

# **SOVIET, RUSSIAN, AND ISRAELI ASSESSMENTS OF IRAN'S NUCLEAR STRATEGIC CULTURE**

## **LONG TERM STRATEGY GROUP**

(b) (7)(C)

The views, opinions and/or findings contained in this report are those of the author, and should not be construed as official Department of Defense position, policy or decision.

Contract No.: HQ0034-07-C-1050

September 2009



# CONTENTS

GLOSSARY OF TERMS.....	1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	3
ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICTS AND IMPLICATIONS .....	3
PROXIES .....	4
REGULAR ARMY VS. IRGC.....	5
MESSIANIC VS. PRAGMATIC TENDENCIES AND IMPLICATIONS .....	5
INTELLIGENCE AND ASSESSMENTS .....	6
WARTIME BEHAVIOR.....	6
OTHER ISSUES .....	7
INTRODUCTION.....	9
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE.....	11
DUPLICATIONS AND OVERLAPS .....	11
CIVILIAN OVERSIGHT .....	13
CIVIL MILITARY RELATIONS.....	15
COMMAND AND CONTROL ARCHITECTURE.....	17
CHAIN OF COMMAND.....	17
NUCLEAR ESPIONAGE.....	19
INTERNAL DYNAMICS .....	23
CULTURAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE ARTESH AND THE IRGC.....	23
TENSIONS: THE ARTESH VS. THE IRGC.....	26
FORMATIVE STRATEGIC EXPERIENCES .....	28
SENSITIVITY TO COUNTER-VALUE DAMAGE.....	30
THE MAIN MOTIFS OF THE IRANIAN STRATEGIC NARRATIVE.....	33
SIEGE MENTALITY .....	33
RATIONALITY-IRRATIONALITY .....	35
TAQIYYA .....	37
TAAROF AND PERSIAN NEGOTIATION CULTURE .....	39
ESCALATIONS .....	41
STRATEGIC EMOTIONS.....	43
TRIPLE “A” THEORY OF VICTORY.....	45
ALAWI ETHOS .....	45
ASHURAI ETHOS .....	46
ASYMMETRICAL (UNBALANCED) WARFARE .....	47
HISTORICAL ANALOGIES.....	48
TECHNOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ASSISTANCE .....	51
RELATIONSHIP WITH PROXIES.....	53
IRANIAN STRATEGIC CAPABILITIES.....	55
CONCLUSION.....	57



# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

*Amphibology* – a style of communication where the message is structured in an ambiguous manner so that it, on the one hand, does not violate social and religious norms but, on the other hand, deceives.

*Artesh* – the Regular Armed Forces of Islamic Republic of Iran.

*Ijtihad* – in Islamic jurisprudence, the process of making legal decision through the interpretation of the Qura'n and Sunnah.

*IRGC* – Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (The Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution).

*Fitna* – schism; first Islamic religious civil war.

*Rahbar* – political leader of the state.

*Shahnameh* (“*Epic of Kings*”) – heroic epic by the Persian poet Ferdowsi.

*Shahadat* – martyrdom.

*Rostam* – a mythical hero of *Shahnameh*; Iranian equivalent of Greek Hercules, Jewish David or Russian Ilya Murometz

*Ketman* – public political concealment and camouflage.

*Khuda, khadi'a, munafaka, makhida* – stratagems of using camouflage, deception and decoy to reduce the enemy's situational awareness.

*Taarof* – impression of polite agreement and deference; camouflage of the real intentions with pleasantries.

*Taklif* – duty, holy endeavor; process- (rather than progress-) oriented duty.

*Tanfiya* – deceptive stratagem of employing the enemy's power against itself.

*Taqiyya* – religiously sanctioned practice of dissimulation or concealment of the believer's faith at moments of imminent danger. An umbrella term in the Shia-Persian political culture for the deceptive stratagems in internal and foreign policy.

*Velayat-e faqih* (“guardianship of the Islamic Jurist”) – system of political administration in Iran.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This monograph proceeds on the assumption that Iran will acquire a military nuclear capability, and then draws on Soviet, Russian, and Israeli assessments of Iranian strategic culture to illuminate issues related to the question of how Iran might use its new arsenal. The object is not to try to predict Iran's behavior but rather to outline patterns of behavior that may be more likely than others.

The key findings from this work fall into two broad categories. First are issues associated with organizational conflicts internal to Iranian political-military and military apparatuses, to include Hezbollah. Second are issues flowing from the various messianic and pragmatic tendencies of Iranian strategic culture, as demonstrated by Iran's recent history and formative military experiences. Finally, several issues emerged that do not fall neatly into either of these categories.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The inclination of the Iranian leadership intentionally to manufacture multiple and overlapping organizational complexes -- the basic feature of the Iranian political-organizational culture -- will probably continue. This managerial style and the deliberate creation of bureaucratic rivalries tend to result in low operational and production effectiveness. When nuclear capabilities are introduced, the multiple overlapping military industrial structures will be able to produce prototypes of weapons and devices, but this same bureaucratic duplication will tend to increase the time and effort needed to progress to mass production. In addition, the culture of bureaucratic duplication and rivalry increases the potential probability of non-sanctioned actions by the multiple key competitors for ownership of the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and surface-to-surface missile (SSM) production and deployment complexes. Also, this culture creates space for doctrinal divergence and competition, so that doctrines of particular organizations that are more aggressive than those of others may be tolerated and may even become operational.

Once an operational nuclear capability is introduced to the Iranian armed forces, Iran will be endowed with overlapping chains of command and procedures for a national command authority. Although we might expect the establishment of a new separate nuclear corps, like the Strategic Air Command in the United States or the Strategic Rocket Forces in the former Soviet Union, which owns the delivery systems for nuclear weapons, custody of the nuclear warheads themselves might be given to another organization specifically established for this purpose, which will not be part of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or the regular army (the "Artesh"). Also, given the organizational culture that deliberately stokes bureaucratic friction, chemical and biological capabilities might be delegated to yet another corps or institution directly subordinate to the Supreme Leader. In keeping with its style of strategic management, the leadership is likely to avoid concentrating its main strategic-operational military assets (SSMs, naval asymmetrical assets, chemical and biological weapons, and nuclear capability) in the hands of a single body, even one as loyal as the IRGC, but rather disseminate them to several organizations.

Because WMD and other strategic capabilities are a symbol of elite status, custody over the nuclear assets would be a path to distinction or a status of "primus inter pares" within the

bureaucracy. The new asset will constitute not only a tool of bureaucratic influence but also a symbol of professional competence. Both the regular army and the IRGC will desire to control nuclear capabilities not only for reasons of political influence but also due to pure professional ambitions. Each will regard itself as the most appropriate professional organization to develop doctrine and a concept of operations for the new capability. The tensions between the two might increase significantly. Given Iranian organizational culture, the leadership might encourage this kind of competitive dynamic.

Intelligence collectors today are playing a critical role in the nuclear project and thus enjoy significant bureaucratic weight, power, and prestige. Their elite status may start to diminish when the program advances from the stage of technology to the stage of strategy formulation, although there is one source that asserts that the Iranian organizations that today work with foreign suppliers of missile technology are also the organizations that have developed concepts of operations for the use of missiles. The question arises, then, of whether significant tension might develop between the existing nuclear elite of “technological collectors” and the emerging nuclear elite of “strategy designers” and “strategic operators.” Also, in an organizational climate in which power struggles and internal conspiracy fears are widespread, intelligence bodies often turn into tools of war on the battleground between enemies in the top political echelons. The nuclear issue may not be an exception to this general tendency.

## **PROXIES**

Foreign intelligence analysts whose work is reviewed in this monograph tend to retrospectively judge the relationship between Iran and its proxies on the basis of observed historical outcomes. This may lead the analysts to systematically overestimate the amount of coordination and planning between Iran and its proxies that will actually take place once Iran is a nuclear weapons state. The analytical errors all seem to be in the direction of inferring coordination from past acts that were in fact executed independently. Hence, we should take seriously the possibility of independent action by Iranian proxies in the context of a nuclear crisis. While Tehran envisions its strategic interaction with Hezbollah as a “patron-client” relationship, Hezbollah is inclined sometimes to envision their interaction as a collegial cooperation of “strategic partners.” The same tendency may manifest itself under certain conditions in a nuclear future, when Hezbollah would play by its own strategic considerations.

The imagined nuclear umbrella and the image of Tehran’s enhanced deterrence power might lead Iranian strategic partners, both countries and organizations, to assume that they possess expanded freedom of operational action. This may inspire radical groups to become more reckless and to take the Iranian nuclear umbrella over their conventional escalations for granted. They might consider that Iranian nuclear potential undercuts enemy “escalation dominance capabilities.” It might encourage them to opt for strategic adventurism and excessive regional aggressiveness while relying upon Tehran’s safety net. Tehran’s readiness to intervene on their behalf might be taken for granted by the proxies, while in fact it will not exist.



## **REGULAR ARMY VS. IRGC**

From the time of the “Ten Thousand Immortals” (Achaemenid Empire, 550-330BC), Persian military tradition has featured two cultures of war and two forces: a professional standing army and irregular military formations mobilized *ad hoc* as a militia (including irregular infantry, cavalry, and even artillery). It would be too extreme to present the professional ethos of the Artesh, drawn from the legacy of the imperial regular army, as totally distinct from that of the IRGC, drawn from the Shia combat narratives and the historical legacy of Persian irregular forces. These two distinct professional narratives are not mutually exclusive; they have been complementary throughout Persian military history and reinforce each other today within the framework of Iranian strategic culture and the institutional cultures of Iran’s military services. That said, in certain strategic constellations the difference between these two traditions might shape Iranian strategic behavior in distinct ways, with significant implications in the context of an Iranian nuclear future.

## **MESSIANIC VS. PRAGMATIC TENDENCIES AND IMPLICATIONS**

Although several experts see Iran as an irrational actor that encapsulates radical jihadist intentions with WMD capabilities and missile means of delivery, Iranian strategic history offers examples of both “signs of caution” and examples of “strategic adventurism.” Despite religious fanaticism Iranian decision-makers demonstrated sensitivity to the effects of the use of decisive military force. The most commonly cited instances of Iranian pragmatism came in the wake of impressive displays of force in Iran’s immediate vicinity. For instance, toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran demonstrated a clear preference for counter-value targeting and anticipated high gains from it. Iranian strategy during the “war of the cities” was characterized by intentional counter-value launches against Iraqi cities in order to deter Iraqis from launching missiles on Iranian cities and industrial infrastructure. Tehran used missiles not only to deter, but also to deescalate, coerce, and compel. This was aimed at achieving the main goal of Iranian military doctrine: to deter potential aggression by presenting the threat of the maximum retaliatory price, including the possibility of using WMD. At the same time, Iran refrained from bringing counter-value escalations to possible extremes, differentiated between pure economic or infrastructure targets and population centers, and was also more restrained than Iraq in other regards, especially when confronted itself with the possibility of strategic retaliation.

That said, there is the issue of the regime’s ability to ensure that all officers behave in ways that conform to the doctrinal objectives conceived by the civilian leadership. Since the IRGC is oriented toward the supreme spiritual goal, one might expect more disobedience from it if the IRGC believes that Iranian leaders are not fulfilling their spiritual obligations. In the context of a nuclear future, if compared to other institutions (for example, the Artesh), the IRGC might be more likely to disobey even the orders given by the Supreme Leader. Within the IRGC, there is the potential for “strategic emotions,” a term used by foreign observers, inspired by messianic associations to drive the inclination to sacrifice to its extremes. Given the significant institutional authority of the IRGC as the current custodian of strategic weapons, the extent to which the supreme leadership could control the IRGC’s aggressive biases is not clear. Unlike the Artesh, the IRGC does not subscribe to the norm of subordinating the military to the civilian echelons. This, coupled with the traditional ethos of taking the initiative, improvising, and leading by example,

could incline the IRGC to operational enterprises that the leadership might see as contradicting its strategic intentions. In future nuclear strategic interactions, the radical elements driven by messianic strategic emotions might undertake signaling efforts independent of those of the civilian leadership.

## **INTELLIGENCE AND ASSESSMENTS**

Further, the Iranian siege mentality, coupled with a long historical memory and a hegemonic vision of a glorious future, might encourage perceptions that are less logical-analytical and more associative-holistic. That is, Iran might interpret concrete current events through the lens of past associations and connect them to messianic future visions. A siege mentality might condition Iranian intelligence analysis, especially during nuclear strategic interactions. Influenced by the inclination to accept conspiratorial explanations, Iranian analysts might connect unrelated events instead of producing straightforward explanations, and thus draw flawed conclusions that magnify perceived threats.

Without internalized rules of nuclear behavior or crisis management mechanisms, Iranian analysts might have difficulty understanding Western behavior. The demonization of nuclear adversaries (the “satans”) might lead to mistaken interpretations of their military behavior. Tehran might succeed in convincing itself that what it is saying about the “satans” is actually true. Tehran might attribute to its adversaries murderous intentions or a willingness to take dangerous actions that the adversaries did not intend to convey. What the sources call “strategic emotions” can intensify this belief and might make Iran liable to take a nuclear action. As a result, the nuclear signals sent by adversaries might be unnoticed, misunderstood, or misinterpreted, thus generating an undesired escalation.

The fundamental distrust produced by a siege mentality and traumatic formative experiences will make it difficult to reassure Iran that the counterpart bargains in good faith and means what it says. Negotiations might be seen as a trick to deprive Iran of its only real deterrent and, in the words of one source, “paranoid perceptions of the adversary’s intentions might lead to irrational decisions during times of crises.” This inclination might increase mirror-imaging at a time of strategic signaling and analysis of the enemy’s actions: genuine intentions might be interpreted according to Iran’s own yardstick, leading to the dismissal of genuine proposals to cooperate as fake even as genuine threats are similarly discounted.

## **WARTIME BEHAVIOR**

Intelligence communities writing in sources cited by the monograph estimate that Iran would make use of all elements of its arsenal – asymmetrical, conventional, missiles, terrorists and WMD (nuclear) – to hit back if attacked and might, in fact put the region at risk. By means of bluffs, Iran will try to reinforce fears of this kind of reaction, and will exaggerate its real intentions and capabilities, in order to strengthen deterrence. While there are reasons to assume that Iran can approach nuclear interactions as a pragmatic and rational actor, there are also indications that Iranian messianic inclinations may produce strategic emotions that lead to radical Iranian interpretations of events in a crisis. Further complicating the assessment of Iranian rationality is the possibility that in keeping with the *taqiyya* tradition of deception, Iran might opt

for the "rationality of irrationality" strategy, particularly during the uncertain early period during which Iran learns what actions involving nuclear weapons are productive and counter-productive.

The Iranian strategic culture is likely to produce at least some delusionary people with faith in supra-natural forces, who also have their fingers on the strategic buttons. The martyrdom motif and perception of warfare as an act of *taklif* (a process that is itself a duty, and not a goal-oriented instrument) stimulates the emergence of messianic strategic emotions. These emotions might support an Iranian understanding of military professionalism, not in the conventional Western sense of being skilled in performing well defined tasks, but as being a pious fighter and acting for the sake of the right cause, not necessarily with the goal of victorious military operations. Under this messianic self-perception, already today some elements in the IRGC see themselves as operating on the spiritual battlefield of good and evil. Given this kind of strategic mentality they can situate a nuclear capability in similar Armageddon and *shahadat* (martyrdom) contexts.

