



The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Operational and Policy Implications

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MES Monographs • No. 1

August 2011



Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

Middle East Studies Monograph Series

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The first issue of the Monograph Series is an updated version of a presentation, entitled “The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Operational and Policy Implications,” given by Michael Eisenstadt, Director of Military and Security Studies Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, as part of the MES Academic Year 2010-2011 Lecture Series, “Framing the Iranian Challenge.”

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The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Operational and Policy Implications

by Michael Eisenstadt

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is an unconventional adversary that requires unconventional approaches in planning, strategy and policy. These approaches must take into account the country's sophisticated culture, the regime's religious-ideological orientation, and the country's modern military history. And they must account for its unique approach to statecraft, strategy, and the use of force.

Iran's political system is characterized by parallel structures that are the locus of multiple power centers. These consist of both traditional and revolutionary institutions: the President and Supreme Leader; the Majles and Guardian Council; the Judiciary and Special Clerical Courts; and the regular military and the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC). Due to this organizational complexity and the importance of informal influence networks, the functioning of the regime is often opaque—even to many of its members.

Thus, planners and policymakers dealing with the IRI should keep in mind three general principles:

- Nothing in Iran is as it seems; things are often to the contrary. Certainty regarding intentions, power relationships, and decision making processes and outputs is often elusive;
- Nothing in Iran is black and white; ambiguity and shades of grey rule. This is both a defining characteristic of Iranian culture, and a reflection of the fact that ambiguity is used by the regime as a stratagem to confound its enemies;
- Iran's strategic culture is characterized by numerous contradictions and paradoxes. One should not seek consistency where none exists.

With these caveats in mind, this monograph will attempt to identify the salient features of the IRI's strategic culture, and their implications for planning, strategy, and policy.¹

A Nation of Martyrs?

Any attempt to understand the national security policies of the IRI must start by clearing up a range of misconceptions regarding the religious and ideological mainsprings of Iranian behavior, which have prevented clear-headed thinking about Iran over the past three decades.

Because Shiite religious doctrine is central to the official ideology of the Islamic Republic and exalts the suffering and martyrdom of the faithful, Iran is sometimes portrayed as an irrational, 'undeterrable' state with a high pain threshold, driven by the absolute imperatives of religion, rather than by the pragmatic concerns of statecraft.

This impression has been reinforced by Iran's use of costly human-wave attacks during the Iran-Iraq War, its unnecessary prolongation of the war with Iraq in pursuit of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and its sup-

port for groups that pioneered the tactic of the suicide bombing—such as the Lebanese Hizballah and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Iranian officials deliberately cultivate and play up this image of Iran as a dangerous foe whose soldiers seek martyrdom, and whose society is willing and able to absorb heavy punishment. They do so to energize the regime's hard-core support base, to intimidate its enemies, and to strengthen the country's deterrent posture.

This perception of Iran, however, is both anachronistic and wrong. Iranian propaganda, and the vivid, enduring images of human wave attacks have done much to distort thinking about Iran. In the heady, optimistic, early days of the revolution, the Iranian people were indeed willing to endure hardships, make great sacrifices, and incur heavy losses in support of the war effort—with Tehran eschewing the opportunity for a cease-fire in 1982 to pursue the overthrow of the Bathist regime in Baghdad and to export the revolution beyond. But as the war with Iran dragged on, popular support for it waned. The population was demoralized and wearied by years of inconclusive fighting, making it increasingly difficult to attract volunteers for the front. Many clerics came to the conclusion that the war was unwinnable. As a result, the regime had to abandon its slogan of “war, war until victory,” and Ayatollah Khomeini had to agree to “drink the cup of poison” in accepting the cease-fire with Iraq in July 1988. As it turned out, Iran was not—as Ayatollah Khomeini was fond of saying—“a nation of martyrs.”

Since then, within the context of a relatively activist foreign policy, Iranian decision-makers have generally shunned direct confrontation, and have acted through surrogates (such as the Lebanese Hizballah) or by means of stealth (Iranian small boat and mine operations against shipping in the Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War) in order to preserve deniability, and thereby minimize risk. Such behavior is evidence of an ability to engage in rational calculation, to accurately assess power relationships, and to identify means to circumvent adversary “red lines.”²

Though its Lebanese Hizballah clients pioneered the suicide bombing in the early 1980s, it has been years since Iran's allies have employed this tactic. While continuing to cultivate the spirit of resistance, jihad, and martyrdom, Hizballah abandoned suicide bombings in the late 1980s, opting for more conventional military tactics, while Iran's various ‘special groups’ proxies in Iraq such as Asaib Ahl al-Haqq and Kataib Hizballah, have eschewed suicide bombing in favor of explosively formed penetrator (EFP), mortar, and rocket attacks.³ Today, it is Sunni jihadist groups such as Al-Qaida and its affiliates (including, ironically, the anti-regime Jundallah organization in Iran) whose preferred tactic is the suicide bombing.

Tehran's cautious behavior during past crises is the best proof that post-Khomeini Iran has generally sought to avoid direct involvement in costly conflicts and quagmires with its enemies. Thus, during the 1991 Shiite uprising in Iraq, the 1998 capture of the city of Mazar-e-Sharif by the Afghan Taliban (which led to the murder of eight Iranian diplomats and a journalist and the slaughter of thousands of Shiite Hazaras), the 2006 war between Israel and the Lebanese Hizballah, and the 2011 crackdown on mainly Shiite protestors in Bahrain, Iran left beleaguered Shiite communities to their fates, rather than entering into potentially risky and costly foreign adventures.

Likewise, Iran temporarily suspended the enrichment of uranium in November 2003 when it believed that it risked a U.S. attack or invasion if it didn't, and it reneged on a 2010 decision to send a naval aid flotilla to Gaza after publicly announcing that it would do so, when Israel apparently warned the United Nations that such a course of action would be considered an act of war.⁴

In all these cases the Islamic Republic showed that it is not insensitive to risks and costs—although in several there were war parties arguing for intervention. Such pragmatism is consistent with the principle of the expediency/interest of the regime (*maslahat*) that was established by the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, in the mid-late 1980s.

Khomeini set down this principle in a series of letters to then President Ali Khamenei and the Council of Guardians in December 1987 and January 1988, respectively, in which he affirmed the Islamic Republic's

authority to destroy a mosque or suspend the observance of the five pillars of faith (the fundamentals of Muslim observance) if the interests of the regime so required. The Expediency Council, established in February 1988, was created to help the Supreme Leader discern the interests of the regime.⁵ This axiom has guided Iranian decision-making ever since.

In establishing this principle, Khomeini formalized the supremacy of *raison d'état* over the tenets of Islam as the precept guiding Iranian decision-making. This principle guides decision making at the highest levels of the regime, as well as the actions of the regime's foot-soldiers.⁶

The assumption underpinning this precept is that the regime's brand of revolutionary Islam will not survive unless the IRI survives. Preserving the Islamic Republic thus becomes the ultimate religious value, and it becomes permissible to engage in torture and murder, and to violate the tenets of Islam, in order to preserve the regime. Paradoxically, then, policy in the IRI is based on the secular principle of *raison d'état*, rather than the dictates of Shiite Islam. One can say, in effect, that the IRI is a secular theocracy.

Similarly, despite the frequent resort to religious allusions and imagery in speeches and interviews, Iranian officials often employ the language of deterrence theory as spoken and understood in the West. Thus, shortly after the first test launch of the *Shihab-3* missile in July 1998, Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani explained that to bolster Iran's deterrent capability

we have prepared ourselves to absorb the first strike so that it inflicts the least damage on us. We have, however, prepared a second strike which can decisively avenge the first one while preventing a third strike against us.⁷

Iranian Defense Planning

Defense planning in the Islamic Republic is driven by three principal factors: 1) a determination to transform Iran into a regional power capable of projecting influence throughout the Middle East and beyond; 2) a need to deter various perceived threats, to avoid a repeat of the tragic deterrence failure that led Iraq to invade Iran in 1980, and; 3) a desire to achieve self-reliance in all areas of national life, which is a fundamental goal of the Islamic revolution.

Status and Influence. The IRI's leadership believes that the Islamic Republic plays a key role in world affairs as the standard bearer of revolutionary Islam and the guardian of oppressed Muslims (and even non-Muslims) everywhere. Accordingly, they believe that the fate of the *ummah* (the Islamic community) depends on Iran's ability to transform itself into a world power that can defend and advance the interests of that community. This perception also leads Tehran to support radical Islamic movements throughout the Middle East—to undermine U.S. influence in the region, reshape the international environment in a way that is conducive to Iranian interests, and to burnish the regime's revolutionary Islamic credentials at home and abroad.

