the effort. If recent force structure patterns are a guide, air and sea long-range strike forces, together with Special Forces ground units, would likely be the elements in greatest demand in the initial stages. This might give way over time to requirements for larger conventional ground forces as events might unfold. This would be particularly true if Iran were to counter American pressures with preemptive strikes at high-value targets, particularly those beyond the bounds of tactical operations (e.g., Israel, Afghanistan or a post-Saddam Iraq). The U.S. Army could find itself heavily committed to a broad range of operational missions, ranging from peace enforcement to intensive combat. The desirability of participation by allied and friendly countries alongside U.S. units would appear to be an even higher priority than in the previous case considered.

In any event, well before U.S. forces focus on the challenges of Iran, they are likely to have already faced battle with Iraq. They could find that just as they complete operations in Iraq they would be obliged to disengage, refit and turn east to deal with the new and more powerful Iranian opponent. Few campaigns in history have placed a broader range of more complex requirements on the units stemming from some of the scenarios suggested here. Further, seldom do military operations terminate quite as quickly as they begin. Hence, it should be recognized that force requirements for the critical period of redirection of the effort from Iraq to Iran may be substantially higher than otherwise might be the case.

In consideration of these matters, we may conclude:

- The first priority for dealing with hostile forces of Iran (the second component of the “axis of evil”) should be the building and assembly of an appropriate coalition of highly capable forces

with allies and friendly powers concerned with the issues of terrorism, WMD and long-range missile proliferation, and the protection of Western access to the oil of the Persian Gulf.

- The contemplated military operations in the Middle East may stress U.S. forces to the fullest. While it is not envisioned that actions against Iran (under Option Two) would necessarily occur before the completion of similar actions against Iraq, occupation and follow-on force requirements in the latter country are likely to complicate early reorientation of available forces from one objective to the other. Accordingly, some requirements for Iran may be necessary *in addition to* those for Iraq, thus increasing overall requirements for trained personnel and units of all types.
- U.S. forces should give first operational priority to the elimination of the Iranian missile threat to neighboring states. This should include both offensive and defensive planning.
- Second priority should be given to ensuring the security of the Strait of Hormuz. Unimpeded passage through that area is essential both for commercial vessels involved in the oil trade and for the movement of troops and war materiel.
- Operational planning should also give consideration to the security of other states of the Middle East and Central and South Asia. Any attempt by Iran to extend the conflict beyond its borders should be met with vigorous opposition. In this connection, planning should include requirements for strengthening defensive capabilities of indigenous forces of the countries at risk
- Finally, all operations should be drawn with a recognition of the existence of potentially friendly, democratically inclined elements of the Iranian population. If and when they are encountered in liberated areas, consideration should be given to the selection of individuals and groups for participation in the administrative authority to be established by occupying forces.

Endnotes

1. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1985–1986* (London: Garden City Press, 1985), pp. 28–29.
2. Sandra Mackey, *The Iranians: Persia, Islam and the Soul of a Nation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 313.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 314–315.
4. Shahram Chubin, “Whither Iran? Domestic Politics and National Security,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, Adelphi Paper 342 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 37.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.
6. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey 2001–2002* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 211.
7. John F. Burns, “Iranian President Says U.S. Leaders ‘Misused’ Sept. 11,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 2002, p. 1.
8. Nazila Fathi, “Iran’s President Trying to Limit Power of Clergy,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 2002, p. 1.

9. Thomas L. Friedman, "The Best of Enemies?" *The New York Times*, June 12, 2002.
10. Ibid., p. 24.
11. Chubin, "Whither Iran?" pp. 24–40.
12. Thomas L. Friedman, "The View From Tehran," *The New York Times*, June 26, 2002.
13. Ibid., pp. 44–47.
14. Robert Olson, "Turkey-Iran Relations 2000–2001: The Caspian, Azerbaijan and the Kurds," The Middle East Policy Council Website, Vol. IX, June 2002, No. 2, http://www.mepc.org/public_asp/journal_vol9/0206_olson.asp.
15. Chubin, "Whither Iran?" pp. 44–45.
16. Dilshika Jayamaha, "Iran: Cracking Down on Terrorism," Associated Press, July 11, 2002.
17. Ibid., p. 48.
18. Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 483.
19. Arie Stav (ed.), *Ballistic Missiles: The Threat and the Response* (London: Brassey's, 1999), p. 155.
20. Deborah Seward, "U.S., Russians Call for Cooperation," Associated Press, July 11, 2002.
21. Barry Schweid, "U.S.: Iran is Most Active Supporter of Terrorism," Associated Press, May 21, 2002.
22. See, for example, comments of Mr. R. James Woolsey, then Director of Central Intelligence: "Iran continues its ambitious multibillion-dollar military modernization program [and seeks to buy nuclear material and ballistic missiles]." Tim Weiner, "CIA Head Surveys World's Hot Spots for Senate," *The New York Times International*, 26 January 1994, p. A6.
23. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey 2000–2001* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 215.
24. Peter Finn, "Al Qaeda Deputies Harbored by Iran," *The Washington Post*, August 28, 2002, p. 1.
25. Peter Slevin and Glenn Kessler, "U.S. to Seek Mideast Reforms," *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2002, p. A1.
26. Scott Peterson, "Iran Quietly Signals an Openness to Terror Fight," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 13, 2002, p. 1.
27. Slevin and Kessler, "U.S. to Seek Mideast Reforms," p. A9.
28. Hazhir Teimourian, "Iran's Make or Break Election," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, June 2001, p. 29.
29. Comparison of data in International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1990–1991* (London: Brassey's, 1991) and *2001–2002* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
30. IISS, *The Military Balance 2001–2002*, p. 132, and Stav, *Ballistic Missiles*, pp. 333–334.
31. There are considerable differences among analysts regarding the *Shihab* programs. IISS considers the *Shihab* 1, 4 and 5 as short-, intermediate- and long-range weapons, respectively.
32. Steve Rodan, "Iran Begins Serial Production of *Shihab-3*," *Middle East Newline*, October 17, 2001.
33. IISS, *Strategic Survey 2001–2002*, p. 217.

34. Richard Beeston, "Mossad Chief Warns of Iran Missile Threat," *London Times*, June 28, 2002.
35. IISS, *Strategic Survey 2001–2002*, p. 217.
36. Bill Gertz, "Exporting Weapons Draws U.S. Sanctions," *The Washington Times*, May 20, 2002.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Edward B. Atkeson, *The Powder Keg: An Intelligence Officer's Guide to Military Forces in the Middle East 1996–2000* (Falls Church, Va.: NOVA Publications, 1996), p. 66.
40. Meghan L. O'Sullivan, "The Dilemmas of U.S. Policy Toward 'Rogue' States," online article (<http://www.brook.edu/dybdocroot/views/articles/osullivan/2000springIFRI.htm>), The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC. Translation of article originally published in *Politique Strangere*, Spring 2000.
41. Daniel Brumberg, "End of a Brief Affair? The United States and Iran," The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief 14, March 2002.
42. "Iraq, Iran and America: Distrust All Around," *The Economist*, Vol. 364, No. 8286 (August 17, 2002), p. 38.
43. "U.S. Policy Toward Iran: Time for a Change?" Conference of the Middle East Policy Council, Transcript Federal News Service, Washington, D.C., December 12, 2000.

(MG Edward B. Atkeson, USA Ret., PhD, is a Senior Fellow with AUSA's Institute of Land Warfare. Douglas Bush, at the time of this writing, was a national security analyst with the Institute of Land Warfare.)