In the nuclear era under the culture of war in which a martyrdom narrative underlies the principles of *jihadi* operational art, waging warfare might turn into a process in itself (fulfilling a religious duty of *jihad/shahadat*), as opposed to a goal-oriented progress (attaining a politico-strategic endstate through nuclear deterrence or coercion).

## **OTHER ISSUES**

Iran's culture of military thinking is oriented toward inflicting moral-psychological effects on the enemy through application of material tools. It is oriented to a lesser extent toward physical annihilation of the enemy. There are elements in the Iranian legacy that may predispose Iran toward counter-value threats and targeting in nuclear strategy and make the leadership more sensitive and reactive to perceived counter-value moves by the adversary.

Finally, given the culture of *taarof* (acting to convey the impression of polite agreement and deference) and *taqiyya*, there might be objective internal difficulties for Iranian decision-makers when they try to assess where they are relative to their goals and aspirations, because reports that they receive from their subordinates might be affected by the same *taarof* and *taqiyya* culture and thus not represent reality.



# INTRODUCTION

This monograph presents Russian and Israeli assessments of how the strategic culture and strategic mentality of Iran might inform Tehran's perception of its nuclear capability and its approach to nuclear strategy.

The starting point of this work is a basic assumption that Iran will eventually acquire a military nuclear capability, and the focus is on the factors internal to Iran that could shape Iranian nuclear doctrine, command and control, and other related issues. The primary methodology used in this monograph is a cultural-ideational approach to security analysis. The source materials are largely in Russian and Hebrew, since this work seeks to benefit from the tradition of strong Perso-Iranian studies in the former Soviet Union and Israel.<sup>1</sup> In keeping with the research aims, the monograph deliberately reflects the biases of Russian and Israeli observers, even when they contradict the conventional wisdom in the West.

The work utilizes the memoirs of imperial Russian diplomats and military officers who served or fought in Persia, Soviet ambassadors, diplomats, military attaches, KGB and GRU officers (collectors, analysts and operatives) working in and on Iran before and after the 1979 revolution, Soviet military advisers and translators in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, works by contemporary Iran scholars from Russia and the former Soviet republics,<sup>2</sup> Hebrew sources produced by diplomats and officials who worked in Iran before the revolution, Israeli Jewish immigrants from Iran, Mossad operatives at the station in Tehran and operatives in Iran before and after the revolution, and works by the leading contemporary Israeli Iran scholars. The paper also utilizes several Iranian pre- and post-revolutionary publications and several perspectives from European researchers.

It is the working assumption of this monograph that the doctrinal and conceptual thinking of newcomers to the nuclear club will evolve more slowly than the building of infrastructure and capabilities. This work therefore assumes that once Iran acquires nuclear potential, the cultural traits and bureaucratic reflexes that can be observed today in the conventional and chemical-biological spheres might significantly shape Tehran's approach to this new capability. Understanding traits of Iranian strategic culture might be relevant for anticipating the behavior of Iran during the period of "nuclear learning" – the period when the Iranian leadership and defense community would undergo a process of nuclear socialization and education.

This work does not predict future Iranian strategic behavior. Instead, it seeks to provide practical guidelines and relevant insights for careful and systematic thinking about it. It suggests which patterns of behavior and strategic outcomes should be expected more than others and explains why. The monograph derives its insights from examination of historical experiences, cultural

---

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of Russian Iranology see for example: L.M.Kulagina, *Iranistika v Rossii I Iransity* (Moscow: IV RAN, 2001); for an Israeli overview see for example: Haggay Ram, *Likro Iran be Israel* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz ha Meuhad, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Armenian, Georgian, Azeri and Central Asian.

norms, bureaucratic reflexes, strategic mentality, and current patterns of operational and tactical behavior of the Iranian armed forces and defense community. The description of each general cultural trend and each strategic issue is based on the amalgamation of Russian and Israeli sources, and emphasizes the points on which Russian and Israeli sources agree or converge.

# ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

## DUPLICATIONS AND OVERLAPS

Probably under the impact of the Shia (faction) legacy, Iranian political culture is characterized by the inclination to group identity, factionalism, and struggles among various personalities and groups for power in informal and formal ways.<sup>3</sup> In addition, as opposed to the Sunnis who closed the gates of *ijtihad* in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Shia permit legal interpretation. This theocratic culture introduced a certain kind of political pluralism through its allowance for different authorities to assume overlapping responsibilities and through its relative tolerance for the expression of different opinions on the same subjects.<sup>4</sup>

Both before and since the revolution, Iranian leaders have seen fit to stoke bureaucratic rivalries, friction, and competition over missions, roles, resources and influence – to minimize the risk of overthrow and enhance central control.<sup>5</sup> Duplications of responsibilities and lines of authority are not the function of democratic aspirations, but reflect the conspiracy and rivalry within the organizational culture of Iran and can be found on all the levels and in all spheres of professional and political life. Khamenei has continued Khomeini's policy of "balancing one group against another, making sure that no single side gains too much power."<sup>6</sup> Decentralization of authority and bureaucratic competition were fundamental to the Shah's system of management as well. For example, the CINCs of different military corps were not able to conduct meetings in the Shah's absence.<sup>7</sup> Competition between several institutions characterizes how Iranian foreign and defense policy is formulated today.<sup>8</sup> Rivalry within the political and bureaucratic process produced a unique system of checks and balances. Whatever the authority of any given organization or institution, it alone cannot dictate its preferred policy course but needs a moderator to produce a consensus with opponents. The same can be said about the nuclear field, although a smaller number of actors produces the decision-making consensus.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> M.V.Vagin, "Zakonodatel'stvo o politicheskikh partiiakh I gruppakh Islamskoi respubliki Iran," *Blizhnii Vostok I sovremennost'*, no.16, 2002;

<sup>4</sup> I.I.Muradian and S.A.Manukian, *Iran I Evraziiskaia ideia: os' Moskva Tegeran* (Erevan: Fond Vysokikh tekhnologii, 1997), pp.3-10

<sup>5</sup> Sergei Krakhmalov, *Zapiski voennogo attaché* (Moscow: Russkaia Ravedka, 2000), pp.149-150.

<sup>6</sup> But lacking Khomeini's charisma and clerical standing, he has developed networks, first inside the armed forces, and then among the clerics administering the major religious foundations, and seminaries of Qom and Mashhad. Under him, the government is said to resemble "a clerical oligarchy more than an autocracy." Ervand Abrahamian, "Who is in charge?" *Iran Bulletin* no. 6 November, 2006

<sup>7</sup> Aleksei Krymin and Egor Engel'gardt, "Systemnaia uiazvimost' politico-voennoi struktury IRI," *Ekspert Vooruzhenii*, (Januray-February, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> A.B.Podcerob, "Islamskii faktro I process priniatiia vneshnepoliticheskikh reshenii," *IBV*, 07.12.2007.

<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, after the decision is made, they artificially provoke discussion and open debate in order to produce an image of political pluralism even on the most strategic questions. Sevak Sarukhanian,

Some authors define the leadership's inclination to produce artificial organizational duplications as a systemic vulnerability of Iranian politico-military structure and organizational culture.<sup>10</sup> Sources argue that the missile production program has an ineffective organizational structure and decision-making process. In addition to the IRGC, the Defense Industries Organization (DIO), Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology and Ministry of Heavy Industries are in charge of certain elements of the missile forces and non-conventional weapons programs.<sup>11</sup> Although DIO was established as an umbrella organization to ensure unified decision-making and development of missile programs and a chemical weapons industry, both the Artesh and the IRGC preserve a significant level of autonomy in these fields and have established parallel defense industries.<sup>12</sup> Chemical and biological military programs are not united in one joint system that produces an integrated and synergistic effect. Rather, research and development (R&D) efforts are often diffused and duplicate one another, thus making the whole system less effective than it potentially could be.<sup>13</sup> Similar to the missile and chemical-biological industries, the nuclear program is also divided among several overlapping and redundant organizations and institutions.<sup>14</sup>

A duplicative managerial style and bureaucratic rivalries often result in low operational and production effectiveness as well as dysfunctional R&D. Several R&D programs operate in parallel, which creates mismanagement of funds and resources. The lack of a coherent managerial decision-making process creates bureaucratic difficulties, counter-productive organizational competition, ineffective use of resources, lack of coordination between production and procurement activities, informational compartmentalization between different organizations and financial mismanagement. For these reasons many strategic weapon systems developed in Iran never went beyond the experimental versions to reach large-scale production. Ultimately, Iranians can be very good at producing prototypes of missiles but very ineffective in putting them into mass production.<sup>15</sup>

Something similar might be expected if nuclear capabilities were introduced; the military industrial complex will be able to produce prototypes of the weapons and devices, but it will take a lot of effort and time to achieve mass production. The culture of bureaucratic duplication and rivalry increases the potential probability for non-sanctioned actions by the multiple key competitors from the WMD and SSM production and deployment complexes. Also, the author estimates that this culture creates space for doctrinal divergence and competition, so that

---

"Iadernyi vybor Irana. Obsuzhdenie natsionalnoi iadernoi programmy I ee celesoobraznosti v Irane," *21 Vek*, no.1, 2005, pp.13-14

<sup>10</sup> Krymin and Engel'gardt.

<sup>11</sup> Shoham, p.96

<sup>12</sup> IRGC operates Scud-B and both (AF Artesh and AFIRGC) operate an arsenal of operational-tactical missiles.Kam, p.130

<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the specialists trained abroad usually are narrowly specialized. Sazhin in *Analiticheskie zapiski*, pp.182, 195-197

<sup>14</sup> Safranchiuk (1998), pp.8,20-21.

<sup>15</sup> Kam, pp.138-141, 169-173.



particular organizations might try to distinguish themselves by staking out doctrines that are more offensive/aggressive than the doctrines offered by rival organizations.

## CIVILIAN OVERSIGHT

A tendency for duplication and overlaps - the basic and enduring feature of Iranian political-organizational culture - is manifested in the realm of security command and civilian control. Several parallel, overlapping bureaucratic offices for civilian oversight exercise control over the armed forces and perform very similar functions.

The available sources produce the following picture: the Political-Ideological Directorate of the General Staff (GS) is responsible for military indoctrination and has representatives down to the platoon level. (It is equivalent to the GLAVPUR [Chief Political Directorate] of the Soviet GS). A directorate of the GS, it is, however, not subordinate to its chief but accountable to the Central Committee of the ruling party. In contrast to the Soviet Army and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), Iranian political commissars do not have military ranks and do not possess direct command authority over the forces. Thus, although they have authority to intervene in professional decisions (and they did so several times during the Iran-Iraq War), according to the Russian sources, unity of command exists in the Iranian armed forces (as opposed to the practice of dual command in the Red Army and in the PLA). Representatives of the Supreme Leader (Islamic commissars a la Soviet *agitprop*), the second institutional structure for exercising control over the military, are also civilians. Though these eyes and ears of the Supreme Leader have a clerical authority to intervene in professional military affairs, unity of command is preserved. These representatives exist both in Artesh and in IRGC units. In addition to the two chains that exist today, during wartime a third office exercising civilian control was added through the representatives of the Ayatollah in the secretariat of the Supreme Defense Council.<sup>16</sup> To ensure the loyalty of the field commanders, these representatives are placed on staffs through all the military levels down to the division commanders and were authorized to veto field commanders' decisions. These tight avenues of control ensure that operational actions are consistent with Islamic law and the intentions of the Supreme Leader. Today, any activity related to WMD or other strategic conventional capabilities is authorized by the Supreme Leader and is overseen by the two (and three in wartime) parallel bodies exercising civilian command and control.<sup>17</sup>

Total control over the Artesh and IRGC is achieved not only through the apparatus of political commissars and the representatives of the Supreme Leader, but also through several apparatuses of counter-intelligence, military and civilian.<sup>18</sup> The GS maintains its own counter-intelligence component to identify dissident elements. Similar in its functions to the Soviet *smersh*, it operates

---

<sup>16</sup> This chain of control is similar to the function of the *Stavka* representatives in the Soviet Army during the Great Patriotic War.

<sup>17</sup> Ermakov in Kozhokina; Sazhin in Mamedova, p.83; Krymin and Engel'gardt; Sazhin I Akhmedov; Minasian (2004).

<sup>18</sup> Sazhin in Akhmedov;

inside military intelligence and is separate from the Internal Security service (VEVAK). About fifteen intelligence and security agencies not only watch internal and external enemies but also spy on each other<sup>19</sup> - an obvious continuity of the “mutual spying regime” from the days of the Shah.<sup>20</sup>

From the author’s perspective, this culture of command and control suggests that once an operational nuclear capability is introduced into the Iranian armed forces, Iran will be prone to establish new overlapping chains of command and procedures for a national command authority. Although we might expect the establishment of a new nuclear corps (as was the case in the USSR, China, and India), custody of the nuclear warheads might be given to another organization specifically established for this purpose, which will not be part of the IRGC or Artesh (something similar to the Soviet 12<sup>th</sup> Chief Directorate of the Ministry of Defense – the main custodian of Soviet nuclear capability).<sup>21</sup> Also, given the organizational cultural tendency to deliberately stoke bureaucratic friction, the author would expect that chemical and biological capabilities will be delegated to another corps or institution directly subordinate to the Supreme Leader.

Traditionally, ethnic factionalism inside the armed forces existed but was a minor factor in light of the centrifugal psyche of the Iranian officers.<sup>22</sup> Most of the units are regionally diverse and include some minorities, but, as was the case throughout Persian history, the units are predominantly Persian and Azeri. It is difficult to identify a correlation between a certain service and a particular minority.<sup>23</sup> Today, compared with ethnicity, kinship or familial factors play a far more prominent role in the distribution of influence and factional coalition-building inside the armed forces. Even as the focal symbol of the military evolved from Iranian national identity during the Shah to Shia Islam after the revolution and purges, the continuity of professional bonding along kinship lines stayed intact, and familial ties still ensure avenues of promotion. It is unclear to what extent family ties today cut across the division between the Artesh and the IRGC or reinforce it. The initial ethos of the IRGC as a decentralized guerilla force emphasized bottom-up innovation more than classical military hierarchy. In the author’s judgment it is likely that the

---

<sup>19</sup> Melman and Javedanfar, p.181

<sup>20</sup> Vinogradov, pp.397-398

<sup>21</sup> Also, as in the case of the Soviet Special Committee on Nuclear Issues (known as Special Committee on Problem No. 1), a standalone organization headed by the powerful and influential individual might be established to take care of it. Lavrenti Beria left NKVD in 1945 to head this committee. Pavel Sudoplatov, *Spetsoperatcii: Lubyanka I Kreml’ 1930-1950gg* (Moscow: Olma Press, 1997)

<sup>22</sup> A situation similar to the Indian or Russian armed forces, where professional-patriotic *esprit de corps* suppresses existing ethnic divisions.