This universalistic Islamic impulse has, however, coexisted uneasily with Iranian nationalism, and each has, at different times, exerted varying degrees of influence over Iranian foreign policy. The Islamic tendency generally dominated in the 1980s, while Islamic and nationalist orientations have contended with each other since then, accommodating the emergence of an increasingly prominent mahdist (messianic) trend in the late 1990s.⁸ The tension between Islam and nationalism continues to this day, as witnessed by the controversy stirred in Iran by President Ahmadinejad's statements about a specifically "Iranian school of Islam."⁹

The IRI's leadership believes that Iran is the dominant power in the Gulf and the region by dint of geography, demography, and resource endowments. This translates into a desire to control the Gulf militarily. This entails an ability to deny its use by others if need be, and to defend its vital interests and assert its rights in the Gulf against rivals—such as Saudi Arabia and the United States. And it believes that the system that has underpinned U.S. power since World War II is in crisis, that the United States is a power in decline, and that

Iran is a rising power. Accordingly, it is working to establish alliances with other anti-status quo powers (such as Venezuela) that seek to constrain American power, in order to hasten this decline.

There is a large gap, however, between the self-image and the aspirations of the regime, and the reality of Iran's military weakness. Tehran's efforts to expand and modernize its armed forces and enhance its military capabilities are intended to bridge this gap. Iran's financial problems and U.S. pressure on its arms suppliers, however, have prevented it from achieving its goal of building a large, capable military. Consequently, it has devoted its available resources to acquiring capabilities that provide the biggest "bang" for Iran's limited defense "buck" including anti-shipping weapons, rockets and missiles, and an infrastructure that could be used to produce nuclear weapons. Given its financial problems, nuclear weapons may be the only way for Iran to become a regional military power on a budget: while a nuclear weapons program might cost billions of dollars, rebuilding its conventional military would cost hundreds of billions of dollars.

Finally, the IRI's pursuit of status and influence manifests itself in its incessant demands for reciprocity in its relations with the outside world—and in particular, with great powers such as the United States. This demand is rooted in the IRI's critique of the international system as inherently unjust. This demand is also rooted, at least in part, in the Shiite imperative to fight injustice, which expresses itself in the regime's condemnation of double standards at the United Nations and elsewhere (except when those double standards benefit the IRI).

Thus, Tehran claims for itself what others claim for themselves, and demands of others what is demanded of it. In response to Iraqi efforts to disrupt Iranian oil exports during the Iran-Iraq War, Iran announced that if it cannot export oil from the Gulf, no other country would be permitted to do so.¹⁰ In response to U.S. demands that Iran not produce nuclear weapons, Iran demanded that the U.S. give up its nuclear arms.¹¹ When the UN Security Council passed a resolution (UNSC Res. 1929) authorizing member states to inspect Iranian shipping for cargo proscribed by UN resolutions, Iran insisted that it would do the same to ships of countries involved in such searches.¹² And in response to the dispatch of Israeli warships in 2009 through the Suez Canal to the vicinity of the Persian Gulf, Iran sent warships through the Suez Canal to the vicinity of Israel.¹³

Deterrence and Defense. Iranian defense planning is also motivated by a desire to enhance the IRI's deterrent capability. At various times, the Islamic Republic has faced real and perceived threats from Iraq, the United States, and Israel. These have come from the west (Iraq and Israel) and the south (U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf). Tehran also fears what it perceives to be American attempts to encircle it as part of its efforts to contain Iran—an apprehension fed by U.S. military campaigns in neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq.

Iranian force dispositions have traditionally reflected these threat perceptions. Prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, most of Iran's ground forces were based near the border with Iraq, while most of its air force was based near Iraq and the Persian Gulf region. Its navy was (and still is) almost exclusively deployed in the Gulf, though Iran has been trying to create a blue water navy capable of projecting Iranian influence and showing the flag outside the Gulf, far from its borders.

Since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran has devoted the lion's share of its limited defense dollars to enhancing its naval, unconventional warfare, and rocket and missile forces, to deter its enemies, and exploit their vulnerabilities if deterrence fails.¹⁴ The aforementioned force dispositions and funding priorities reflect Tehran's past preoccupation with perceived threats from Iraq, the United States, and Israel, and the fact that Iran's most important economic asset—its oil and gas industry—is concentrated near the Persian Gulf.

Since the 1960s, the U.S. strategic deterrent and warfighting force has consisted of a triad: 1) land based missiles; 2) land based bombers, and; 3) missile-equipped nuclear submarines—to which the U.S. is considering adding a conventional prompt global strike capability.¹⁵ To bolster its own defense and war-fighting capabilities, Iran has likewise sought to create a deterrent triad consisting of:

- Anti-Access/Area-Denial capabilities to disrupt oil exports from the Persian Gulf, should it desire to do so, and to deny its enemies the ability to use the Gulf as a staging area for attacks;

- The ability to destabilize neighboring countries with large Shiite populations and to launch terrorist attacks on several continents in conjunction with the Lebanese Hizballah and other surrogate organizations (such as Iraqi Shiite ‘special groups’);
- Missile and rocket forces equipped with conventional, and perhaps eventually nuclear, warheads. In the future, Iran may also seek nontraditional delivery means for its nonconventional arsenal, such as special forces, unmanned aerial vehicles, and boats.

After the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran sought to create a fourth leg for its deterrent: the Basij militia and IRGC were trained to conduct guerilla warfare against an invader in accordance with a new, decentralized defensive concept—the regime’s so-called “mosaic” doctrine.¹⁶ As the threat of invasion faded, these organizations focused their attention on the perceived threat of a “soft” revolution fomented by the United States.

In addition to building these military capabilities, Iran has taken steps to bolster its deterrent image and posture by:

- Cultivating a culture of resistance, jihad, and martyrdom in order to intimidate its enemies and to enhance its staying power;
- Building oil and gas pipelines with its neighbors (e.g., the stillborn Iran-Pakistan-India Pipeline, and the recently announced Iran-Turkey-Syria Pipeline) and linking neighboring countries into its electrical grid (it provides Iraq with 10 percent of its electricity). In addition to the economic benefits of such arrangements, Tehran apparently hopes that these links of interdependence will ensure that its neighbors—almost all of whom are U.S. partners or allies—will have an incentive to lobby Washington against an attack on Iran, and;¹⁷
- Establishing ties with Shiite and Muslim communities worldwide, by co-opting Shiite clerical networks and through religious outreach by Iranian cultural centers (which are often staffed by Iranian intelligence personnel). Iran hopes that these ties will ensure that these communities will rally to its side if it is attacked.

Iran has frequently used ambiguity to bolster deterrence. Thus, since 2006, President Ahmedinejad has repeatedly declared that Iran is a “nuclear power,” using this term in a way that plays on its multiple meanings.¹⁸ Likewise, Iran has used displays of its missile forces in parades and exercises to play on the perceived connection between missiles and nuclear weapons, which it has encouraged by festooning the missiles with banners proclaiming that “Israel should be wiped off the map.”¹⁹

Tehran’s policy of nuclear ambiguity also complicates U.S. efforts to establish a regional security architecture to contain and deter a nuclear Iran. As demonstrated by the firestorm that greeted Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s July 2009 statement regarding a U.S. “defense umbrella” for the region, such declarations could lead friends and allies to believe that Washington has reconciled itself to Iran’s eventual acquisition of nuclear weapons, thereby advancing Tehran’s goal of being treated as a nuclear power.

Self-Reliance. For its entire existence, the IRI has been a “strategically lonely” state, lacking reliable allies or a superpower patron. This reflects, in part, Iran’s status as a predominantly Shiite-Persian state in a region dominated by Sunni Arabs and Turks, and the fact that since the 1979 revolution, the IRI has often pursued radical policies that alienated its neighbors and isolated it internationally.

Thus, during the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran faced Baghdad virtually alone. A U.S.-led arms embargo greatly complicated Iran’s efforts to sustain its war effort, and Iran’s sense of isolation and abandonment was heightened by the apathetic international response to Iraq’s use of chemical weapons in that war. This experience has left deep wounds in the Iranian national psyche, and inculcated a profound distrust of international arms control treaties (to which Iraq had been a signatory), as well as international organizations like the United Nations. And it has bred a determination in Iran that these bitter experiences not be repeated.