<sup>23</sup> Kam (2004), p.24; Middle Eastern Military Balance, “Iran: general data – demography,” *INSS*, 2009, p.2-3

delegation of authority, egalitarianism, and social mobility after institutionalization created a suitable climate for family ties to affect paths of promotion.<sup>24</sup>

Available information gives grounds to assume that once nuclear capabilities are introduced, the clerics will seek a kind of control regime and rules of engagement that will mitigate the risk of non-sanctioned use, either accidental or driven by “strategic emotions.” Once the nuclear corps has been established, the familial factor might play an important role in staffing its senior leadership and officer ranks in order to ensure a reliable organization.

## CIVIL MILITARY RELATIONS

In times of crisis Iranian armed forces have traditionally played an important political role, either by action or inaction. Historically, the military’s self-image inclined it to crack down on separatist ethnic groups that endangered domestic security and national integrity, but to refrain from suppressing Persian popular protests or movements, even when they threatened to bring about regime change. It seems to the author that on the level of professional ethos, the cultures of the Artesh and the IRGC differ in their attitudes toward civil-military relations and toward involvement in politics. The narrative of Rostam, a professional myth for the Artesh, prescribes a distinction between political and military affairs, subordinating the latter to the former. Rostam was the king’s military servant, who carried out his orders without questioning them and never claimed his throne. He was a military backbone of the empire, a superior protector of the kingdom from invasion by barbaric enemies, the servant and the protector of the sovereign, and not a “warrior-king.” Consistent with this myth, the professional narrative of the Artesh generates a spirit of non-intervention in political affairs. From the time of the Immortals (*Zhayedan*), the regular army has played a dual role of a national standing force and an imperial guard. The ethics of discipline and subjugation to the political authority in the case of the Artesh also reflects professional emulation of Western military organizations and the mode of civil-military relations known in the West. In contrast, for the IRGC, being a superior defender of the state implies less of a distinction between civilian and military affairs and more engagement in political life. The professional narrative of the IRGC is based on the myth of Husain, a warrior-king, who encapsulated the highest religious, political, and military authority in one body. Thus, the IRGC’s professional identity and self-image reflect this hybrid of political, military, and religious motives, casting this trinity as indivisible. The IRGC sees itself as the guardian more of ideology than of the government.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> This trait reflects a traditionally strong importance attributed to immediate and extended family ties. Eva Patricia Rakel, “The Political Elite in the Islamic Republic of Iran: From Khomeini to Akhmadinejad,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol.29, no.1, 2009, p.110.

<sup>25</sup> M.Vikhriev, “Na kogo mogut operatsia Iranskie konservatory,” in A.O.Filonik, *Analiticheskie zapiski Iran* (Moscow: IIBV, 2004), pp.43-44; V.I.Sazhin, “Islamskaia respublika Iran: vlast’ I armiia,” in V.M. Akhmedov, “Armiia I politika na Blizhenm Vosotoke,” *Blizhnii Vostok I Sovremennost’*, no.33, IIBV, 2007; Sergei Minasian, “Vooruzhennye sily I politika v sfere bezopasnosti Islamskoi respubliki Iran,” *Tsentral’naia Aziia I Kavkaz*, no2, 04.30.2004.

The author estimates that as far as the ethic of discipline is concerned, for the senior echelons of the IRGC, submission to divine commandments might be above superior-inferior relations with the clerical-political leadership. The ethos of personal responsibility for the success of the revolution and the Islamic cause creates an orientation toward taking the initiative. From the IRGC's point of view, actively guarding the values of the revolution is not considered an intervention in political affairs. The IRGC's indoctrination and encouragement of its officers to intervene politically may eventually result in the weakening of civilian-clerical control over the military. In other words, it seems to the author that there is a potential for tension between the IRGC and the clerical commissars and political leadership. Confidence in the Supreme Leader plays a pivotal role in the IRGC's approach to discipline.<sup>26</sup> This tension might potentially increase since while the political leadership is relatively oriented toward deterrence, particular segments of the IRGC might have a more offensive orientation, as discussed below.<sup>27</sup>

Since IRGC forces define their mission around a supreme spiritual goal rather than the defense of an office-holder, one might expect more disobedience on their side if they are disappointed by the Supreme Leader. In the author's judgment, in the context of the "nuclear future," compared to other institutions (for example the Artesh) the IRGC might be more likely to disobey orders from the Supreme Leader.

---

<sup>26</sup> Kliashtorina, pp.168-172, 187; A.Z.Arabadzhian, *Iranskaia revoliutcia 1978-1979: prichiny I urroki* (Moscow: Nauka, 1989), pp.163-171; Ali Alfoneh, "Indoctrination of the Revolutionary Guards," *AIE*, no.2, February 2009.

<sup>27</sup> This situation is reminiscent of Soviet civil-military relations during the 1970s and 1980s, when senior political-military leadership saw a nuclear capability only as a deterring option, while particular military circles considered this capability (at least doctrinally) as an operational escalation option.

# COMMAND AND CONTROL ARCHITECTURE

The nature of Iranian politics in general, and of the nuclear field in particular, demands consensus or balance between several interest groups in order to make important foreign and security policy decisions. Several competitive dynamics overlap, including hardliners vs. reformers and secular organs vs. clerical ones, while duplications and triplications of professional institutions produce a complicated bureaucratic framework. To reach a decision, a consensus or balance of interests must be generated. Although nuclear decision-making may be formally more centralized, available information gives grounds to assume that unofficial inter-organizational tensions and struggles for influence might also provide a complicating mechanism.<sup>28</sup> Today, factionalism goes beyond tensions between reformers and hardliners. Individuals bond and are connected through kinship, marriage ties, and past membership in the same service branch during the Iran-Iraq War. Education also affects relationships and internal dynamics within the bureaucracy. Thus, the author expects that future coalitions concerned with particular nuclear-related strategic questions might coalesce along the same lines.

## CHAIN OF COMMAND

Menashe Amir defines Iranian political culture as “the most democratic dictatorship and the most dictatorial democracy.”<sup>29</sup> The system of political administration in accordance with the principle *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) codifies the superiority of *rahbar/faqih* (political leader/religious authority) and of the Shia religious government. Elected republican institutions – the President and the Majlis - operate under the superior “theocratic duplicates”: *rahbar* and the 12 jurists of the Council of Guardians who actually exercise full control and supervise the political behavior of the “secular” executive and legislative powers while ensuring that the laws and all government policies are compatible with Sharia (Islamic law). The president fulfills the role of the CEO.<sup>30</sup> Transformations suggested by reformists and moderates are not changing the political regime of *velayat-e faqih*.<sup>31</sup> Even if the Council of Expediency limits in a

---

<sup>28</sup> Sarakhunian (2007), pp.62-64; A.A.Rozov, “Evoliutcia mekhanizma sderzhek I protivovesov v Iranskoj politicheskoi sisteme,” *IIBV*, 15.02.2006

<sup>29</sup> Menashe Amir in Experts Forum, “Iran, 25 Years Later,” *MERIA*, vol.8, no.2, (June 2004).

<sup>30</sup> A.A.Voskresenskii, *Politicheskie sistemy I modeli demokratii na Vostoke* (Moscow: Aspekt Press, 2007), pp.54-55, 139; Kudriashova in Voskresenskii, pp.355-357; Mekhdi Imanipur, “Konstitutciia islamskoi respubliki Iran I princip pravleniia spravedlivogo fakikha,” in N.M.Mamedova, *Dvadtsat’ piat’ let Islamskoi revoliutcii v Irane* (Moscow: IV RAN, 2005), pp.50-55; Genadii Falunin, “Put’ Iranskogo voina,” *KZ*, 02.10.2009; Grishin (2008), p.78; Nina Mamedova, “Iran: ternistui put’ transformacii islamskoi gosudarstvennosti,” *AiAS*, no.1, 2004, pp.14-18;

<sup>31</sup> Russian sources do not accept the once popular comparison between Khatami and Gorbachev (“Gorbachev ayatollah”). To the Russian, Khatami’s reforms are like those of Kruschev – transforming the regime without destroying its fundamental principles – the clerical foundation of the regime and the role of *rahbar*. Khatami’s dialogue of civilizations doctrine is similar to Krushiov’s doctrine of “peaceful co-existence” – just a different way of struggle, which might turn very risky. Sazhin in Mamedova. Also see: Mikhail Shakh, *Uspekhi I trundosti reformirovaniia Irana* (Moscow: MGIMO, 2000).

certain way the absolute power of the *rahbar*, it preserves the supremacy of religious over secular institutions of power.<sup>32</sup> Despite a fundamental change in the political elite, the traits of the political system of the *velayat-e faqih* manifest significant continuity from the times of constitutional monarchy. In both periods the sovereign is not elected by the people, and ministries are not able to act independently from him; the leader constructs the political elite through direct nominations.<sup>33</sup>

The senior religious authority of the Shia community, *faqih*, who is also the political leader of the country, *rahbar*, is commander in chief (CINC) of the Iranian armed forces, with unlimited (almost dictatorial) authority in strategic political-military issues. He provides general religious-ideological strategic guidance and also is responsible for declaring war, announcing mobilization and signing peace. He nominates the chief of the General Staff (GS), the head of the IRGC and the Artesh, and commanders of the corps and military districts. Subordinate to him is the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) – the main organ for generating Iranian security policy, strategic planning and coordination of all state activities related to national security (military and civilian), according to the *rahbar*'s directives. The SNSC has ten permanent members (two of whom are representatives of the *rahbar*) and is headed by the President of Iran (the deputy CINC). It includes two sub-councils: the Security Council (headed by the Minister of the Interior) and Defense Council (headed by the Chief of the GS). The latter generates Iranian military policy, doctrine, force build-up and related coordination activities with the civilian organs of the state. Although the president chairs the SNSC, he does not control the armed forces.

The CINC commands the armed forces through the GS, which is responsible for administrative and operational management of the corps and military districts in peacetime and in war. Actually, the GS is the senior and the central operational organ of all the Iranian armed forces. It is responsible for strategic military planning, formulation of military doctrine and related concepts of operation (conops), operational and combat preparation of the forces (training and maneuvers); organization and implementation of command and control across the services and military districts; and coordination of activities and operations between the Artesh, IRGC, Forces of Civilian Defense,<sup>34</sup> and Basij. The Ministry of Defense (MoD) is not directly tied to the command and management of the armed forces. It is responsible for force build-up, budgeting and defense, and R&D and industry. (It seems to the author that the current architecture of strategic management, and particularly the distribution of power between the GS and the MoD, demonstrates continuity from the Shah's times. Interestingly, although the Iranian armed forces during the time of the Shah were organized by the American advisors and in keeping with American military norms, Iran's GS and MoD played different roles from their counterparts, the

---

<sup>32</sup> Nina Mamedova, "Iran segodnia," *Svobodnaia mysl'*, no.1, January 2009, p.55-57; E.V.Dunaeva, "Itogi poslednikh vyborov v Irane," *Blizhnii Vostok I sovremennost*, IIBV, no.32, 2007

<sup>33</sup> Rakel.

<sup>34</sup> In peacetime this is subordinate to the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

US Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Department of Defense. In the distribution of labor and power between them they are more similar to the Soviet or Chinese GSs.<sup>35)</sup>

The Artesh and the IRGC are actually doubly subordinated. For strategic and political questions the chief of the Artesh staff and the chief of the IRGC staff are subordinate to the CINC (*rahbar*), but for operational-military questions they are subordinate to the chief of the GS of the Iranian armed forces. At the same time, the IRGC seeks constantly to preserve its autonomy, and, in fact, below the level of the head of the IRGC and his staff, there are no representatives of the GS along the whole chain of command in any of the three corps. Artesh and IRGC units on the operational level are administratively separate from each other in peacetime. Their command and control over ground, naval, and air forces turns joint during wartime; then the units become subordinated to the Joint Operational Command of specific (geographical) theaters of operations, which become subordinated to the GS.<sup>36</sup>

The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) formally reports to the President, but is in fact controlled and directed by the Supreme Leader through the SNSC. It is a “peaceful” organization, preparing technological nuclear infrastructure for other units that operate in its shadow while preparing for launching a “military” option. These units duplicate and overlap; some of them are part of the IRGC, and others are within the Ministry of Defense (although controlled directly by the SNSC and Supreme Leader). They have their own parallel technological and training facilities, and it seems as though coordination and prioritization of various stages of weapons acquisition is conducted by a special organ inside the IRGC subordinate directly to the Supreme Leader.<sup>37</sup> The Supreme Leader holds ultimate authority over nuclear issues, so the President is probably the third in command and influence after the SNSC.<sup>38</sup>

## NUCLEAR ESPIONAGE

Given its own limitations in technological infrastructure, fundamental R&D and trained scientists, Iran has established since the early 1990s an “empire” of technological procurement and industrial espionage from abroad, similar to the programs of Pakistan and Iraq. Thus, it is difficult to underestimate the importance of technical intelligence (TECHINT) for Iran’s nuclear and

---

<sup>35</sup> S.M.Aliev, A.Z.Arabadzian and A.I.Demin, *Sovremennyi Iran: spravochnik* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), pp. 80-83; M.S.Ivanov, *Noveishaia istoria Irana* (Moscow: Mysl', 1965), p.194; Krakhmalov, pp.5-41; 139-206; Shebarshin.; V.I.Sazhin, “O voennom potentsiale IRI,” *IBV*, 02.22.2006; Minasian (2004).

<sup>36</sup> S.M.Ermakov, “Perspektivy razvitiia vooruzhennykh sil Irana,” in E.M.Kozhokina, *Iran v sovremennom mire* (Moscow: Rossiiskii institute strategicheskikh issledovani, 2003), pp.89-123; K. Terenkov, “Modernizatsiia vooruzhennykh sil IRI,” *IBV*, 26.05.03; V.I.Danilov, *Evolutsiia politicheskikh sistem na Vostoke* (Moscow: IV RAN, 1999), pp.82-83; Shaul Shai, *Tzir ha resha: iran, hizbullah ve hateror ha palistini* (Herzlia: IDC, 2003), pp.39-40; A.A.Rozov, “O vysshem sovete natsional'noi bezopasnosti Irana,” *IBV*, 26.02.2006; Krymin and Engel'gardt; Minasian (2004).; Kam, pp.94-95

<sup>37</sup> Melman and Javedanfar, pp.144-145

<sup>38</sup> Melman and Javedanfar, p.223

missile programs.<sup>39</sup> The author assumes that the bureaucratic weight and influence of the organization that collects nuclear related TECHINT is substantial.

Areas of responsibility inside the Iranian intelligence community overlap and blur into each other. It seems to the author that the IRGC and its elite special unit Al-Quds are not responsible for nuclear espionage. VEVAK, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security and successor to the Shah's SAVAK, is a counter-intelligence arm of the regime conducting operations against political dissidents – “bad guys” – domestically and abroad. Although its responsibilities overlap with those of Al-Quds, the latter conducts secret operations abroad mainly through maintaining contacts with “good guys” – training and equipping foreign terrorist and fundamentalist organizations and maintaining an international empire of terror. Although many attribute it to Al-Quds, the author hypothesizes that nuclear espionage is conducted by another intelligence organ. Major operations with strategic implications in any realm are approved by the SNSC and then executed only after the sanction of the Supreme Leader.