As a result, Iran sought to develop its own military industries in order to reduce its dependence on foreign arms suppliers, minimize the impact of future embargoes, and create the foundation for a modern military. Likewise, the desire to achieve self-reliance is probably among the factors driving its nuclear program.

Finally, the pursuit of self-reliance—a central element of the IRI’s revolutionary ethos that extends to all spheres of national life—reflects a determination to free Iran of the dependence on foreign technology and advisors that characterized the Shah’s efforts to modernize and transform the country. Despite thirty years of exertions, however, the IRI remains heavily dependent on foreign suppliers for advanced arms, equipment, and technology, although it downplays this dependence and often exaggerates its achievements in this area.

Hard and Soft Power in Iranian Strategy

It may seem surprising that the IRI has not built a large, capable conventional military commensurate with the image of itself as a regional power. While U.S. pressure on potential suppliers and economic constraints may account partly for that, Iran could have afforded to build a larger conventional military, given the size of its foreign currency reserves and the amount of money spent annually on food and gas subsidies. That it has not done so probably reflects not only its concerns about domestic stability, but the fact that its approach to national security places greater emphasis on guile than on brute force,²⁰ and on ‘soft power’ than on ‘hard power.’²¹

Nevertheless, Iran has not ignored its ‘hard power’ assets. It has pursued niche capabilities that exploit its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf and the vulnerabilities of its adversaries—particularly the U.S. aversion to casualties and its preference for short wars.²² And it is pursuing the infrastructure that it would need to build nuclear weapons, should it decide to do so. Nuclear weapons would finally provide the IRI with the status and capabilities commensurate to its grand ambitions.

Armed Surrogates. The IRI has long relied on armed surrogates (such as Lebanese Hizballah and Shiite ‘special groups’ in Iraq) to project influence abroad. Some of these surrogates have been innovators in the field of unconventional warfare: Hizballah pioneered the use of suicide bombing and of battlefield rockets as *strategic* bombardment systems against Israel, Hamas conducted suicide bombing campaigns and pioneered the use of homemade rockets, also against Israel, while Shiite ‘special groups’ in Iraq used EFPs and Improvised Rocket Assisted Munitions against U.S. forces there. These groups have greatly enhanced Tehran’s ability to project influence, and are part and parcel of its deterrent complex; if Israel or the United States were to attack Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, it is likely that Iran would retaliate by means of Hizballah, Shiite ‘special groups’ in Iraq, and other proxies.

People’s War. Iran was occupied by the U.K. and U.S.S.R. during World War II, and it feared another invasion after the failed 1980 U.S. hostage rescue and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. To deal with the perceived threat of invasion, the IRI created the Basij, a popular militia auxiliary intended to be a “20 million man army” (the actual number is much smaller) which is controlled by the IRGC. The primary mission of the Basij is internal security, and waging a ‘popular war’ against an invader.²³

A Guerilla Navy. Iran has built a navy capable of waging asymmetric naval guerilla warfare as part of its anti-access/area-denial strategy in the Gulf. Regular and IRGC-navy forces would employ swarm tactics, mines, antiship missiles, small boats, midget and conventional submarines, combat swimmers, and rockets and missiles, to disrupt shipping in the Gulf and control passage through the Strait of Hormuz.²⁴

Strategic Rockets and Missiles. Iran’s missile force is usually perceived primarily as a means of delivering nonconventional payloads. The received wisdom is that Tehran would not waste such an expensive delivery system for nonconventional payloads. However, Iran’s rocket and missile force is more correctly seen as a conventional deterrent and war-fighting force, which has the ability to deliver nonconventional payloads. Iran produces a large family of conventional rockets which have a range of up to 300km, which it likely intends to use to supplement its missile force as weapons of mass terror against enemy cities. (Numerous cities

in Iraq and the Gulf are located near the border with Iran and on the shores of the Persian Gulf—well within the range of these rocket systems.) This emphasis on conventional strategic bombardment systems is a lesson of the Iran-Iraq War, when conventional missile strikes on Tehran during the 1988 War of the Cities led to the evacuation of a quarter of the city's residents. This contributed to the demoralization of the Iranian public and, ultimately, to the decision to bring the war to an end.²⁵

Iran's rocket forces are an oft-overlooked aspect of its military force structure; attention is generally focused on the larger, more capable Shihab family of missiles that give Iran its long reach. Iran is producing these in large numbers to ensure a dramatic psychological impact on the enemy, and to overwhelm enemy missile defenses. As terror weapons, rockets and missiles are equally effective; civilians are indifferent to whether they are being targeted by unguided or guided systems. Moreover, neither the United States nor Iran's Arab neighbors have the ability to counter its rocket forces at this time. Only Israel currently has the ability to shoot down both rockets *and* missiles.

Soft Power. United States officials tend to be wedded to a hard power approach to strategy and statecraft that underplays the importance of soft power. Thus, in assessing the threat posed by Tehran, U.S. military planners and policymakers tend to focus on Iran's hard power capabilities—particularly its unconventional warfare capabilities (the Qods Force and Hizballah), its anti-access/area-denial capabilities (small boats, mines, and anti-ship missiles) its rocket and missile forces, and its nuclear program. This reflects an American preoccupation with capabilities that can produce physical effects, rooted in American conceptions of military power that are not necessarily shared by the IRI.

Thus, U.S. officials have fretted that the Iraqi military will be unprepared to secure the country's airspace and waters after U.S. forces leave, while it is Iranian political influence and soft power (particularly its economic, religious, and informational activities) that probably pose the greater long-term threat to Iraqi sovereignty and independence. U.S. officials therefore tend to overlook the key role that soft power—and particularly propaganda and psychological warfare—plays in Iran's defense and foreign policies.²⁶

Iran's soft power encompasses the various non-kinetic elements of national power:

Reputation and image management: Tehran presents itself as a dependable partner and dangerous adversary, and pushes a triumphalist narrative that asserts that it is a rising power that has God and history on its side. These messages have been undercut, however, by a tendency to over-promise and under-deliver, by its own domestic political and economic problems, and by a tendency to lecture and condescend toward Arabs and others.

Export of revolutionary Islam: Tehran seeks the primacy of its brand of Islam in Shiite communities around the world by spending prodigious sums of money to support the activities of clerics trained in Qom and steeped in the ideology of clerical rule, and by co-opting or displacing clerics trained elsewhere (such as Najaf).²⁷ Tehran also seeks to create bonds of solidarity with Shiite communities around the world that can serve as external bases of support for its policies and as allies should it be attacked.²⁸

Militia proxies: Where there are embattled Shiite communities and weak states, Iran has created proxy militias, such as the Lebanese Hizballah and various Hizballah clones in Iraq—including Kataib Hizballah, Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, and the Promised Day Brigades—to defend the interests of the local Shiite community, to do its bidding, and to spread its culture of resistance, jihad, and martyrdom. Hizballah has parlayed its military achievements as a resistance organization into political capital; several of its Iraqi clones are trying to do the same.

Economic leverage: Tehran pursues trade and investment with other countries for profit, and to foster dependencies which it can exploit. In Iraq, for instance, it has used business deals to bolster local allies, and it has dumped cheap, subsidized produce and consumer goods on the local market, undercutting Iraq's agricultural and manufacturing sectors. Moreover, Iraq's reliance on Iran for some of its electricity needs is a dependency which many Iraqis believe that Tehran manipulates for political ends; for instance, in June 2010, Iran reportedly cut electricity supplies to Basra to bolster Sadrist claims that the government was lagging in

the delivery of services.

Propaganda and spin: Iran vies for Arab “hearts and minds” through Arabic-language news broadcasts that reflect Tehran’s propaganda line, although Iranian actions have often undercut these efforts. Polling data shows that Arabs (even Iraqi Shiites) tend to distrust Iran and generally do not consider its form of governance a viable model. These popular attitudes explain why Tehran will continue to lean heavily on soft power, its security services, and covert action to project influence in the Arab world.

Despite this emphasis, Tehran’s soft power has often underperformed, mainly due to maladroit implementation and the IRI’s tendency to be its own worst enemy in dealing with its Arab neighbors. The future prospects of Iran’s soft power will depend on the future direction of Iraq-Iran relations, the overall tenor of Iran-Arab and Sunni-Shiite relations in the Gulf in the wake of the Saudi-led intervention in Bahrain, and the future status of Iran’s nuclear program—which may be Tehran’s ultimate psychological warfare enabler in the region and beyond.²⁹

The IRI’s “Way of War”

The IRI’s “way of war” consists of several elements: 1) reliance on proxies; 2) use of calibrated violence; 3) emphasis on the psychological, moral, and spiritual dimensions of conflict, and; 4) strategic patience. In addition, the IRI has demonstrated—much to its detriment—a penchant for overreaching.

Proxy Warfare. The use of street mobs and violent pressure groups as instruments of domestic politics is an old tradition in Iran, going back at least to the Qajar dynasty.³⁰ Thus, the thugs of Ansar-e Hizballah (a shadowy vigilante group sponsored by senior hard-line clerics) played a key role in repressing domestic unrest in Iran in 1999 and 2009. This form of “politics by other means” finds its corollary in Iran’s use of militia and terrorist surrogates as an instrument of foreign policy. For Tehran, war is a job for its Arab surrogates and not, to the extent possible, for its own military. When Iran has wanted to strike out at its enemies, it has done so by commissioning or facilitating operations by others:

- As part of its war on the United States, the IRI facilitated the October 23, 1983 Marine Barracks bombing by Hizballah’s Islamic Jihad Organization that killed 241 Marines, and led to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Lebanon.
- In response to the assassination of Hizballah secretary general Sheikh Abbas Musawi (and his family) by Israeli forces on February 16, 1992, Hizballah, with assistance from Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security, bombed the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires on May 19, 1992.
- In response to an Israeli air strike on a Hizballah training base at Ayn Dardara in Lebanon, on June 2, 1994, which killed dozens of Hizballah recruits and their IRGC trainers, Hizballah (with Iranian assistance) bombed a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires on July 18, 1994, killing eighty-five and wounding hundreds more.
- Six months after the U.S. Congress authorized \$18-20 million for covert operations in Iran, Saudi Hizballah bombed a U.S. military housing complex in Dharam, Saudi Arabia, on June 25, 1996, killing 19 U.S. service members and wounding 372 personnel of various nationalities. The operation was planned by the IRGC-Qods Force, with the assistance of the Lebanese Hizballah, in an apparent attempt to replicate the success of the Beirut Barracks bombing.

Reliance on proxies provides plausible deniability and complicates retaliation by its enemies. There are, however, disadvantages to relying on proxies over which it does not have full control. Thus, in 2006, Hizballah miscalculated its way into war with Israel that led to the destruction of Hizballah’s long-range rocket forces—a key element of Iran’s strategic deterrent. And in 2007, Iranian-sponsored Iraqi Shiite militias engaged in internecine violence and acted in ways that undercut the authority of the Iranian-supported central

government, contributing to the latter's 2008 decision to crack down on the Mahdi Army and Shiite special groups.³¹ In both of these cases, Tehran's proxies and allies acted in ways that harmed Iran's image and interests.

Iran's use of proxies is guided by largely pragmatic, rather than ideological considerations. Thus, it has supported a variety of militias and insurgent groups in Iraq, at times backing nearly every horse in the race. It has supported Shiite militias such as the Badr Corps, the Mahdi Army, Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, and Kataib Hizballah, while also backing the government of Iraq—though the former have sometimes fought among themselves, and have often acted to undermine the authority of the latter. And it has shown a willingness at times to strike temporary tactical alliances with its strategic enemies, working with Sunni salafi jihadist groups such as Ansar al-Islam—in order to gain leverage over its erstwhile Kurdish allies, and with al-Qaida in Iraq—in order to keep sectarian violence at a roil and to bloody U.S. forces in Iraq.³²

Calibrated Violence. When the IRI resorts to force, it generally does so in a calculated manner, and often to achieve specific psychological effects—although at times it has acted in a less constrained manner.³³ And it has developed a varied repertoire of responses for dealing with its domestic and foreign enemies.

Thus, it executed thousands of imprisoned opposition members in 1988 in response to an offensive launched by the Iranian Mojahedin-e Khalq opposition movement from bases in Iraq during the final phases of the Iran-Iraq War. It ordered the assassination of dozens of Iranian oppositionists living in Europe and elsewhere during the 1980s and early 1990s until the 1992 murder of Iranian Kurdish oppositionists in a Berlin restaurant caused a rupture in Iran's relations with Europe, putting an end to this practice. And its agents murdered half a dozen dissidents and intellectuals in 1998 during the Presidency of Mohammad Khatami (the so-called “chain murders”) in order to intimidate the reform movement.

Iran has taken a carefully considered approach toward the domestic opposition movement that arose in the wake of the contested June 2009 elections, that built on lessons-learned from previous confrontations. The IRI has sought to prevail by wearing down and demoralizing the opposition over time, rather than by resorting to the massive use of force. There have been no “Tiananmen Square moments” in the regime's efforts to quash the Green movement. By providing security forces with sticks, batons, chains, and tear gas, and by avoiding live fire to keep fatalities down, the regime has precluded the mass public mourning ceremonies that energized the revolution against the Shah.³⁴ By ensuring that street clashes are bloody, close-quarter melees, it has frightened off the less stout-hearted among the opponents of the regime.³⁵ And by mistreating, torturing, and humiliating detainees, and then releasing them so that they can tell their stories to their families and friends, it has demoralized and intimidated the populace.³⁶

The IRI reserves the special institution of “house arrest”—which entails stigmatization, isolation, and marginalization—for its most dangerous domestic opponents. It used this technique for Ayatollah Khomeini's deposed heir, Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, and it recently placed Green Movement leaders Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi under house arrest. House arrest is often tantamount to a life sentence that ends only with the death of the victim. It permits the regime to effectively “disappear” prominent individuals, while avoiding more drastic measures (such as imprisonment or extrajudicial killings) that could prompt a violent popular backlash and engender dissent within the regime's inner circle.³⁷

The IRI has struggled, however, since the early days of the revolution, to establish and preserve its monopoly over the use of force. Iran has a history of radical rogue elements initiating unauthorized actions to force the hand of the government, and of being rewarded afterwards if the gambit benefits the regime. Thus, radical “students” seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979 to undermine efforts by the provisional government to reestablish normal ties with the U.S. (Khomeini did not know of the planned takeover beforehand, but provided his blessing after the fact.) Many of the young hostage takers went on to become prominent politicians and officials in the IRI.³⁸

Likewise, the commander of the IRGC Navy unit that detained 15 Royal Navy sailors and marines without authorization in disputed waters in the Shatt al-Arab in March 2007, was lauded and decorated when the episode ended well for the IRI with the humbling of the UK.³⁹ While such “rogue” actions are infrequent,

they have sometimes had dramatic consequences for Tehran's domestic politics and foreign relations, and could complicate efforts to establish a stable deterrent relationship should Iran eventually obtain nuclear weapons.

The Psychological, Moral, and Spiritual. The experience of the past thirty years shows that the IRI places great importance on the psychological dimensions of statecraft and strategy, and emphasizes the primacy of the moral and spiritual dimensions of war over the physical and technological.

Thus, the IRI's diplomacy and strategy emphasize achieving moral effects over physical effects, while the IRI sees the informational line of operation as the decisive one in war. Whereas the United States undertakes information operations to support its military activities, Iran frequently undertakes military activities (i.e., exercises, shows of force, and proxy operations) to support its information operations.⁴⁰

This approach draws, at least in part, on Islamic religious traditions as well as the IRI's historical experience. Thus, the Quran, in Surat al-Anfal, verse 60, says: "And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of God and your enemies. . . ." This verse, which appears in the official logo of the IRGC, underscores the importance of the psychological dimension of warfare. Furthermore, Surat al-Anfal, verse 65 says: "O Prophet! Rouse the believers, to the fight. If there are twenty amongst you, patient and persevering, they will vanquish two hundred; if a hundred, they will vanquish a thousand of the unbelievers." This verse implies that religious zeal can compensate for lack of numbers.

The IRI's historical experience supports this approach. In the Shah's Iran, clandestinely distributed tape recordings of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's sermons contributed to the success of the Islamic Revolution and the rise of Khomeini as its leader, while skillful propaganda spurred mass defections from the Shah's armed forces and discouraged many still loyal to the old order. And during Hizballah's protracted guerrilla war against Israel in southern Lebanon (1982–2000), psychological operations played a central role in undermining Israeli domestic support for the occupation of southern Lebanon, contributing to its withdrawal in May 2000.