The Ministry of Information, or Ministry of Intelligence, is the main organ for collecting foreign intelligence on a range of topics. It is the primary collector of TECHINT. The information collected by its industrial espionage efforts then serves military R&D, the weaponry build-up of the armed forces, and modernization of civilian industry. This fact and the division of labor with other organs of the IC provide grounds to assume that this ministry might be responsible for the coordination of all activities related to nuclear espionage – similar to the special Soviet nuclear espionage organ – for the acceleration of Iran's nuclear project. It seems likely that in nuclear related espionage and clandestine procurement, the IRGC and whatever body is the primary collector of TECHINT enjoy overlapping responsibilities. Perhaps a division of labor exists in a sense such that the IRGC guides undercover procurement, while the other organ conducts espionage. At the same time, there is also evidence to suggest that Iran's undercover networks for acquiring strategic technological components for the nuclear project are not operated by the IRGC.<sup>40</sup>

Historical evidence and especially Soviet nuclear history suggest that a dictatorship can establish a nuclear command and control architecture as stable as one in a democratic country. If instability threatens Iran, the problem may lie not so much with the non-democratic nature of the regime as with the existence of friction among different elites over control of nuclear assets.<sup>41</sup> From the time of the Shah, intelligence information was often used for internal political struggles and for

---

<sup>39</sup> V.I.Sazhin, “Voina protiv Iraka I problema nerasprostronenia iadernogo oruzhiiia,” in *Analiticheskie zapiski: armii, VTS, OMP na Blizhnem Vostoke* (Moscow: IIIiBV, 2004), p.150; Sarukhanian (2007), p.104; Sazhin in Mamedova, p.79; Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), *Novyi vyzov posle Kholodnoi Voyny: rasprotoennie oruzhiai massovogo unichtozheniia* (Otkrytii doklad SVR RF, 1993); Safranchiuk, (1998), p.16-17; Khlopkov, p.43

<sup>40</sup> Melman and Javedanfar, pp.210-213; Yaniv Gambash, Evgeniya Bistrov and Arnon Sofer, *Iran 2007: Nituakh Astategi*, (Haifa: Haifa UP, 2008) p.98; Ermakov in Kozhokina, p.111; Kam (2004), pp.189-191, 205, 209-210.

<sup>41</sup> Evron in Kam, 2008, p.54



securing political positions.<sup>42</sup> In an organizational climate in which power struggles and internal conspiracy fears are widespread, intelligence bodies and rivalries among them often figure in battles among enemies within the top political echelons of the regime.<sup>43</sup> The author believes that the nuclear issue is not likely to be an exception.<sup>44</sup> Although collectors today are playing a critical role in the nuclear project and thus enjoy significant bureaucratic weight, power, and prestige, the author expects that their elite status may start to diminish when the program advances from the stage of technology to the stage of strategy formulation. At that point, significant tension might develop between the existing nuclear elite of “technological collectors” and the emerging nuclear elite of “strategy designers” and “strategic operators.”

---

<sup>42</sup> S.M.Aliev, *Istoriia Irana XX vek* (Moscow: IV RAN, 2004), pp.312-313

<sup>43</sup> Melman and Javedanfar, pp.124-125

<sup>44</sup> This is reminiscent of the tensions and rivalries which existed between NKVD, GRU, military counterintelligence and Smersh during and after WWII, especially in the context of the Soviet nuclear project.



# INTERNAL DYNAMICS

## CULTURAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE ARTESH AND THE IRGC

From the time of the “Ten Thousand Immortals” (Achaemenid Empire, 550-330BC), Persian military tradition has featured two cultures of war and two forces: a professional standing army and irregular military formations mobilized *ad hoc* as a militia (including irregular infantry, cavalry, and even artillery). It would be too extreme to present the professional ethos of the Artesh, drawn from the legacy of the imperial regular army, as totally distinct from that of the IRGC, drawn from the Shia combat narratives and the historical legacy of Persian irregular forces. These two distinct professional narratives are not mutually exclusive; they have been complementary throughout Persian military history and reinforce each other today within the framework of Iranian strategic culture and the institutional cultures of Iran’s military services.<sup>45</sup> That said, in certain strategic constellations the difference between these two traditions might shape Iranian strategic behavior in distinct ways, with significant implications in the context of an Iranian nuclear future. It is equally important to explain the differences and the similarities between the two.

*Shahnameh*, the poetic opus by Ferdowsi, one of the most influential pieces of the Persian written tradition, reflects in folkloric ways the cultural values of Iranian nationhood since the golden age of Greater Iran. Since most of the saga is dedicated to the heroic history of Persian civilization before and after the conversion to Islam, it is a particularly useful source for tracing the roots, essence, and continuity of the Persian strategic tradition. Although about ten centuries old, it is more than just a poetic cultural legacy of the Persian strategic tradition; in contrast to the ancient folklore sagas of other nations, *Shahnameh* is widely read and internalized, and thus very influential in shaping behavioral norms and self-identity within the modern Persian speaking community. The ethos of Rostam, a mythical hero of *Shahnameh*, together with other tales from the age of heroes, covers most of Ferdowsi’s *Epic of Kings*. Rostam can be seen as an Iranian equivalent of the Greek Hercules (or maybe Achilles). Among other moral qualities that the *Shahnameh* celebrates, including patriotism and religious worship, it prizes the pursuit of wisdom and long-term strategic thinking, qualities found in the narrative of Rostam. Rostam’s martial legacy teaches that the bravery, integrity, and strength of the honorable warrior are as important as ingenuity, intelligence, and the ability to conceive of chess-like stratagems, using guile to prevail through tricks and traps.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> O.A.Krasniak, *Stanovlenie Iranskoj reguliarnoi armii v 1879-1921gg* (Moscow: URRS, 2007); N.K. Ter-Oganov, *Sozdanie i razvitie Iranskoj reguliarnoi armii i deiatel’nost’ voennykh missii v Irane* (Tbilisi: TGU, 2003); Streljanov, pp.5-22; Razin. N.A.Sotavov, *Krakh grozy vselennoi* (Makhachkala, 2000)

<sup>46</sup> A.E. Krymskii, *Istoriia Persii, ee literatury i drevnei filosofii* (Moscow, 1901); A. Starikov, *Shahnameh* (Moscow: Literaurnie pamiatniki, 1957); E.Ea. Bertel’s, *Istoriia Persido-Tadzhikskoi Literatury* (Moscow: Vostochnaia Literatura, 1960); N.O. Osmanov, *Persido-Tadzhikskaja klassicheskaia poezija* (Moscow: Moskovskii Rabochii, 1979); Viktoria Arakelova, *Shahnameh in the Kurdish and Armenian Oral Tradition* (Yerevan: YGU, Kafedra Iranistiki, 2002); *Osnovy Shiizma* (Yerevan: YGU, Kafedra Iranistiki, 1997); Makhamdullo Radjabov, *Formirovanie npravstvennih kachestv lichnosti v Shahnameh*

The legacy of Imam Hussein and the battle of Karbala is another fundamental narrative that informs Iran's strategic tradition. The legacy of the Ashurai narrative<sup>47</sup> turned sacrifice, stoic ascetics, stamina, suffering, and endurance into an integral part of the Iranian cultural mosaic and strategic mentality. The act of martyrdom produces a symbolic victory, despite actual physical defeat, and establishes the cultural norm that faithful zeal and moral will compensate for material (technological and numerical) inferiority and assure victory. An ethos of martyrdom cultivates a suicidal approach to operations and turns these acts into a trump card within the military arsenal.<sup>48</sup>

The two organizations have different sets of values and different yardsticks for measuring professionalism. The Artesh draws on its inheritance as the elite national regular force that was uninterruptedly advised, re-organized, reformed, and trained from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by foreign military advisors from continental Europe, Britain, Scandinavia, imperial Russia and the United States.<sup>49</sup> Generations of Persian imperial officers were educated abroad. Due to these prolonged foreign professional ties, it seems to the author that the Artesh perceives itself to be in a peer relationship with other regular militaries that pursue professional excellence through discipline, hierarchy, thorough operational planning along established principles of military science, and competence in operating state of the art weaponry. Although the Rostam narrative legitimates adopting asymmetrical lines of operations, the Artesh is more inclined to wage war in modes comparable to those of other conventional militaries.<sup>50</sup> The IRGC traces its professional origins to its legacy as a paramilitary guerilla force of anti-regime insurgency, where anti-

---

(Dushanbe: Tadzhiiskii Gosudarstvenni Pedagogicheskii Institute, 2002). Shaul Shaked, *Shahnameh: sefer ha mlakhim miet ferduasi* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1992); Vasiliev, pp.125-128;

<sup>47</sup> Especially through annual emulating martyrs during the month of *Muharram*.

<sup>48</sup> A.Makarov, "Islam.Bor'ba.Smert'.Pobeda.," in V.Prussakov, *Islamskaia revoliutciia v Irane: vzgliad iz Rossii* (Moscow: Pallada, 1996), pp.51-59; K.V. Makarov, "K voprosu sootnesennosti islama I Irnaskogo nachial v mirovozhrenchiskikh ustanovkakh iamaam R.Khomenini, zatragivaiuschikh mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia," in *Imam Khomeini I dukhovnoe vozrozhdenie* (Moscow: IV RAN, 2000), pp. 76-83; Kliashitorina, pp.168-172, 187; Karsh (2002), pp.72-73; Georgii Mirskii, "Shiitskii Revansh," *NG. Religii*, no.3, February 18, 2009; Falunin, (2009), p.35.

<sup>49</sup> The Persian Cossack Brigade, an ancestor of the modern Iranian army, was a regular elite military unit established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the help of the Russian Imperial Army. Up to WWI it was the most effective Iranian military force. After the removal of the Qajar dynasty from power, Reza Shah (who started his service in the brigade as a junior officer), with British assistance, merged the brigade with other military units and turned it into the backbone of the new Iran's national army. P.N.Strelianov, *Kazaki v Persii, 1909-1918* (Moscow: Tcentropoligraf, 2007); O.A.Gokov, "Rossiiskie oficery I Persidskaia kazachia brigada," *Canadian American Slavic Studies*, , 2003, vol.37no.4. pp.395-414; Smirnov.

<sup>50</sup> K.Terenkov, "Modernizatsiia vooruzhennykh sil IRI I perspektivy Irano-Rossiskogo voenno-tekhnicheskogo sotrudnichestva," in *Analiticheskie zapiski*, p.95; K.N.Smirnov, *Zapiski vospitatelia Persidskogo shakha* (Tel Aviv: IVRUS, 2002); Ter-Oganov; Krasniak; A.A. Trofimov, "Voennotekhnicheskoe sotrudnichestvo Islamskoi respubliki Iran s zarubezhnimi stranami," in *Analiticheskie zapiski*, p.117. During the war, while IRGC and Basij pushed in the direction of improvisational attacks driven by strategic emotions or guerilla style warfare, Artesh sought thorough planning and execution of combined arms maneuver warfare according to the principles of conventional tactics and operational art. Kam (2004), pp.93-94

institutional revolutionary values went hand in hand with non-orthodox military tactics. Given its irregular professional origins and early operational history, it cultivated personal bravery, improvisational initiative, tactical ingenuity, and high moral based on religious zeal. It believed these factors as compensated for the superior professionalism, firepower, and weaponry of its enemies' regular armies. Technologically inferior but spiritually dominant, the IRGC felt that it could overpower better equipped and trained, but lower morale, professional regular forces. Due to this organizational culture, even when the IRGC was institutionalized it was still disinclined to adopt a formal hierarchy and the architecture of command and control of a professional regular force. To be sure, combat experience from the Iran-Iraq War inclined it to adopt more professional skills and value more highly the efficiency of modern military technology. However, in its professional self-conception the IRGC never divorced itself totally from its legacy of insurgency.<sup>51</sup>

In the course of the Iran-Iraq War, professional isomorphism, or the mutual influences of and emulation of successful practices by the Artesh and the IRGC pushed the cultures of the two organizations closer to each other. Since the late 1980s, the Iranian political leadership has been trying to blur the boundaries between the respective operational approaches of the two organizations and to merge them into an operationally and ideologically homogeneous military force. Some convergence is apparent: The IRGC has emphasized a professional military side and distanced itself from representing only a guerilla type of force, while the Artesh has acquired the status of a legitimate and reliable force loyal to the ideas of the revolution.<sup>52</sup> Also, the introduction of general conscription blurred the division between the middle-class, urban Artesh, on the one hand, and the low-class, rural IRGC on the other. The IRGC, which sees itself as a professional military organization, seeks to engage "serious" enemies, as is appropriate to its professional self-image. Consequently, it tends to delegate policing and internal security functions to the Basij or Internal Security Service.<sup>53</sup> However, despite such compatibility, the author estimates that competitive professional relations and significant tensions between the Artesh and the IRGC still exist, and the duplicative structure of the armed forces will prove counter-productive for developing overall military capacity.

---

<sup>51</sup> This organizational phenomenon is not unique; the exact tendencies of cultivating "compensatory asymmetry" can be observed in the Red Army during the post-revolutionary Civil War or the Israeli paramilitary *Palmach* during the War of Independence and after the establishment of the IDF. Kam (2004), pp.93-94; KliashTORina, pp.168-172, 187; Genadii Falunin, "Irak-Iran: posledniia klassicheskaia voina XX veka," *NVO*, no. 36, October 10, 2008; Valerii Sumarokov, "Zabytaia voina," *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaia oborona*, no.4, 2008, pp.98-104

<sup>52</sup> The guards turned away from improvised, frontal assaults and adapted more cautious, planned and professional approaches to warfare with combined arms maneuver operations and acknowledged thorough operational planning as a prerequisite to strategic objectives. Although during the war the IRGC was more committed to suicidal offensives while Artesh was inclined to winning by carefully planned defense and counter-offensives, it is difficult to say to what extent Artesh is more risk-averse when compared to the risk-prone IRGC, due to the different organizational cultures.

<sup>53</sup> Kam (2004), pp.92-95; Valerii Eremeev, "Zabytaia voina," *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaia oborona*, no.4, 2007, pp.76-83; Ermakov in Kozhokina, pp.104-107, 110, 120-121

## TENSIONS: THE ARTESH VS. THE IRGC

There are additional sources of tension between the IRGC and the Artesh.