This mindset informs the regime's approach to both the domestic opposition and its external enemies. *Newsweek* correspondent Maziar Bahari offered unique insight into this belief system in an article about his detention by Iranian authorities in the wake of the June 2009 presidential election:

I once interviewed a former Islamic guerrilla who had become a government minister. The problem with the shah's secret police, he said, was that they thought they could break a prisoner's will through physical pressure, but that often just hardened the victim's resolve. 'What our brothers after the revolution have masterminded is how to break a man's soul without using much violence against his body.'⁴¹

The amount of effort Tehran invests in information activities and its all-consuming preoccupation with alleged U.S. efforts to foment a "soft" revolution through propaganda and psychological warfare, provide the most compelling proof of the importance it attaches to the psychological dimension of statecraft and strategy. The reason for this preoccupation is not difficult to discern. Iran enjoys significant geographic depth, which is a powerful deterrent to invasion; the country's heavily populated central plateau is surrounded by a ring of rugged, easily defended mountain ranges. By contrast, each and every citizen is susceptible to subversive messages that enter the country through the internet, radio, and satellite television, and that have the potential to undermine their faith in the regime and its revolutionary ideology.

To gird itself against domestic subversion and enemy psychological warfare, the IRI has tried to "Islamize" the security forces and military and to nurture a culture of resistance, jihad, and martyrdom. To this end, it has attempted to inculcate what it calls *Alavi* and *Ashurai* values in its fighting men—by extolling the heroic martial virtues of the Imam Ali (cousin and son-in-law of the prophet, early convert to Islam, and renowned warrior who fought in nearly all the early battles of Islam),⁴² and the complementary virtue of martyrdom, as embodied by the Imam Hussein and his party, who were massacred by the forces of the Caliph

Yazid on the plains of Karbala on Ashura (the 10th day of the month of Moharram) in the year 680 C.E.⁴³

The doctrine of resistance (*moqavemat*) as practiced by the IRI (as well as Hizballah, Hamas, and Syria) in their struggle with Israel and the United States, assigns primary importance to the accomplishment of psychological effects. It assumes that victory is achieved by demoralizing the enemy—through terrorizing its civilians, bleeding its armies, and denying it battlefield victories.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it assumes that conflicts are zero sum games and that compromise is a sign of weakness that will be exploited by the enemy.⁴⁵

While military victories are certainly desired, the ultimate measure of the utility of force is whether it advances the IRI's interests, promotes its culture of resistance, jihad, and martyrdom, and yields an "image of victory." In certain circumstances, a military defeat may advance these objectives just as well as a victory (for example, the Battle of Karbala, which has inspired generations of Shiites). This unique perspective was reflected by former Army Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Ali Shahbazi who once stated that

it is possible that the United States or some country instigated by it might start a military conflict . . . but it will not be able to end it. . . . because only Muslims believe that 'whether we kill or are killed, we are victorious.' Others do not think this way.⁴⁶

The IRI's efforts to promote a culture of resistance, jihad, and martyrdom aim to create a society that is energized and strengthened by conflict.⁴⁷ Just as the death of protestors during the 1978-79 Islamic Revolution led to ever larger demonstrations—contributing to the success of the revolution—the IRI strives to create a society whose readiness to sacrifice is strengthened by conflict and martyrdom.⁴⁸ These efforts, however, have fallen short of this goal; Iran remains a society traumatized by the Iran-Iraq War, repeated bloody purges, and recurrent cycles of repression. The jihadi martyrdom culture is embraced only by hard-core Hizballahis and Basijis, who make up only a small, albeit influential, part of Iranian society.⁴⁹

The operational imperatives that flow from the resistance doctrine—the need to stand fast in the face of enemies, to push boundaries, and to eschew compromise on matters of principle—coexist uneasily, at best, with the pragmatism and flexibility embodied in the principle of the expediency of the regime. This tension between the absolute imperatives of the regime's political and religious doctrines and the pragmatic needs of governance and statecraft, has been a defining feature of Iranian decision making since the IRI's inception. Since the late-1980s, the approach embodied by the principle of the expediency of the regime has prevailed, though this could eventually change, as a result of the perceived successes of the resistance doctrine in Lebanon and Gaza, the failure of the international community to halt Iran's nuclear program, and the growing strength of the Mahdist (*mahdaviyat*) current in Iranian politics since the 2005 election of President Ahmadinejad.

The upsurge in messianic devotion in Iran dates to the late 1990s, several years before the political ascendancy of Ahmadinejad—who has politicized the cult of the Mahdi and used it to advance his own ambitions.⁵⁰ At present, the messianic current among regime supporters appears to be a minority trend, and its more extreme variants remain a fringe phenomenon. Thus, the possibility that a violent apocalyptic cult could emerge within the IRGC is exceedingly slim. But given the ambiance of messianic expectation in some circles in Iran, the possibility cannot be completely dismissed.⁵¹ While such groups seem more preoccupied more with the elimination of their spiritual enemies than with their own martyrdom, the danger exists that such a group might seek to eliminate Islam's enemies without due consideration for the interests of the regime.

The growing prominence of these resistance and messianic narratives thus raises the possibility that under certain circumstances, some Iranian decision makers might welcome a limited conflict with the United States, in order to revive the spirit of the Islamic revolution, to hasten the reappearance of the Mahdi, or to achieve some other domestic or foreign policy objective. The future trajectory of Iranian policy and the ultimate implications of Iran's emergence as a nuclear power will therefore likely depend on the relative strength of these contending orientations among key regime decision makers—particularly the Supreme Leader.

Contending approaches to warfighting likewise exist in the armed forces of the IRI, where the debate concerns the relative value of religious zeal and technical competence. The regular military has tended to embrace a more traditional approach to war, with a relatively balanced emphasis on hardware, technology, and the human element. Its force structure, which resembles those of most Western armies, reflects this fact.

By contrast, the IRGC has elevated the moral and spiritual dimension above all others in the belief that faith, ideological commitment, and religious zeal are the keys to victory.⁵² Thus, the IRGC originally consisted of poorly trained, irregular mass infantry forces that specialized in human wave attacks, though it eventually established quasi-conventional infantry, armor, and artillery formations, as well as naval and air arms during the Iran-Iraq War.

The IRGC's approach came to dominate Iranian thinking during the Iran-Iraq War, though its thinking has evolved since then to reflect a more balanced appreciation of the relative importance of moral and technological factors. Nonetheless, the IRGC may be the only force in the region with regime protection duties that does not always get the newest and most capable systems—perhaps due to residual skepticism on its part regarding the importance of technology.⁵³

Strategic Patience. The IRI prefers to avoid decisive engagements and head-on confrontations, and has repeatedly demonstrated a preference for “Fabian” strategies of delay, indirection, and attrition.⁵⁴ Thus, the Islamic Republic has:

- Drawn out its nuclear negotiations with the EU and the P5+1 to buy time for its program, enabling it to make slow, incremental progress in the interim;⁵⁵
- Intimidated, demoralized, and worn down the domestic opposition by holding show trials of opposition leaders, conducting mass arrests, and torturing and maltreating detainees;
- Tried to ensnare Israel in a wearying, demoralizing, open-ended conflict with its Lebanese Hizballah and Palestinian Hamas allies;
- Been careful to take on the U.S. only by indirect means, relying on surrogates such as the Lebanese Hizballah and Iraqi ‘special groups.’

This preference for strategies of indirection and attrition is well-suited to a culture that has a rather expansive conception of time, that values strategic patience, and whose senior political and military leadership is characterized by a great deal of continuity. (Many senior government officials have filled key positions since the early 1980s.)⁵⁶ It is an alien way of thinking, however, for impatient Americans whose contemporary strategic culture emphasizes “surges,” “decisive operations,” and “exit strategies,” whose political culture is shaped by the twenty-four hour news cycle, and whose foreign policy is profoundly influenced by the four year electoral cycle.

Iranians can look to Shiite history as well as their own cultural heritage for examples of the benefits of strategic patience: Imam Ali was initially passed over to lead the *ummah* after the death of the prophet Muhammad, but eventually was chosen to be the fourth caliph. Following the Arab conquest of Iran, the Persian influence in the Islamic empire eventually prevailed with the rise of the Abbasid dynasty more than a century later.⁵⁷ And in the literary classic *One Thousand and One Nights*, Sheherazade saves her own life through a strategy of delay.