One source of tension is economic: The IRGC benefits from huge revenues from Iran's transportation and oil industries and often serves as a business contractor for government projects. Compared to the Artesh, the IRGC's accumulation of significant political, military, economic, financial, and technological power enables it to pay higher salaries to its senior ranks, to have better access to funds and resources, and to exert stronger bureaucratic influence.<sup>54</sup>

The war produced a new generation of fighting officers in Artesh, who reached high ranking positions and see themselves as loyal to the regime and not as the "Shah's army." It is staffed with a lot of IRGC and war veterans, who see themselves as professionally equal and want to play the same role as the IRGC. Their perception of a neglectful and arrogant attitude on the part of the IRGC is an irritant, as these Artesh personnel believe that they have cause to claim more power and authority.<sup>55</sup>

The IRGC possesses exclusive authority over most strategic capabilities including weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and surface-to-surface missiles, and prevents any transfer of these capabilities to the Artesh; a situation that aggravates the Artesh for purely professional reasons.<sup>56</sup> The Artesh has its own "missile legacy," which probably increases its frustration with the current situation.<sup>57</sup> Although the Artesh has responsibility for some missile and chemical (defensive/offensive) means and special forces – three pivots of the Iranian theory of victory – the IRGC has an upper hand in R&D, production, procurement, and deployment of these tools of

---

<sup>54</sup> V.I.Mesamed, "Korpus strazhei islamskoi revoliucii: sochetaniia fanatizma I pragmatizma," *IBV*, 27.08.07; "Problema osvobodheniia Britanskikh voenosluzhashih," *IIBV*, 10.04.2007; M.Varatanian, "Korpus strazhei isalmskoi revoliucii obnavliaet strategiu," *IIBV*; "Ostavka goda v Irane: KSIR meniaet rukovoditelia," *IBV*, 03.09.2007. Low officer's rotation across different geographic regions, stimulates the connection between the officers and the local business enterprises, cultivates protectionism and diminishes combat readiness and effectiveness. Minasian (2004).

<sup>55</sup> Minasian, 2004; Kam, p.94. Iranian conduct in the Iran-Iraq conflict, and "guerilla war on water" demonstrated such characteristics as wise operational decision making under fire, flexibility, aptitude for operational and tactical creativity, innovative improvisation, quick learning through fighting, stamina, endurance and rapidly recovering from losses and damage. Although the Iran Iraq war is definitely a formative experience for the senior leadership, one should remember that military forces and security apparatus today consist of the peers, children and grandchildren of this war. It is difficult to say to what extent mid level and junior officer corps will demonstrate the same abilities today. Arasli, p.20; Iu.Romanov, "Boevye mili neizvestnoi voiny," *Boevaia vakhta*, 2003, no.38; Iu.U. Pivovarov and O.A. Perov, "Armeiskaia aviatciia v voynakh I vooruzhennykh kinfliktah sovremmensoti," *ViZh*, No.1.

<sup>56</sup> Sergei Minasian, "Rossiia I Iran, evoliuciia voenneo tekhnicheskogo sotrudnichestva," *Tzentral'naia Azia I Kazvkaz*, 10.31.2003

<sup>57</sup> When the first missile capabilities (Iran-130) were introduced during the war, it was Artesh who operated them against South Iraq in 1988. The second family of assets, Shahin-1 and Shahin-2 (40 km range, 190 kg warheads) and later Niziat-10 was also introduced to the AF of the regular army between 1989 and 1993. Later, the family of Fajr missiles was introduced to the ground forces of the regular army. Kam, pp.144-146

war. The fact that the Artesh does not possess some of the main assets of a future war is, in the author's judgment, the source of serious professional jealousy. The fact that the IRGC benefits from more modern and advanced military procurement and the best pool of recruits exacerbates organizational antagonism.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to controlling most of the Iranian strategic assets and capabilities on which unconventional asymmetrical warfare is based – e.g., naval assets, SSMs, WMD, and links to terrorist proxies – the IRGC monopolizes the conceptual development of this theory of victory. Excluding the regular army from asymmetrical warfare, the IRGC marginalizes the role of the Artesh in a future war. The fact that the IRGC houses the center for the development of strategy – an intellectual center of gravity of military science – and also that it controlled previous military think tanks, including the Academy of Defense and Strategy, probably irritates the Artesh, which assigns great importance to formal military theory and doctrine development. This situation is paradoxical since the IRGC develops the doctrine and possesses operational capabilities to execute it, while overall military doctrine and strategic planning are designed by the joint GS of the Armed Forces.<sup>59</sup> Also, it is not clear to what extent the training of the Artesh and the IRGC are conducted under the same doctrinal guidance and in the framework of common joint, combined arms exercises and military maneuvers.<sup>60</sup> In theory, in addition to the ability to conduct combined arms operations with other corps within their own administrative boundaries, the Artesh and the IRGC are expected to fight jointly with each other's corps.<sup>61</sup>

In addition to professional tension with the Artesh, the IRGC experiences additional friction with political commissars. The IRGC might be bureaucratically insulted to be staffed with the Imam's representatives, which it probably sees as necessary only for the unreliable Artesh. Clerical commissars most likely encounter obstacles to their efforts to exercise authority inside the IRGC, which seems to be an autonomous guardian of the revolution – a dynamic similar to the relationship between Party representatives and senior KGB officers in the USSR. The IRGC perceives itself as an autonomous revolutionary partner rather than an object for control.<sup>62</sup>

The author estimates that the introduction of an asset such as a nuclear weapon is likely to increase the above-mentioned tensions. Today, the IRGC's discretion over WMD and other strategic capabilities is associated with elitism and exclusivity. In the future, the body that exercises custody over Iran's nuclear assets will be seen even more so as distinguishing itself from bureaucratic competitors and acquiring the status of "primus inter pares." The new asset

---

<sup>58</sup> Kam, p.94; Minasian (2004)

<sup>59</sup> Arasli, pp.17, 22. Sazhin.

<sup>60</sup> It is known however, that Artesh and IRGC have separate programs of professional education and for the first time undergo joint professional military education only at the level of the senior commanders for brigade–corpus. V.Sazhin, "Sistema komplektovaniia I prohozheniia sluzhby v vooruzhennukh silakh Irana," *ZVO*, 03.01.2000.

<sup>61</sup> Ermakov in Kozhokina, pp.104-107, 110, 120-121; Kam (2004), pp.94-95

<sup>62</sup> Ali Alfoneh, "The Revolutionary Guards' Role in Iranian Politics," *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall, 2008, pp.3-14.

would not only constitute a tool for exercising bureaucratic influence but also stand as a symbol of professional competence. The author judges that both the Artesh and the IRGC will desire to control Iran's nuclear capability not only for reasons of political influence but also because of pure professional ambitions. Both of the two will regard themselves as the most appropriate professional organization to develop doctrine and a concept of operations for the new capability. Given Iranian organizational culture, the author believes that the leadership might encourage this kind of competitive dynamic. In keeping with its style of strategic management, the leadership might avoid concentrating all its strategic-operational military assets -- SSM, naval asymmetrical assets, chemical and biological weapons, and the nuclear capability -- in the hands of a single body, even one as loyal as the IRGC, preferring to disseminate it to several organizations.

## FORMATIVE STRATEGIC EXPERIENCES

The Iran-Iraq War probably encapsulates the strongest traumatic and formative experiences during the thirty years of the regime. The sense of strategic helplessness during the war became a "never again event," which affected the Iranian strategic psyche in a manner analogous to the way in which the Great Patriotic War and the Yom Kippur War shaped the Soviet and Israeli strategic mentalities, respectively.<sup>63</sup> The strongest formative experience of modern Iran was a total war in which counter-value attacks (five "wars of cities"<sup>64</sup>), the use of chemical weapons, and SSM strikes were not isolated episodes in the overall fighting but an integral part of the war experience.<sup>65</sup> Thus, "totality" of war is not something extraordinary in the Iranian military modus operandi.

The indifferent reaction of the international community to Iraq's use of WMD and strategic bombings deeply frustrated the Iranian leadership and supported conspiracy theories generated by the siege mentality of the Persian psyche. Tehran interpreted the passivity of the international community as an act of discrimination and attributed its double standards to a traditional anti-Iranian bias.<sup>66</sup> The sense of abandonment by the international community produced an acute need for total self-reliance. This traumatic experience encouraged Iran to acquire offensive chemical and biological agents and find a means of delivering them to offset the Iraqi capability.<sup>67</sup> After the war, Tehran concluded that there was no effective alternative to acquiring the WMD capability, which would serve as an ultimate strategic deterrent against any kind of future disasters.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> V.I.Sazhin, "Islamskaia revoliuciia prodolzhaetsia," *IBV*, 11.02.09; Kam (2004), 27

<sup>64</sup> One in 1984, one in 1985, two in 1987 and the last one in 1988.

<sup>65</sup> Karsh in Karsh, Navias and Sabin, p.43-46; Kam (2004), p.27; Andrei Frolov, "Iran: dlia chego emu rakety?" *Index bezopasnosti*, no.2 (82), pp.56-57

<sup>66</sup> Iran considered Iraqi strikes as the crimes against humanity.

<sup>67</sup> The aim was to be able to retaliate and thus deter, both in terms of weapons and means of delivery (the SCUDs acquired from Libya and used against Baghdad in 1985).

<sup>68</sup> Melman and Javedanfar, pp.18, 97, 183-4; E.A.Orlov, "Irano-Irakskaia voina 1980-1988 gg I pozitci SSSR, SShA I OON," in N.M.Mamedova, *Islamskaia revoliuciia v Irane: proshloe, nastoiashchee*,



The traumatic experience of six years of chemical<sup>69</sup> and missiles attacks was a key factor that accelerated Iranian chemical, biological and missile programs and also the Iranian nuclear project.<sup>70</sup> The first three years of missile attacks did not produce any change in the Iranian perception of the role of missiles in war.<sup>71</sup> The tipping point was in 1985, when about 82 Scuds were fired. The reaction was to purchase Scuds from Libya<sup>72</sup> and to start domestic production of ballistic missiles. The IRGC conducted the first launches on Baghdad in 1985. In the following years Iran continued to launch missile strikes over Iraq.<sup>73</sup> Most were ineffective, as they hit the open areas in or outside Baghdad. The second tipping point was during the war of the cities in 1988, when Iraqis launched the advanced version of Scud Al-Hussein within a range of 600 km. In March-April 1988, Tehran was surprised and shocked when Iraq launched 200 Scuds on Tehran, Isfahan and Qom, killing 2000, leaving 8000 wounded, and causing one million residents of Tehran to leave the city. During the 52 days of the 1988 “war of cities” Iran retaliated with 77 missiles (61 on Baghdad and nine on Mosul). The effect was minimal and for every Iranian missile, the Iraqis launched three to four missiles.<sup>74</sup>

Under the Ashurai culture of martyrdom, described in more detail in the following sections, Tehran tolerated the losses of about 5,000 soldiers killed by chemical weapons. Its main fear was that this capability would be used against Iranian civilian populations, especially after Baghdad used chemical weapons against Kurdish villages in 1987-8. Overall, the impact of chemical weaponry and bombing of the cities was more psychological than physical. These strikes demonstrated to Iran the absence of any effective Iranian or international deterrent to Iraqi use of WMD. Tehran decided to initiate its own chemical and biological programs and means of delivery, which would provide it with deterrent strategic capabilities and also operational tools of war.<sup>75</sup> Since then Tehran has become obsessed with producing an ultimate retaliatory capability, which could deter effectively and then punish mercilessly if deterrence were to fail.<sup>76</sup>

Iran has announced its intention several times to produce chemical weapons, in order to boost the national spirits and deter the aggressors, but officially it has refuted any intention to initiate their use.<sup>77</sup> After the introduction of these capabilities the Iranian security posture has preserved its

---

*budushee* (Moscow: IV RAN, 1999), pp.110-129; Kam (2004), pp.42, 52-56, 129, 235; Sarukhanian, (2005), p.15.

<sup>69</sup> This included mortar rounds of tear gas [1982], shells and bombs with mustard gas [1983], bombs with tabun nerve gas [1984] and artillery rockets with sarin nerve gas [1987]. Shoham, p.113

<sup>70</sup> Sarukhanian, (2005), p.15; Kam (2004), p.41

<sup>71</sup> Iran was attacked by three Scuds in 1982, thirty three Scuds in 1983 and twenty four Scuds in 1984.

<sup>72</sup> The first 30 Scud-B missiles and two launchers, which arrived in 1985.

<sup>73</sup> Fourteen missiles in 1985, eight in 1986, and eighteen in 1987.

<sup>74</sup> During the whole IIW, Iran launched about 120 missiles and Iraq 516 missiles. Kam (2004), pp.146-148

<sup>75</sup> Kam (2004), pp.233-239. In 1985 Iran launched a number of artillery barrages with chemical warheads captured from Iraq.

<sup>76</sup> Kam (2004), pp.56-57

<sup>77</sup> Kam (2004), p.237. Ronen Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran* (New York: Free Press, 2007), p.304

defensive orientation, but Iran also became more strategically assertive. Judging by analogy, the author believes that the same might be true about the nuclear capability. Hence, it might be that after the introduction of the nuclear capability Iran's security posture might shift in a more offensive/assertive direction.

## **SENSITIVITY TO COUNTER-VALUE DAMAGE**

Although, one might expect a low sensitivity to casualties in such a martyrdom-seeking culture, the Iranian insensitivities to casualties is apparent primarily with regard to battlefield casualties, and is not apparent in the call of civilian casualties in cities. Tehran demonstrated during the war over-sensitivity to counter-value damage. In terms of the impact on Iranian moral, the Iraqi SSM escalation of 1988 was not an ultimate reason for the cease fire, but the final factor that together with aerial bombings against strategic and population targets and the fear of the counter-value use of chemical weapons outweighed the fighting zeal and contributed to the Iranian decision to accept the cease-fire.<sup>78</sup> The psychological impact of the battlefield damage was not so high; Potential Iraqi conventional and unconventional escalation against the civilian population had the stronger influence. These fears severely damaged the moral of the population and increased the sense of helplessness of the decision-makers. This sense of vulnerability would be the main driving force for the decision to initiate the missile program.<sup>79</sup>

The leadership was more sensitive to potential counter-value threats (even conventional ones) than to Iraq's actual counter-force strikes (even unconventional ones). Unnerved as they were by the chemical counter-force demonstration, the prospect of such an option being applied in a counter-value manner scared them more. The erosion and collapse of Iranian national moral, which turned into a widespread panic and a mass exodus of Tehran residents together with a mass escape of a million refugees from the western and north-western regions, led to Khomeini's decision to stop fighting.<sup>80</sup> The regime of the ayatollahs was a "regime of the cities" that attached the highest importance to counter-value defense and was exceptionally sensitive to urban support.<sup>81</sup> Traditionally, in Persian political culture "streets" and "cities" play a central role in civil protest and regime change.<sup>82</sup> This explains the sensitivity to the "counter-value" strikes, especially those that could potentially ignite collective urban protests.

---

<sup>78</sup> Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: the KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), p.192; Karsh in Karsh, Navias and Sabin, pp.44-47

<sup>79</sup> Kam (2004), p.148

<sup>80</sup> Karsh in Karsh, Navias and Sabin, p.42

<sup>81</sup> Aliev, p.511 Gambash, Bistrov and Sofer, pp. 79-95; Andrei Pochtarev, "Srazhaiuschiisia Vavilon," *KZ*, 23.04.2003 and 24.05.2003; Genadii Faulin, "Iran-Irak: posledniiia kalsicheskaia voia," *NVO*, 10.10.2008; A.A.Aliev, *Iran vs. Irak: istoriia I sovremennost'* (Moscow: Moskovskii Universitet, 2002); Karsh in Karsh, Navias and Sabin, p.43-46; David Menashri, *Iran be mahpekha* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz ha meuhad,1988), pp.232-241.

<sup>82</sup> Melman and Javedanfar, p.18; Lubrani in Melman (2006).

Iran also demonstrated a clear preference for counter-value targeting and anticipated high gains from it. Iranian strategy during the “war of the cities” was characterized by intentional counter-value launches over Iraqi cities in order to deter Iraqis from launching missiles on Iranian cities and industrial infrastructure. Tehran used missiles not only to deter, but also to deescalate, coerce, and compel.<sup>83</sup> This was aimed at achieving the main goal of Iranian military doctrine: to deter potential aggression by presenting the threat of the maximum retaliatory price, including the possibility of using WMD.<sup>84</sup> At the same time, Iran refrained from bringing counter-value escalations to possible extremes, differentiated between pure economic or infrastructure targets and populations centers, and was also more restrained than Iraq in other regards, especially when confronted itself with the possibility of strategic retaliation.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Frolov, p.57

<sup>84</sup> Frolov, p.69

<sup>85</sup> Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military Analysis* (London: Adelphi Papers, 1987), pp.37-38.



# THE MAIN MOTIFS OF THE IRANIAN STRATEGIC NARRATIVE

## SIEGE MENTALITY

The Shia ethos of oppression multiplied by Iran's traumatic experiences in the imperial era created a deep-rooted sense of suspicion about external plots and almost a paranoid fixation on conspiracy theories. Common Iranian wisdom attributes any national misfortune to the hostile hands of foreign powers. According to the national narrative, Persia was constantly plotted against; Western powers for generations exploited Iranian natural resources and its geo-strategic location to their own benefit, and thus continuously humiliated Persian national pride.<sup>86</sup>

For Shiites, as the persecuted minority at the bottom of the social hierarchy of all the countries of the caliphate, the Ottoman Empire, and the Moghul Empire, the tradition of suffering is connected to a belief in the rightness of their way and a sense of superiority. In the Persian national psyche, a siege motif is accompanied by a self-perception of Iran as a great empire, and a certain cultural arrogance. A siege mentality is also connected with the sense of resistance to foreign influence and preservation of cultural-religious uniqueness and elitism. The Persian national psychology is the conglomerate of hegemonic imperial nationalism and self perception as elite. A siege mentality accelerates security paranoia but at the same time, persecution produces a sense of being a chosen people. Historically, Shia Persia cultivated a religious and cultural distinction from other Arab Sunni states of the region. Persecution distinguishes them from the Sunnis and barbarian infidels, so that pride in cultural uniqueness is a pivotal motif in the Persian narrative.<sup>87</sup>

Iran traditionally has a bastion mentality and sees itself encircled by the enemies. One traditional phobia is Russia and its expansion toward the south. Historically, most Iranian territory that has been lost to foreigners was taken by the Russians. The second traditional phobia is Iraq. The longest-lasting rivalry in Persian history, it encapsulates the religious clash between the Sunni-

---

<sup>86</sup> Part of the modern Iranian intellectual tradition presents mimicking the West (*Gharbzadegi*) as the source of most of the country's misfortunes and abuses. Artesh's professionalism was often equated with the modernization by the Pehlevi dynasty as imposing foreign influence contradictory to traditional values of Persia Islam. Melman and Javedanfar, p. 226; Sarukhanian (2007), pp.76-77; L.V. Shebarshin, "Rossiia ne voiuet s Islamom," *NVO*, 29.10.1999; Z.A. Arabadzhian, *Iran: protivostoianie imperiiam, 1918-1941* (Moscow: IV RAN, 1996); M.Kamenova, "Iran v regione: problema vyzhyvaniia," in N.M. Mamedova and M.Imanipur, *Rol' I mesto Irana v regione* (Moscow: IV RAN, 2007), pp.17-29; Abbas Manuchikhi, *Politicheskaiia sistema Irana* (Sankt-Peterburg: Iranika, 2007), pp.142-180; Kam (2004), p.42; Kliashatorina, pp.15-65; Shebarshin, pp.164-165.

<sup>87</sup> Vladimir Sazhin, "Maiatnik Iranskoi demokratii," *Rossiia v global'moi politike*, no.4, 08.31. 2005; Mamedova (2006); Ermakov in Kozhokina, p.90 Falunin, (2009), p. 35; Georgii Mirskii, "Islamskii fundamentalism, sunnity I shiity," *Mirovaia ekonomika I mmezhdunarodnye otnosheniia*, no.9, Septemebri 2008, p.4.; S.L.Agaev, *Germanskii Imperialism v Irane* (Moscow: Nauka, 1969); B.P.Balaian, *Diplomaticheskaiia istoriia Russko-Iranskikh vojn I prisoedinenie Vostochnoi Armenii k Rossii* (Erevan: Izdatel'stvo AN Armianskoi SSSR, 1988).

Shia worlds and a cultural clash between the Semitic and Persian-Arian civilization, and also has clear territorial dimensions. Following the Iranian revolution, the American threat was added to these two traditional phobias, and overshadowed them. The American threat brings to the surface most of the traumatic associations of the siege mentality raised by the motif of foreign intervention.<sup>88</sup>

The Persian-Shia historical legacy produced a tendency to pursue Iranian interests regardless of external tensions and prosecutions, which can explain their stubbornness in the nuclear field.<sup>89</sup> Persecution of Iran by the international community in the nuclear field is seen as an extension of this trend. The stubborn need to struggle for its right to possess nuclear capabilities asserts national exceptionality. Iran seeks a nuclear capability, which would elicit respect from the outside world and produce a deterrent effect in order to overcome the complex of victimization.

The author further infers from the studies that a siege-elitist mentality with a long historical memory and a hegemonic vision of its own glorious future might create a perception of reality which is less logical-analytical and more associative-holistic. Iranians might interpret concrete current events through the lens of past associations and connect them to messianic future visions. It seems to the author that a siege mentality might condition Iranian intelligence analysis, especially at the time of nuclear strategic interactions. Influenced by the inclination to accept conspiracy explanations, Iranian analysts might connect unrelated events instead of producing a straightforward explanation, and thus draw incorrect conclusions. The fundamental distrust, produced by a siege mentality and traumatic formative experiences, will make it difficult to reassure Iran that bargains offered in good faith meant what they said. Negotiations might be seen as a trick to deprive Iran of its only real deterrence capability and “paranoid perceptions of the adversary’s intentions might lead to irrational decisions during times of crises.”<sup>90</sup>

“Strong mutual mistrust, a basic feature of Middle Eastern political culture, creates a psychological environment that is conducive to rigidity and inflexibility.”<sup>91</sup> Conspiracy and siege mentality might be connected to feelings of distrust which often underlie social and professional interactions in Iran, and eventually produces a climate of “spymania.”<sup>92</sup> This might explain the

---

<sup>88</sup> Kam, pp.37-43.

<sup>89</sup> Vladimir Sazhin, “Maiatnik Iranskoi demokratii,” *Rossia v global’noi politike*, no.4, 08.31. 2005; Mamedova (2006);

<sup>90</sup> Evron in Kam, 2008, p.54

<sup>91</sup> Inbar (2006), p.91

<sup>92</sup> V.Mesamed, “Shpionomaniia v Irane,” *IIBV*, 06.12.2008; The Iranian excellence of counterespionage and secret police dates back to the times of the Shah when SAVAK benefited from the experience of the American and Israeli intelligence communities. Later on, SAVAK built on SAVAK’s heritage, exactly like the Soviet *ChK* had emulated the culture of the Imperial *Okhranka* and benefited from its *modus operandi*. Vladimir Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB: Myth and Reality* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1990), pp.207-208, 268-271; Melman and Javedanfar, pp. 79-80,162-163; Eliezer Tsafir, *Satan gadil, satan katan: mahapekha ve milut be Iran* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Maariv, 2002), pp. 6-40; Jakob Nimrodi, *Masa khaiai* (Tel Aviv: Maariv, 2003); Meir Ezri, *Mi bekhem mikol amo* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Maariv, 2001); Minasian (2004).

duplication in the intelligence community and the overlapping of mutual espionage which was described in the previous sections.

## **RATIONALITY-IRRATIONALITY**

There is no clear cut consensus about the level of Iranian rationality. Although several experts see Iran as an irrational actor that embodies radical jihadist intentions with WMD capabilities and missile means of delivery,<sup>93</sup> Iranian strategic history has examples of both “signs of caution” and examples of “strategic adventurism.”<sup>94</sup> Despite religious fanaticism, Iranian decision-makers have demonstrated sensitivity to the effects of the use of decisive military force. The most commonly cited instances of Iranian pragmatism came in the wake of impressive displays of force in Iran’s immediate vicinity.<sup>95</sup>

Despite the significant place that the Ashurai motif (see in the following sections) occupies in the Iranian strategic culture, most sources, both Russian and Israeli, attribute to the Iranian political elite a high degree of rationality and a non-suicidal inclination. Although the leadership encouraged “human waves” and “human de-mining” (Ashurai motif), when it came to the massive casualties during the war of the cities, the leadership opted for a cease-fire. When it came to counter-value threats, Tehran was ready to make religious-ideological concessions.<sup>96</sup>

Shia rationalism is based on a deep faith in the rightness of their course. They are fanatics only in the sense that in their system of moral values their beliefs and ideology stand higher than their life. In other words, they were ready to risk and sacrifice their lives for the sake of their beliefs – something that can be observed among the subjects of both totalitarian and democratic regimes. Most of the participants of “human-waves” and “human de-mining” were driven by the feeling of patriotism – a simultaneous appeal to national and religious sentiments, not just dogmatic religious fanaticism and the cult of death.<sup>97</sup> When it became the question of their own survival and that of the regime, the clerics quickly accepted to the basic logic of rationality<sup>98</sup> and pragmatism.<sup>99</sup> Despite fanaticism, radicalism, messianic orientation and readiness to pay heavy

---

<sup>93</sup> Shoham, p.101

<sup>94</sup> Rubin, (Sept.2006), pp.150-151

<sup>95</sup> Arasli, p.20; Nathan Thrall, “How the Reagan Administration Taught Iran the Wrong Lessons,” *MERIA*, vol.11, no.4, (December, 2007), pp.21-22

<sup>96</sup> E.E.Kirsanov, “Iran: fanatiki ili realnye politiki,” *IIBV*, 22.05.2009. A.Z. Arabadzian, *Rezenziiai na knigu E.Abrahamian Khomeinism; Ocherki Islamskoi Respubliki* (Moscow: RAN, 1997),pp.21-22; Aliev, p.513

<sup>97</sup> Shebarshin, p.166; Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988* (London: Osprey Publishing, 2002), pp.64, 72-74

<sup>98</sup> “Hafantazia va Irant shel Moshe Yalaon,” *Haaretz*, 11.06.2009

<sup>99</sup> A.K.Konstantinov, “Iran v geopoliticheskom treugolniki Rossiia, Evropa SSha,” *Blizhnii Vostok I sovremennost'*, no.33, 2007

prices in military campaigns, some experts are doubtful that the regime would sacrifice its own existence and the lives of millions of Iranians for any reason.<sup>100</sup>

Experts suggest that we should judge Iranian rationality by the ability to maximize its ability to reach its goals by the minimum means and not by normative analysis of the appropriateness of their goals. Iran generates the most strategic utility in the nuclear context from its dissimulation activities and negotiation style.<sup>101</sup> Tehran's calculated management of the uranium enrichment strategy and its aspirations to become the leader of global Islam suggest that Iran is pragmatic and rational, although radical and fanatical and that it is thus presumably deterrable. Iran could thus be considered to have a rational leadership with a radical worldview.<sup>102</sup> With regards to the nuclear question, Iranian strategists and decision-makers are driven primarily by considerations of national security and are ready to compromise their messianic world view.<sup>103</sup>

Experts define Iranian foreign and defense policy as pragmatic overall.<sup>104</sup> In most cases of Iranian decision-making, religious dogmas have conformed to the necessities of reality.<sup>105</sup> Menashri argues that Iranian post-revolutionary policy incrementally disengaged from a dogmatic inclination, recognized the limits of its power and in subsequent decades was often pragmatically unprincipled and fluctuated with changes in Tehran's interests. Its foreign policy course is not driven by purely theological considerations but involves a high degree of *realpolitik*. With few exceptions, "whenever ideological revolutionary convictions clashed with the interest of the state, Iran's state interests ultimately triumphed, and forced change in its actual policy." In reaction to marginalization and isolation, Iran opted for escalatory rhetoric and behavior to let others understand that she was a country to be reckoned with, and that its pragmatism should not be taken for granted.<sup>106</sup> The desire to reach its political goals and to make progress (in whatever field) moderated the initial revolutionary zeal and made ayatollahs into fundamentalists and modernists simultaneously.<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> Kam, (2007), pp. 9, 77; Evron in Kam, 2008, p.52

<sup>101</sup> Ascuali in Kam, 2008, pp.29-30

<sup>102</sup> Uzi Rubin, "Missile Defense and Israel's Deterrence against a Nuclear Iran," in Kam, 2008, pp.70-71

<sup>103</sup> Sarukhanian, (2005), p.21

<sup>104</sup> Falunin (2009), p.36

<sup>105</sup> A.B.Podcerob, "Islamskii faktro I process priniatiia vneshnepoliticheskikh reshenii," *IBV*, 07.12.2007.

<sup>106</sup> David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), pp.236, 281,28, 296; *Revolution at a Crossroads: Iran's Domestic Politics and Regional Ambitions* (Washington: Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy, 1997), p.83; *Iran: bein islam le maarav* (Tel Aviv: Misrad ha Bitakhon, 1996); *Dat ve medina be mizrakh ha tikhon* (Tel Aviv: Ha kibutz ha meuhad, 2006), p.161.

<sup>107</sup> I.V. Kudraishova, "Islamskaia Tzivilizatsionnaia dominant I politicheskaia modernizatsija na Blizhnem I Srednem Vostoke v sravnitel'noi perspective," in A.D.Voskresenskii, *Politicheskie sistemy I politicheskie kul'tury Vostoka* (Moscow: Vostok-Zapad, 2007),pp.358-359; The approach of the clerical decision makers and *rahbar* to questions of internal ethnic politics also demonstrates the same readiness to make compromises and opt for pragmatic solutions. O.I.Zhigalina, "Etnokul'turnaia konfliktnost' v



One should consider that, being reasonable and rational, Iranian players measure the costs and benefits, of actions on the basis of a set of values, which might be different from Western standards.<sup>108</sup> Messianic emotions might, however, shape the interpretation of the realities of the moment.<sup>109</sup> In pressing crisis situations, the calculi of strategic considerations acquire a totally different flavor. In the heated atmosphere of crises, factors like national and personal pride and shared panic have played prominent roles, tending to cloud rational judgment and to push leaders toward dangerous threshold policies.<sup>110</sup> Many of the Middle Eastern “rational” leaders, with sensitivity to risks and costs different from the Western ones, have tended to engage in brinkmanship, which lead to miscalculations. Iran may be rational, but does have a distinct strategic culture and lacks open lines of communication to its enemies, and diplomatic skills.<sup>111</sup> In potential nuclear crises, this may have serious consequences.