Despite this preference for the long game, Iranian behavior is often characterized by slap-dash improvisation and the pursuit of short-term gain at the expense of long-term advantage. Thus, while the leaders of the IRI are sometimes able tacticians, they are often poor strategists. This is best demonstrated by the IRI's tendency to overplay its hand.

Propensity to Overreach. The IRI has repeatedly demonstrated a tendency to be too clever by half and to overplay its hand in its diplomacy, business dealings, and military activities. For instance, Tehran's:

- behavior unnecessarily prolonged and complicated negotiations with the United States over the freeing of the embassy hostages, contributing to the deep distrust that to this day characterizes relations between the two countries;
- Tendency to drag out negotiations “to the 61st minute” in the pursuit of minor advantage, has often resulted in far less favorable outcomes for Iran than if it had taken a more flexible approach from the outset.⁵⁸
- Decision to continue the Iran-Iraq War after 1982, when it could have had a cease-fire with Iraq, unnecessarily prolonged the war, leading to six more years of fighting that exacted a very high price in blood and treasure from Iran;
- Temporary occupation in December 2009 of a disputed oil well on the border with Iraq, embarrassed its allies in the Iraqi government and unnecessarily antagonized Iraqis of all persuasions.

Part of the reason that Iranian officials often find it difficult to close a deal or end a dispute, is their zero sum approach to conflicts, which precludes compromise, and the fear that in a political system characterized by extreme factionalism, rivals will claim that they could have done better. (Thus, the decision to end the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 and to temporarily suspend the enrichment of uranium in 2003, remain contentious issues in Iranian politics.) There is little sense of the utility of achieving a mutually beneficial compromise or of reaching a deal. The emphasis is on getting all one can, and of avoiding concessions.

This often self-defeating tendency by Tehran to overplay its hand will continue to provide diplomatic and informational opportunities for the United States that it should be prepared to exploit.

Conclusions

The strategic culture of the IRI has had a profound impact on its approach to statecraft, strategy, and war. The following are a number of implications that flow from the foregoing analysis of Iran’s strategic culture that will hopefully enable U.S. planners, strategists, and policy makers to more effectively engage with or otherwise deal with Iran:

Countering Soft Power. Washington tends to focus on the Tehran’s hard power assets, at the expense of its soft power capabilities. The IRI’s soft power, however, may be a more effective means of projecting Iranian influence in the Middle East and may constitute the greater long-term threat to U.S. interests in the region. The United States needs to focus more attention and devote greater resources to countering Iran’s soft power.

Nontraditional Hard Power Assets. Washington tends to focus on those hard power assets that it values most, not those that could be of greatest value to Iran in a future war. Thus, the U.S. has invested tremendous resources in building defenses against Iran’s missile arsenal, but lacks the means to counter the IRI’s large rocket forces. And the United States has only recently begun to recognize the threat posed by Iran’s unconventional naval warfare capabilities.

Propaganda and Psychological Warfare. U.S. policy makers tend to underestimate the value of the informational instrument of national power. By contrast, policy makers in the IRI consider information activities as their decisive line of operations. As a result, the U.S. has not exploited Tehran’s extraordinary vulnerabilities in this arena, or reaped the benefits that aggressive information activities might yield.⁵⁹

Piercing the Veil of Ambiguity. The United States has not been effective at preventing Tehran from exploiting the ambiguity that shrouds many of its policies, whether proxy operations or its nuclear program. Detailed intelligence, aggressive information activities, and a credible retaliatory policy are key to preventing Tehran from exploiting its policy of ambiguity.

Deterring Adventurism. How does one deal with a political system run by politicians who thrive on isolation and conflict with the outside world, or deter decision makers who—inspired by the IRI’s resistance narrative or by mahdist ideology—might, under certain circumstances, welcome conflict? Part of the solution entails reaching out to those Iranians who want better ties with the outside world, convincing Iranian policymakers that a conflict would not remain limited, and underscoring the very real potential for a confrontation—thereby strengthening the hand of more cautious policy makers who may want to avoid conflict.

Countering Iran’s “Fabian” Strategy. Iran’s strategies of indirection, delay, and attrition are predicated on the assumption that time works in its favor. However, Iran’s experience demonstrates the risks of such strategies: risking collapse and defeat, it was compelled to end the Iran-Iraq War without anything to show for its efforts. Challenges facing Iran’s current long game include a potentially powerful (if currently quiescent) domestic opposition, major economic challenges (in particular, the decline of its oil industry, should it fail to attract foreign investment), and the possible loss of its Syrian ally due to the popular uprising against the Asad regime. The U.S. should continue to exploit these vulnerabilities to disrupt Tehran’s long-term strategy.

This monograph will hopefully constitute a modest step toward a more complete understanding of the IRI’s strategic culture. In so doing, it will also hopefully inspire further research on this topic, and lay the foundation for more realistic planning, and more effective strategy and policy toward the Islamic Republic.

Notes:

¹ Strategic culture consists of “shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experience and accepted narratives... that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives.” Jeannie L. Johnson and Jeffrey A. Larsen, *Comparative Strategic Cultures Syllabus*, prepared by SAIC for Defense Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, 20 November 2006, at: <http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/dod/dtra/syllabus.pdf>. For a useful overview of the origins and evolution of this concept, see Jeffrey S. Lantis and Darryl Howlett, “Strategic Culture” in John Baylis, James J. Wirtz, Colin S. Gray, and Eliot Cohen (Eds.), *Strategy in the Contemporary World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 82-100.

² One of the striking paradoxes of contemporary Iranian politics is that despite the fact that the leadership of the IRI has demonstrated a tendency toward paranoia and conspiratorial thinking, it has also frequently shown an ability to engage in fairly subtle calculation. See: Ervand Abrahamian, “The Paranoid Style in Iranian Politics,” in *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 111-131; Ahmed Ashraf, “Conspiracy Theories,” *Encyclopedia Iranica*, December 15, 1992, at: <http://iranica.com/articles/conspiracy-theories>.

³ Martin Kramer, “Sacrifice and ‘Self-Martyrdom’ in Shi‘ite Lebanon,” in Martin Kramer (ed.), *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1996), pp. 231-243, at: <http://www.martinkramer.org/sandbox/reader/archives/sacrifice-and-self-martyrdom-in-shi-ite-lebanon/>. Regarding Iran’s Shiite allies in Iraq, see Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali, *Iranian Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran’s Whole- of- Government Approach*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 111, April 2011, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus111.pdf>.

⁴ See, for instance, the account of the Iranian decision to not send a flotilla to Gaza by Mehdi Jedinia, “Tehran Finds Neat Way Out on Gaza Shipment,” *Mianeh*, July 13, 2010, at: <http://mianeh.net/article/tehran-finds-neat-way-out-gaza-shipment>.

⁵ Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 1997), pp. 233-246; David Menashri, *Revolution at a Crossroads: Iran’s Domestic Politics and Regional Ambitions*, Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1997, p. 8. See also: Michael Eisenstadt, “Living with a Nuclear Iran?” *Survival*, vol. 41, no. 3, September 1999, pp. 124-148; Michael Eisenstadt, “Deter and Contain: Dealing with a Nuclear Iran,” in Henry Sokolski and Patrick Clawson, *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran* (U.S. Army War College: 2005), pp. 225-256.

⁶ When jailed Iranian activist Abdollah Momeni asked his interrogators why they used brutal methods such as torture to extract confessions, they responded that “according to the founder of the Islamic Republic the preservation of the regime is the foremost obligation.” Letter of Prominent Prisoner of Conscience, Abdollah Momeni, to Ayatollah Khamanei, *International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran*, September 9, 2010, at: <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/09/letter-momeni-khamanei>.

⁷ “Defence Minister Comments on Production of Shahab-3 Missile,” *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 2*, Tehran, July 30, 1998, translated in BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, August 3, 1998.

⁸ Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi‘ism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 41-70, 221-251.

⁹ Robert Tait, “Iranian President’s New ‘Religious-Nationalism’ Alienates Hard-Line Constituency,” RFE/RL, August 18, 2010, at: http://www.rferl.org/content/Iranian_Presidents_New_ReligiousNationalism_Alienates_HardLine_Constituency/2131415.html.

¹⁰ Ruhollah K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 13-18.

¹¹ Thomas Erdbrink, “At Iran Nuclear Summit, Ahmadinejad Calls for U.S. to Disarm First,” *Washington Post*, April 17, 2010, at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/17/AR2010041702111.html?hpid=topnews>.