On the one hand, there are reasons to assume that Iran can approach nuclear interactions as a pragmatic and rational actor. At the same time, messianic inclinations may produce strategic emotions which will foment a radical interpretation of the moment. Also, the use of the nuclear capability by the fanatical group, of course, cannot be ruled out.<sup>112</sup>

## TAQIYYA

Under centuries of political oppression, religious persecution and foreign usurpation the Shia and Persian strategic personality developed the norm of hiding one’s true face and intentions through dissimulation. Since the times of *Fitna*, when the Shia faction of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates turned into a persecuted minority, the concept of *taqiyya* (dissimulation) became a main strategy for religious, political and physical survival. *Taqiyya* stands for the religiously sanctioned practice of dissimulation or concealment of the believer’s faith at moments of imminent danger – for example, pretending to be Sunni, but maintaining a Shia identity in a clandestine manner. Incrementally, this practice of adopting a religious camouflage for the sake of survival migrated to the broader Shia-Persian political culture, making deception and dissimulation traits in the tradition and practice of internal and foreign policy.<sup>113</sup>

---

sovremennom Irane,” in A.D.Voskresenskii, *Konflikty na Vostoke: etnicheskie I konfessional’nye* (Moscow: Aspekt Press, 2008), pp.28-283

<sup>108</sup> Kam, 2007, p.50

<sup>109</sup> A.B.Podcerob, “Islamskii faktro I process priniatiia vneshnepoliticheskikh reshenii,” *IBV*, 07.12.2007.

<sup>110</sup> Rubin in Kam, 2008, p.73

<sup>111</sup> Efraim Inbar, “The Need to Block a Nuclear Iran,” *MERIA*, vol.10, no.1, (March, 2006), p.91

<sup>112</sup> Kam, 2007, p.50

<sup>113</sup> Andrei Mel’nikov, “Golub’ mira ili plamennyi revoliucioner,” *NG*, 16.07.2008; Introduction by A.V.Smirnov in Khamid al Din, *Uspokoenie razuma* (Moscow: Ladomir, 1995); R. B. Malysheva, “Ismaility,” *Voprosy Istorii*, vol. 28, no.2, 1977; Miroljub Evtych, “Politkorrektnost’ I Ekstremizm,” *Svobodnaia Mysl’*, no.7, August, 2006; Guy Bechor, “Khukei mizrakh ha tikhon,” 06.04.2007; <http://www.gplanet.co.il/>; Iran is well known not only for its military, but also for the deceptive

According to the Sharia regulations *taqiyya* is legitimate if it serves the divine cause or is practiced against apostates in times of war. In the latter case, it refers to what we would term today as CCD (camouflage, concealment and deception) but also to the stratagem and deceptive planning and execution of warfare.<sup>114</sup> Under the umbrella concept of *taqiyya*, the Shia-Persian tradition produced several deceptive stratagems which were widely used throughout Persian strategic history: *ketman* – public political concealment and camouflage, as practiced by dissidents<sup>115</sup>; *khuda*, *khadi'a*, *munafaka*, *makhida* – using camouflage, deception and decoy to reduce the enemy's situational awareness and *tanfiya* – employing the enemy's power against itself.<sup>116</sup> Persians excelled for ages at this art of dissimulation, in which traditions of *taqiyya* and *taarof* (see in the following section) mutually reinforce each other. Dissimulation also informs the current Iranian approach to strategy and diplomacy, particularly with regard to the pursuit of nuclear capabilities and concealing Iran's true intentions from the international community.<sup>117</sup>

Elaborating on their pre-Islamic political heritage, Persians created and introduced into the Muslim-Arab political tradition the genre of “Mirrors for Princes” – the literature which instructs rulers in the art of statecraft and strategy-making. Such didactic works for princes as *Qabus-nameh*, *Seyasat-nameh* or *Nasihah al-muluk*<sup>118</sup> discussed the arsenal of intrigues and repertoire of deceptive stratagems.<sup>119</sup> Persistence, hard work and bravery are respected, but advancement and achievements through intrigue or conspiracy are normatively appropriate as well. Intrigue and asymmetry can be found in both the Rostam military legacy and in Hussein's heroic narratives. Bravery and courage of the great warrior can normatively coexist with canny stratagem and retreat in favor of future operational advantages. Although a common view sees the Ashurai narrative as operationally risk-prone, tolerant to casualties and inclined to prefer martyrdom over surrender to the infidel, the ethos of the Iranian culture of war is also based on the tales of Ali and Hassan, who for the sake of the subsequent strategic benefits of the *ummah* made temporary concessions and let the enemy impose his will on them. Khomeini's decision “to drink the poison chalice” by accepting a cease-fire is the modern manifestation of this trend. Thus, concessions and even unfair peace can be justified even from the point of view of jurisprudence and tradition.

---

commercial activities. Emanuele Ottolenghi, “Iran's Deceptive Commercial Practices,” *BESA Perspective Papers on Current Affairs*, no.41, April, 15, 2008.

<sup>114</sup> For example, the concept of *hudna* (cease-fire) in that context is perceived only as an operational pause for regrouping and accumulating power toward the forthcoming engagement.

<sup>115</sup> Usually it is practiced under theocratic tyranny for the sake of keeping the real truth secret. For example, see the application of this Persian term to the political behavior of the dissident intellectuals in the Soviet-Stalinist Poland and Lithuania. Česlovas Milošas, *Pavergtas protas* (Vilnius: Vaga, 1995) (Lithuanian).

<sup>116</sup> Bechor; A.A. Ignatenko, “intriga v Arabo-Islamskoi Kul'ture Epokhi srednevekovii, po materialam kniazhih zertcal,” in L.S. Vasiliev, *Politicheskaia intriga na Vostoke* (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniia, 2000), pp. 109-127

<sup>117</sup> Melman and Javedanfar, pp.98-99, 105; V. Mesamed, “Iran gotov k pergovoram, no ne k kompromisam,” *IIBV*, 06.12.2008; Kam (2004), p.229; Bergman, pp.334-335; Grishin (2008), pp.75,77.

<sup>118</sup> T.Iu.Irmiiieva, *Istoriia musul'manskogo mira ot Khalifata do Blistatel'noi Porty* (Cheliabinsk: Ural-Kniga, 2000); I.R. Nasurova, *Abu Khamid al Gazali: Nastavlenie praviteliam* (Moscow: Izdatel'ski Dom Ansar, 2004).

<sup>119</sup> Ignatenko in Vasiliev, pp.103-144.

The heroes of Persian strategic folklore and fairy tales also defeat the much stronger forces of evil and enemies not by directly overpowering them but through smart planning, ingenuity and guile. Their theory of victory rests more on stratagem, which multiplies the impact of direct force, than on symmetrically overwhelming the enemy.<sup>120</sup> According to Leonid Shebarshin, the KGB resident in Iran (1976-1983) and also the last chief of the KGB in 1991, in the Iranian strategic culture, deception and multi-dimensional intrigue (stratagem) are not auxiliary means, but rather are the fundamental elements of the battle.<sup>121</sup>

Shebarshin is echoed by his colleague from the Israeli intelligence, who describes cheating as foundational and a “salient characteristic of Iran’s strategic philosophy.” Discussing Iranian management of chemical and biological programs, Dany Shoham praises the multidimensional camouflage used by Iran, utilizing a repertoire of political and diplomatic masking and concealment activities. Tehran knows how to generate maximum strategic benefits from the opaque image that it renders. Iran strikes an elegant balance between generating an image of innocence and obedience to non-proliferation norms, which prevents punitive action and buys time for further advancement of its programs. It also generates a high degree of strategic respect for Iran, and effective deterrence emanates from the implied possession of this capability.<sup>122</sup> According to the Israeli experts, Tehran handles the nuclear issue brilliantly by exploiting the “talk and build” strategy of exacting real concessions in return for fake concessions.<sup>123</sup>

## TAAROF AND PERSIAN NEGOTIATION CULTURE

The Shia concept of *taqyia* incrementally became interconnected with the Persian practice of *taarof*. Iranian political and broader culture prescribes concealment of opinion from strangers, unpredictability, and suspicion. A façade of courtesy and ritual public politeness, in fact, camouflages private thoughts and feelings which are revealed only in the very inner circles.<sup>124</sup> The Persian negotiation style is conditioned by the culture of the *bazaar*, where final agreements over deals are reached through bargaining. In the Iranian tradition, this prolonged maneuvering is also affected by the broader system of courtesy known as *taarof*, which involves camouflaging one’s real intentions with pleasantries. In communication style terminology, Iranians are a high context culture. Such insincere social courtesy as beating around the bush, being indirect but polite, utilizing symbolic and vague language, implying more than expressing and telling pacifying pleasantries to avoid conflict are ways of communicating according to the social practice of *taarof*. In structuring the message, poetic Iranian culture does not seek the pragmatic shortest way from one point to another. In normative terms, this does not mean to lie; it’s just to employ negotiation or social interaction techniques diametrically different from those used in the

---

<sup>120</sup> M.N. Osmanov, *Persidskie Narodnie Skazki* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Nauka, 1987); Vasiliev, pp.125-128; Melman and Javedanfar, pp.98-99;

<sup>121</sup> Shebarshin, p.176

<sup>122</sup> Dany Shoham, “Image vs. Reality of Iranian Chemical and Biological Weapons,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence*, vol.18, (2005),pp.89, 106,112, 119,130, 2005.

<sup>123</sup> Inbar (2006), p.87; Rubin (Sept. 2006), p.148

<sup>124</sup> Zonis, pp.199-298

diplomatic discourse of the Western low context cultures.<sup>125</sup> Several works from the “Mirrors for Princes” genre refer to the theory and practice of *amphibology* – a style of communication where the message is structured in an ambiguous manner so that it, on the one hand, does not violate social and religious norms but, on the other hand, totally deceives and takes advantage of the interlocutor.<sup>126</sup>

The author judges that the practice of *taarof* might also have serious implications for the internal Iranian nuclear decision-making process. The tendency not to report the truth to the authorities might result in the inclination to produce “intelligence to please” the superiors, so that eventually under the “conformist” reports about the state of affairs the top political leaders might not be fully informed about the real technological, scientific and strategic state of affairs. A gap might develop between the reality constructed for the top leadership by their bureaucratic entourage and the actual state of affairs.<sup>127</sup> Sources argue that the “oriental model of bureaucracy” contributes less to the effective work but is good in imitating and “staging” the activity, to create the impression of progress and success. This creates difficulty for the analysts to assess authoritatively the real military potential of missile capabilities and WMD.<sup>128</sup> The author suggests that this trait of Iranian strategic culture might increase the chances of such intelligence pathology as “intelligence to please.”

The conclusion that can be reached is that the culture of *taarof* and *taqiyya*, will create conditions in which it will be very difficult for foreign intelligence analysts to decide whether Iranian strategic players mean what they say and say what they mean. In addition to the subjective difficulty in assessing players’ veracity, there might be objective difficulties for Iranian decision-makers to assess where they are relative to their goals and aspirations, because reports which they get from their subordinates might be affected by the same *taarof* culture and thus do not represent the true reality.

According to the experts, exaggerations and full-scale bluffs<sup>129</sup> are common in Iranian strategic practice and serve at least three goals: (a) deterring the potential enemy; (b) demonstrating the

---

<sup>125</sup> A.A.Asgarian, “Osobennosti iazyka novostnykh progamm na Iranskom TV,” *Voprosy Filosofii*, no.1, vol.28, 2008; V. Panfilova, “Iran kak obraz zhizni,” *Ogonek*, no.15, April, 2006; Boris Paramonov, “Govorite prozoi,” *Radio Svoboda-Kul'tura*, 06.09.2006; Bechor; Melman and Javedanfar, pp.131-151; Vinogradov, p. 400; Fuad Mamedov, “Seredina endshpilia,” *Zerkalo*, no.90, May 23, 2009.

<sup>126</sup> Vasiliev, pp.124-126

<sup>127</sup> Saddam Hussein was getting conformist reports from his scientists, who reported that the nuclear track was advancing very well when it was not, since they were afraid to be killed. Melman and Javedanfar, p. 224; The Soviet ambassador to Iran and other senior Soviet diplomats reported on this kind of practice, which took place between the Shah and his staff and political advisers during the last year of the regime. V.M. Vinogradov, *Diplomatiia: Liudi I Sobitija iz zapisok posla* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1998), pp. 375-377, 384-385, 400.

<sup>128</sup> Sergei Minasian, “Iran na puti k iadernoi bombe? Analiz raketno-iadernoi programmy strany,” *Tsentral'naiia Azia I Kavkaz*, 06.30.2006; Safranchiuk (1998), p.28.

<sup>129</sup> For example: forged pictures of sunken Israeli ships, fake submarine missile tests, fake “footage” of an aircraft carrier, forged repetitions of the clip of the same missile test, decoying satellite imagery, etc.

reach of power to Iranian domestic and global Muslim audiences; and (c) concealing some operational capabilities in order to generate surprise on future battlefields.<sup>130</sup> Iran is constantly signaling and demonstrating its nuclear aspirations; showing a “high profile” during the exercises, demonstrating its missile launches and hinting about its maturing nuclear capabilities.<sup>131</sup> Similarly, official statistics conceal the real state of the economy in the country in order to magnify the achievements of the Islamic government in the field of economic development.<sup>132</sup> The inclination to exaggerate is directly related to the practice of *taqiyya* and constitutes an act of deception for the sake of deterrence. Iran wants to demonstrate its ability to retaliate and escalate a conflict and therefore shrouds its missile program in opacity and exaggerates its actual capabilities for the sake of deterrence. If foreigners lack confidence in their assessments of Iran, the result, in Iranian eyes, is the strengthening of the Iranian deterrent posture.<sup>133</sup> In several open publications Iranian political scientists discussed the Israeli practice of nuclear opacity as an effective approach to preserving deterrence without revealing their capabilities.<sup>134</sup>

Some experts argue that foreign intelligence communities will prepare for the worst case, and will estimate that Iran would make use of all of its arsenal – asymmetrical, conventional, missiles, terrorists and WMD (nuclear) – to hit back if attacked and might, in fact, set the entire region on fire.<sup>135</sup> If that is the case, the judgment of the author is that the Iranian strategy of deterrence through deception, bluffing, and opacity has succeeded. If deterrence fails and conflict begins, one might expect that in keeping with the *taqiyya* tradition Iran might opt for the strategy of “rational irrationality” and escalate for the sake of de-escalation, believing that its bluff will have a deterrent effect on its adversaries. However, its potential adversaries are educated in totally different strategic traditions, and therefore might assess this bluff as a real demonstration of radical goals and accordingly adopt preventive measures. At the same time, the author expects that at a time of strategic signaling genuine foreign offers might be interpreted according to Iran’s own yardstick. Iran thus might take genuine proposals to cooperate as fake and genuine threats as bluff.