¹² “Defense Minister: Inspection of Iranian Cargo Ships Imperils Regional Security,” *Fars News Agency*, June 30, 2010, at: <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8904091475>.

¹³ “Israeli Warships Cross Suez Canal Again,” Haaretz, July 14, 2009, at: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/israeli-warships-cross-suez-canal-again-1.279983>; Isabel Kershner, “Israel Silent as Iranian Ships Transit Suez Canal,” *New York Times*, February 22, 2011, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/23/world/middleeast/23suez.html>; “Iran to Send Fleet of Warships to Red Sea, Mediterranean Sea,” Fars News Agency, January 23, 2011, at: <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8911031140>.

¹⁴ Michael Connell, “Iran’s Military Doctrine,” in Robin Wright (ed.), *The Iran Primer*, (Washington, DC, United States Institute of Peace: 2010), at: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-military-doctrine>.

¹⁵ *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, United States Department of Defense, April 2010, at: <http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20Nuclear%20Posture%20Review%20Report.pdf>; Amy F. Woolf, *Conventional Prompt Global Strike and Long-Range Ballistic Missiles: Background and Issues*, Congressional Research Service, March 1, 2011, at: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R41464.pdf>.

¹⁶ Ali Alfoneh, *What Do Structural Changes in the Revolutionary Guards Mean?* AEI Middle Eastern Outlook No. 7 (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, September 2008), at: http://www.aei.org/docLib/20080923_23487MEO07_g.pdf.

¹⁷ For more on this component of Iran’s deterrence posture, see: Gholam Reza Jalali, chairman of the IRI’s Passive Defense Organization and former IRGC commander quoted in Y. Mansharof and A. Savyon, “Iran in Preparations, Deployment to Withstand Possible Attack by West,” *MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series Report* No. 451, July 3, 2008, at: <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/2743.htm>.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Yaakov Lappin, “Ahmadinejad: Iran now Nuclear Power,” *YnetNews.com*, 20 December 2006, at: <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3342489,00.html>.

¹⁹ Mary Jordan and Karl Vick, “World Leaders Condemn Iranian’s Call to Wipe Israel ‘Off the Map,’” *Washington Post*, October 28, 2005, at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/27/AR2005102702221.html>. Iran’s acknowledgement that a feasibility study that the IAEA had obtained from a foreign intelligence service in 2005 (and which had apparently originated in Iran) appeared to be that of a nuclear warhead, while denying that it had come from Iran, may likewise have been calculated to further this policy of ambiguity about Iranian intentions. Yossi Melman, “Behind the scenes of UN nuclear inspection of Iran,” *Ha’aretz*, October 22, 2010, at: <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-end/behind-the-scenes-of-un-nuclear-inspection-of-iran-1.320599>.

²⁰ Dima Adamsky, personal correspondence, July 14, 2011.

²¹ Here, “soft power” refers to the non-kinetic (non-military) elements of national power. This definition differs from that used by Joseph Nye in his influential works on the subject, wherein soft power refers to the ability to influence by the power of attraction—as opposed to coercion or inducements. For a brief overview of Nye’s approach to soft power, see: Joseph Nye, “Think Again: Soft Power,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, February 23, 2006, at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2006/02/22/think_again_soft_power.

²² Michael Connell, “Iran’s Military Doctrine,” in Robin Wright (ed.), *The Iran Primer*, (Washington, DC, United States Institute of Peace: 2010), at: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-military-doctrine>.

²³ Ali Alfoneh, “The Basij Resistance Force,” in Robin Wright (Ed.), *The Iran Primer*, (Washington DC, United States Institute for Peace: 2010), at: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/basij-resistance-force>; Ali Alfoneh, “The Basij Resistance Force: A Weak Link in the Iranian Regime?” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch No. 1627, February 5, 2010, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3171>; Ali Alfoneh, *What do Structural Changes in the Revolutionary Guards Mean?* American Enterprise Institute, Middle Eastern Outlook No. 7, September 2008, at: http://www.aei.org/docLib/20080923_23487MEO07_g.pdf.

²⁴ Fariborz Haghshenas, “Iran’s Doctrine of Asymmetric Naval Warfare,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch No. 1179, December 21, 2006, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2548>; Fariborz Haghshenas, *Iran’s Asymmetric Naval Warfare*, Policy Focus No. 87, September 2008, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus87.pdf>; Michael Eisenstadt, *Iranian Military Power: Capabilities and Intentions* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996), pp. 48-62.

²⁵ Warren Richey, “Iranians Await Iraqi Attacks in Campgrounds and Luxury Hotels,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 15, 1988, p. 11.

²⁶ Michael Eisenstadt, *The Missing Lever: Information Activities Against Iran*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Note No. 1, March 2010, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyNote01.pdf>.

²⁷ Mehdi Khalaji, "The Iranian Clergy's Silence," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 10, posted online on July 12, 2010, at: <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/the-iranian-clergys-silence>; Mehdi Khalaji, *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 59, September 2006, pp. 6-11, 25-31, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus59final.pdf>.

²⁸ Michael Slackman, "Iraqi Ties to Iran Create New Risks for Washington," *New York Times*, June 8, 2006, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/08/world/middleeast/08iran.html?fta=y>.

²⁹ This discussion on soft power is based largely on: Michael Eisenstadt, "The Limits of Iran's Soft Power" in Robin Wright (Ed.) *The Iran Primer Blog*, United States Institute for Peace, March 22, 2011, at: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/all/Michael%20Eisenstadt>. See also: Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali, *Iranian Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 111, April 2011, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus111.pdf>.

³⁰ Michael Rubin, *Into the Shadows: Radical Vigilantes in Khatami's Iran* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001).

³¹ Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali, *Iranian Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 111, April 2011, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus111.pdf>.

³² Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali, *ibid*, pp. 8-11.

³³ Adamsky, personal correspondence, July 14, 2011.

³⁴ The regime likely also feared that a frontal clash with the reform movement might have led elements in the security forces to disobey orders or join the opposition, causing the security forces to fracture. Michael Eisenstadt, "The Security Forces of the Islamic Republic and the Fate of the Opposition," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *PolicyWatch* #1538, June 19, 2009, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3076>.

³⁵ Michael Eisenstadt, *Iran's Islamic Revolution: Lessons for the Arab Spring of 2011?* National Defense University, Strategic Forum No. 267, April 2011, at: http://www.ndu.edu/inss/docUploaded/SF%20267_Eisenstadt.pdf.

³⁶ Ali Ahmadi Motlagh, "Political Prisoners and the Security Apparatus in Post-Election Iran," *Muftah*, August 2, 2010, <http://muftah.org/?p=215>.

³⁷ *A Brief History of "House Arrests" and Detentions in "Safe Houses": What Will Be the Fate of Disappeared Leaders?* International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, March 6, 2011, at: <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/03/history-of-house-arrests/>. The technique of "house arrest" offers one possible template for how the IRI might work toward Israel's elimination—by means of a long-term process that limits Tehran's risks, and that avoids acts (such as nuclear terrorism) that could have catastrophic consequences for Iran were Israel to retaliate in kind. Thus, Iran is building up the military capabilities of Hizballah and Hamas to enmesh Israel in a protracted, bloody, inconclusive, and demoralizing conflict, under Iran's looming nuclear shadow. This will lead to Israel's delegitimization, and a process of large-scale emigration, brain drain, and terminal decline. See: "Iranian Website: Iranian Nuclear Bomb Spells Death to Israel," MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 2820, February 23, 2010, at: <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/807/3989.htm>. This does not, however, preclude the possibility that some senior Iranian officials might see nuclear terrorism by a surrogate such as Hizballah as a viable option against Israel.

³⁸ Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah—The Iran Hostage Crisis: The First Battle in America's War with Militant Islam*, New York, Grove Press: 2006, pp. 8-15.

³⁹ David Crist, *Gulf of Conflict: A History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 95, June 2009, pp. 25-26, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus95.pdf>.

⁴⁰ In this regard, Tehran's approach is similar to that of jihadist groups such as Hizballah, Hamas, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. See Thomas Elkjer Nissen, *The Taliban's Information Warfare: A Comparative Analysis of NATO Information Operations (Info Ops) and Taliban Information Activities*, Royal Danish Defence College Brief (January 2008), p. 7.

⁴¹ Maziar Bahari, "118 Days, 12 Hours, 54 Minutes," *Newsweek*, November 30, 2009, at: <http://www.newsweek.com/2009/11/21/118-days-12-hours-54-minutes.html>.

⁴² Ali's martial prowess is of particular importance due to his pre-eminent status in Shiite Islam (second only to Muhammad) and the great importance that Islam attaches to the power of personal example. Thus, Islamic law is based, in part, on the hadith (the sayings and actions of the prophet Muhammad) while Shiites are enjoined to choose a senior cleric to be their marja (sources of emulation) in matters of faith.

⁴³ While the IRI makes much of the virtues of martyrdom as embodied by the slaughter of Hussein and his party at the Battle of Karbala, it recognizes that victory cannot be achieved solely by the death of the faithful; as a result, the regime also emphasizes the heroic warrior qualities of Ali, who participated in nearly every battle waged by the Muslim army during his lifetime as a standard-bearer, champion in one-on-one contests, and bodyguard for the Prophet Muhammad.

⁴⁴ Ehud Yaari, "The Muqawama Doctrine," *Jerusalem Report*, November 13, 2006.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, the episode in July 1978 in the midst of the Islamic Revolution in which opposition politician Mehdi Bazargan (who would later head the revolutionary provisional government) urged Ayatollah Khomeini to adopt a gradualist approach, to not institute clerical rule (since the clerics lacked governing experience), and to not burn bridges with the United States (whose goodwill would be needed by a revolutionary regime). Khomeini rejected nearly all of Bazargan's advice. Shaul Bakhash, *Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York, Basic Books: 1990), pp. 47-48. Likewise, Khomeini has repeatedly argued against compromise with the U.S., as this would be seen as weakness that would only invite additional pressure and demands. Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khomeini: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader* (Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: 2008), p. 16.

⁴⁶ "The Armed Might of Iran: Able to Manifest Itself in a Threatening Manner," *Ettela'at*, September 24, 1995, p. 3, translated from Persian by Guive Rosen. See also Steven Ward, *Iran's Challenging Victory Narrative*, *Historically Speaking*, Vol. 10, No. 3, June 2009, pp. 41-42.

⁴⁷ The idea that conflict may serve social and political functions also has a long tradition in Western social science. See: Georg Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group-Affiliations* (New York, Free Press: 1955); Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York, Free Press: 1956).

⁴⁸ For more on the catalytic effect of the 40-day Muslim mourning period on the escalating cycle of violence during the revolution, see: Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran* (New York: Random House, 1985), pp. 34-35.

⁴⁹ Thus, the IRI has long harbored concerns over the reliability of the IRGC, ever since Revolutionary Guard units refused to quash riots in the town of Qazvin in 1994. These concerns were reinforced by reports that IRGC personnel voted in 1997 for reformist presidential candidate Mohammad Khatami in even greater proportions than did the general population (73 versus 69 percent). This voting pattern indicates that the IRGC rank and file reflected the divisions within Iranian society. This should not have come as a surprise; for the past two decades, the IRGC has increasingly come to rely on conscripts to meet its manpower needs, raising doubts about its reliability should it be needed to quell unrest. Eisenstadt, *Iran's Islamic Revolution*, pp. 7-8. Even during the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC Navy consisted of a mix of dedicated revolutionaries, conscripts, and impressed deserters, and as a result, it often avoided taking risks while operating against U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf. Crist, *Gulf of Conflict*, p. 15.

⁵⁰ Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shiism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 41-70, 221-251; Mehdi Khalaji, *Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Policy*, Policy Focus No. 79 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, January 2008), pp. 3-6, 14-18; Ali Alfoneh, "Ahmadinejad versus the Clergy," *American Enterprise Institute, Middle East Outlook*, no. 5 (August 2008), pp. 1-4.

⁵¹ David Cook, "Messianism in the Shiite Crescent," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 11 (2011), pp. 91-103.

⁵² Steven Ward, "Historical Perspectives on Iran's Way of War," Presentation to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 18, 2009.

⁵³ For instance, while the IRGC air force fighter squadrons are equipped mainly with Embraer Tucano trainer and Su-25 Frogfoot attack aircraft, the regular air force is equipped with more capable F-4, F-14, Su-24, and MiG-29 fighter and strike aircraft. Likewise, while the IRGC navy has small boats, shore-based antiship missiles, and highly capable missile-equipped fast attack craft, the regular navy has the country's three Kilo class submarines and its frigates and destroyers. Fariborz Haghshenass, "Iran's Air Force: Struggling to Maintain Readiness," Washington Institute for Near East Policy *PolicyWatch* No.1066, December 22, 2005, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2422>; Fariborz Haghshenass, *Iran's Asymmetric Naval Warfare*, Policy Focus No. 87, September 2008, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/Policy-Focus87.pdf>

⁵⁴ In a Fabian strategy, frontal attacks and decisive battle is avoided and victory is attained by wearing down the enemy through attrition, indirection, and demoralization. The name is derived from the Roman politician and general Fabius Maximus, who practiced such an approach against the Carthaginian general Hannibal in Italy during the Second Punic War (218-202 BCE). For more on Fabius Maximus, see B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Signet, 1974), pp. 13-14, 26-27, 29-30, 59.

⁵⁵ See, for instance, "Chief Iranian Nuclear Affairs Negotiator Hosein Musavian: The Negotiations with Europe Bought Us Time to Complete the Esfahan UCF Project and the Work on the Centrifuges in Natanz," MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 957, August 12, 2005, at: <http://www.memritv.org/report/en/1439.htm>.

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Gerhard Bowering, "The Concept of Time in Islam," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 141, No. 1, 1997; Gerhard Bowering, "Ideas of Time in Persian Sufism," *Journal of Persian Studies*, vol. 30, 1992, pp. 77-89; Zakariya Wright, "Living in Time: Muslims and the Modern Time-Crunch," *IslamAmerica*, February 10, 2008, at: <http://www.islamamerica.org/ArticleLibrary/LivinginTimeMuslimsandtheModernTimeCrunch.aspx>.

⁵⁷ Ehsan Yarshater, "The Persian Presence in the Islamic World," in Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh, *The Persian Presence in the Islamic World* (Cambridge University Press:1998), pp. 4-125; "Iranian Contributions to Islamic Culture" in Richard Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia* (London, Phoenix Press: 1975), pp. 150-174.

⁵⁸ This habit has chased away many potential business partners and cost Iran many commercial contracts. For instance, negotiations for the sale of Russian S300 surface-to-air missiles started in 1999 and dragged on as Tehran haggled over the price, until it finally agreed to the original asking price and signed a contract in 2007. Following the passage of UNSC Res 1929 in June 2010, which banned arms transfers to Iran, Russia cancelled the contract and refunded Iran its money. Had Tehran not negotiated interminably, it probably would have taken delivery of the S300s years before. "Haggling Irked Russians," *Tehran Times*, October 28, 2010, at: http://www.iran-times.com/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=674:haggling-irked-russians&catid=100:whats-right&Itemid=425.

⁵⁹ For instance, there is popular dissatisfaction in Iran with the provision of tens of millions of dollars in aid to Arab militias in Lebanon, Gaza, and Iraq, at a time when most Iranians are struggling to make ends meet. For more on this, see: Michael Eisenstadt, *The Missing Lever: Information Activities Against Iran*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Note No. 1, March 2010, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyNote01.pdf>.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Patrick Clawson, Dr. David Crist, and Ambassador John Limbert for their extraordinarily insightful and useful comments on an earlier draft of this monograph, and Guive Rosen for his Farsi language research assistance.

The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Operational and Policy Implications

Michael Eisenstadt

Defining what is the strategic culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979 is challenging. Its nature is often contradictory and paradoxical and its meaning elusive. It is framed in large part by Tehran's stratagem to confront its adversaries. The foreign policy of the "strategically lonely" Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is a byproduct of competition between Islamic universalism and Iranian nationalism. Iran, while feeling threatened by a number of states, including the United States, has ambitions beyond the size of its conventional forces. To address both its perceived threats and satisfy its grand strategic ambitions, Iran relies on armed surrogates, large volunteer forces, a "guerilla navy", strategic rockets and missiles, and soft power. In the first issue of the MES Monograph Series, Mr. Michael Eisenstadt notes that "strategic culture of the IRI has had profound impact on its approach to statecraft, strategy, and war." Through an examination of Iran's "way of war," Mr. Eisenstadt offers specific suggestions for the United States to better engage or deal with Iran.



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