## ESCALATIONS

Iranian determination to continue fighting during the Iran-Iraq War, when it achieved territorial status quo ante-bellum and paid an enormous price in casualties, was probably fueled by strategic

---

<sup>130</sup> Arasli, pp.26-27; Frolov, p.59

<sup>131</sup> Sergei Shakarianz, “Kto I kak blefuet vokrug iadernoi problem Irana,” *Severnyi Kavkaz*, 02.28.2008; Tal Inbar;

<sup>132</sup> Anatolii Alimov, “Voenno-promyshel’nyi potencial Irana,” *Iadernui kontrol’*, no.3, May-June, 2001, p.42

<sup>133</sup> Amin Taarzi, “The Role of WMD in Iranian Security Calculations: Dangers to Europe,” *MERIA*, vol.8, No.3 (Septemebr, 2004), pp.14-105

<sup>134</sup> Within the framework of these discussions he referred to the Israeli strategic behavior in the nuclear field in times of crises both in 1973 and 1991. Sergei Minasian, “Raketno-iadernaia programma Irana I problem regional’noi bezopastnosti,” *Tsentral’naia Aziia I Kavkaz*, no.4, 08.31.2003., p.11.

<sup>135</sup> Melman and Javedanfar, p.220

emotions and revolutionary fervor. Driven by what Israeli authors refer to as strategic emotions, Iran was locked in an uncontrolled escalation that was disproportionate to its original vision of war goals. Only disproportionate escalation by the other side de-escalated the conflict and forced Khomeini to “drink the poison” of ceasefire.<sup>136</sup> Iranian conduct in war is an example of how strategic emotions produce uncontrolled escalation and how new tools of war can extend the initial goals of war. Israeli experts argue that Baghdad usually escalated to avoid defeat, including the initial decision to use chemical weapons as a last defensive resort. Tehran on the other hand escalated, including the launch of counter-value attacks, to achieve victory. In its escalation, however, Tehran tried to preserve where possible a basic reciprocity in the character of its response, even as it increased the level of conflict or employed alternative means and ways of war.<sup>137</sup>

The same experts conclude that in the contest between Iraqi and Iranian cultures of war, the material-technological superiority of the former determined decisions to escalate, while the moral resolve and tactical fanaticism of the latter was decisive in sustaining the intensification of fighting.<sup>138</sup> Tactical-operational religious fanaticism was not automatically extended to the strategic management of the war. Ashurai passion and Alawi zeal did not outweigh rational-pragmatic considerations of the decision-makers.<sup>139</sup> Rational strategic considerations shaped the decisions of non-conventional escalation and produced its thresholds and limitations.<sup>140</sup>

The author judges that in the absence of accepted rules of nuclear behavior or crisis management mechanisms, Iranian analysts might have a hard time correctly understanding Western behavior. The demonization of nuclear adversaries (the “satans”) might lead to mistaken conclusions about their (the “satans”) military steps. Given that Tehran may convince itself in what it is saying about the “satans,” the author estimates that Tehran might attribute to its adversaries a willingness to take reckless steps that the adversaries did not intend to take. For example, Iran might consider an adversary’s second strike capability as a sufficient condition for an adversary to decide to attack Iran. Strategic emotions could intensify this belief and might make Iran liable to take a nuclear action. The nuclear signals might be unnoticed, misunderstood and misinterpreted, thus generating an undesired escalation.<sup>141</sup>

---

<sup>136</sup> Philip A.G. Sabin, “Escalation in the Iran-Iraq War,” in Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications* (Tel Aviv: JCCS, 1989), pp.283-285

<sup>137</sup> Sabin in Karsh, pp.284-285, 288; Karsh in Karsh, Navias and Sabin, p.41; Valerii Eremeev, “Zabytaia voina,” *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaia oborona*, no.2, 2007, pp.84-91

<sup>138</sup> Sabin in Karsh, pp.286-287.

<sup>139</sup> Sabin in Karsh, pp.284.

<sup>140</sup> Efraim Karsh, “Rational Ruthlessness: Non-Conventional and Missile Warfare in the Iran-Iraq War,” in Efraim Karsh, Martin Navias and Philip Sabin, *Non-Conventional Weapons Proliferation in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), p.34

<sup>141</sup> Kam, 2007, p.54, 81-82; Evron, in Kam, pp.56-57, 61-62; Rubin in Kam, pp.71-72

## STRATEGIC EMOTIONS

It would be an oversimplification to characterize Persian-Shia strategic culture as entirely suicidal. The recurring pattern of Iranian conduct during the war with Iraq was to decide upon the most efficient operational course of action and then to justify it according to Islamic rationalizations.<sup>142</sup>

That said, the IRGC, the custodian of today's strategic capabilities, seems to be the most fanatic, emotional and potentially irrational player, when compared to strategists and Supreme Leaders at the top of the command and control chain. The history of the Iran-Iraq War provides several examples of emotional moves by dogmatic IRGC elements which turned strategically counterproductive from the leadership's point of view. The IRGC navy's attack of Kuwait with Silkworm missiles, unsanctioned combat operations during the Tanker war, reluctance to cooperate with the regular navy and even with the Defense Ministry, threats to change the Kuwaiti regime, the threat to attack Saudi oil facilities, and attempts by mutinous units of the IRGC to launch missile attacks against US-led coalition forces in Saudi Arabia (in order to trigger an armed conflict with the United States)<sup>143</sup> – all these contradicted the strategic intents of the clerical strategic leadership. Also, it appears that during the war the IRGC was more interested in inflicting damage on the enemy than in minimizing casualties among the Iranian population, while the Artesh and even clerical leadership had somewhat more balanced theories of victory. Even recently, during the crises with the British sailors, the IRGC was more risk-prone than other Iranian actors evolved in the event.<sup>144</sup>

Iranian strategic culture, in the author's judgment, is likely to produce some number of delusionary people with faith in supra-natural forces, who are given some role in the use of Iranian strategic weapons. The martyrdom motif and perception of warfare as an act of *taklif* (process- and not progress-oriented duty) stimulates the emergence of messianic strategic emotions. The author estimates that these emotions create an understanding of professionalism that defines professional military conduct in terms of being a pious fighter and acting for the sake of the right cause, and not necessarily conducting a victorious operation according to the postulates of military art. Under this messianic self-perception, already today some elements in the IRGC see themselves as operating on the spiritual battlefield of good and evil. Israeli experts estimate that given this kind of strategic mentality they can situate a nuclear capability in the similar Armageddon and *shahadat* contexts.<sup>145</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> Melman (2006);

<sup>143</sup> Artesh and some senior IRGC members rushed to the missile battery to prevent the missiles from being fired.

<sup>144</sup> V.I.Mesamed, "Problema osvobozhdeniia britanskikh voenosluzhashih: tainoe I javnoe," *IBV*, 10.04.2007; Alfoneh, 2008; Fariborz Haghshenass, "Iran's Asymmetric Naval Warfare," *Policy Focus* no.87, September 2008, pp.5-6

<sup>145</sup> Yossi Melman and Meir Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2007), pp. 41-56; V.I.Sazhin, "Amerikanskie politologi o jadernoi problem Irana," *IIBV*, 04.06.2008. Melman (2006);

Also, it seems to the author that strategic emotions driven by messianic associations might drive the inclination to sacrifice to its extremes. Given the significant institutional authority of the IRGC over Iranian strategic weapons, the extent to which the supreme leadership can control the IRGC's aggressive biases is not clear. Unlike the Artesh, the IRGC does not subscribe to the norms of subordinating the military to the civilian echelons. This, coupled with the traditional ethos of taking the initiative, improvising and leading by example could incline the IRGC to the operational enterprises that the leadership might see as contradicting its strategic intentions. The author suggests that in future nuclear strategic interactions, the radical elements driven by messianic strategic emotions might undertake signaling efforts independent of those of the civilian leadership.



# TRIPLE “A” THEORY OF VICTORY

A synthesis of unique Persian and Shia martial legacies produces three pillars on which the current Iranian theory of victory rests: Alawi superiority of moral over the material factors, Ashurai readiness to tolerate suffering and casualties and opt for martyrdom and Asymmetrical stratagem.

## ALAWI ETHOS

As is the case for any other fighting entity which opts for asymmetrical warfare, human factors in the Iranian theory of victory take precedence over material ones. In the case of the Shia military tradition the superiority of spiritual over material factors was introduced even prior to asymmetrical practices. The precedent of Ali and Hussein who lost the physical battle but won the spiritual campaign established one of the basic norms of the Shia culture of war – non-material but moral and spiritual factors constitute the center of gravity. Following the revolution the clerics’ distrust of the Artesh, coupled with the lack of material resources, made the human factor pivotal for the revolutionary armed forces’ theory of victory. The Shia martial tradition was most suitable for this theory of war. The victory is about the superiority of the spiritual over the material. Both physical combat victory and an act of martyrdom count as victory. The legacy of Ali established a basic principle of the Shia military tradition: victory has a high price, or, in other words, only by paying a high price through physical suffering can one attain a spiritual victory.<sup>146</sup>

Although suicidal “human waves” and “human de-mining” often compensated for poor arms and a lack of training, the experiences of the Iran-Iraq War corrected the initial belief that religious zeal can offset machines of war. Iran overcame its initial ambivalent attitude toward military technology, which it saw as a manifestation of Westernization and the infidel’s way of war. However, in this culture of war, technology and firepower multiplied human factors but not vice versa. Armies that had poor spirit could not compensate by having high technology. Alawi culture of war envisions military hardware as an insufficient condition for victory if not accompanied by a superior moral factor. Today Iran invests heavily in its military R&D and seeks to equip itself with the most modern weaponry. Still, material factors have not acquired an upper hand in comparison to moral factors.<sup>147</sup>

The author estimates that this culture of military thinking leads Iranians toward a way of war oriented toward inflicting moral-psychological effects on the enemy through application of

---

<sup>146</sup> V.I.Sazhin, “Voennaia mosh Irana dvadzat’ let spustia: ot pepla do almaza,” in Mamedova, pp.72-73; A.Makarov, “Islam.Bor’ba.Smert’.Pobeda,” in V.Prussakov, *Islamskaia revoliuciia v Irane: vzgliad iz Rossii* (Moscow: Pallada, 1996), pp.51-59; Kam (2004), p.53; KliashTORina, pp.168-172, 187; Leonid Shebarshin, *Ruka Moskvy* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2002), p.177; In general, according to the collective belief, the greatness of the Persian civilization and national identity was preserved not due to material factors but due to spiritual values. Ryshard Kapuschinskii, *Imperator.Shahinshah* (Moscow: Evropeiskie izdaniia, 2007).

<sup>147</sup> Arasli, pp.14; Kam; KliashTORina, pp.168-172, 187; Shebarshin, p.156; Georgii Mirskii, “Shiitskii Revansh,” *NG. Religii*, no.3, February 18, 2009.

material tools. It is oriented to a lesser extent toward the physical annihilation of the enemy. The Alawi legacy predisposes Iranians toward a counter-value strategy in nuclear war and makes them more sensitive and reactive to the counter-value moves of the adversary.

## ASHURAI ETHOS

The impact of the *Karbala* legacy on the psyche of the Shia collective is analogous to the impact of crucifixion on constructing the Christianity tradition. The Ashurai narrative which underlies the Shia theory of victory generates an attitude to the utility of force which is different from the one perceived in Western military thought. Under the impact of the Karbala myth, an absolute spiritual victory might indeed be consistent with total military defeat. This makes Shia military thought not only more tolerant of massive casualties, but also orients it toward a martyrdom as a process and not toward operational military progress. This distinguishes it in certain ways from other schools of asymmetrical military thought. Divine martyrdom in a futile military campaign contributes to the act of defeat a victorious connotation. This also is in keeping with the logic of an asymmetrical approach, which aims more at disruption, denial and disorientation, than toward integral and total destruction of the enemy forces. Cultivation of martyrdom, sacrifice and suffering in the Shia philosophy of war is more than just the duty of practicing *shahadat* or *jihad*.<sup>148</sup> The legacy of Imam Ali and Imam Hussein fosters the cult of suffering such that the demonstration of stamina and endurance is part of the entire Iranian approach to warfare.<sup>149</sup>

This “process orientation” culture of war resonates with the Shia interpretation of Jihad, which emphasizes not only the goals of the “holy war,” but the “holy endeavor” under complicated and difficult conditions.<sup>150</sup> In any conflict with the post-heroic culture of the West, according to Iranian military thought, the Ashurai way of war, supported by other asymmetrical capabilities, will be an absolute trump card in wartime, and will generate an effective deterrence regime in peacetime – an attitude similar to the Chinese concept of *Shashoujian* or the German *Wunderwaffe*.<sup>151</sup>

What happens when this culture of war is provided with a nuclear capability? There are grounds to assume that a martyrdom culture of operational art can potentially generate suicidal strategic emotions. The author estimates that in the nuclear era under the martyrdom narrative might turn even nuclear war into a process (fulfilling a religious duty of *jihad/shahadat*) as opposed to an

---

<sup>148</sup> Arasli, pp.14-15; Melman and Javedanfar, p.-30-31, 52, 206; Vinogradov, p.393; Menashri (2001), p.286; N.M.Mamedova, “Opyt social’no ekonomicheskogo razvitiia Irana v usloviakh Islamskogo pravleniia,” in Mamedova, p.54; S.Antonenko, “Islamskii proryv na ariiskii proctor,” in Prussakov, p.44.

<sup>149</sup> The condolence performances of *ta’zieh* staged for the mourning of Muharram cultivate the values of suffering and sacrifice. A.A.Kochetkov, “Korabel’naia artilleriia srednego kalibra v XX veke,” *ViZh*, No.4, April 2008, page(s): 34-38, p. 36; Strelanov, p.211; Sheberashin, p.165; Georgii Mirskii, “Islamskii fundamentalism, sunnity I shiity,” *Mirovaia ekonomika I mmezhdunarodnye otnosheniia*, no.9, Septemembr 2008, p.4.

<sup>150</sup> G. Falunin, “Iran: 30 let stanovleniia Islamskogo Gosudarstva,” *ZVO*, no.4, April, 2009, p.35

<sup>151</sup> Haghshenass; Arasli, p.15

instrument (attaining a politico-strategic end-state through nuclear deterrence or coercion). the act of nuclear martyrdom aimed at advancing the arrival of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam through Armageddon might be a feasible option. This might be the case, particularly because some Iranian sources indicate that the IRGC thinks that the chain of command extends from Allah through the Supreme Leader to the IRGC Central Command.<sup>152</sup>

## **ASYMMETRICAL (UNBALANCED) WARFARE**

The perception of “unbalanced warfare” as an operational panacea in a future war represents a set of strategic beliefs and constitutes a strategic mindset on which the Iranian theory of victory is based. This approach to warfare encapsulates lessons learned from the Iranian’s own experience and emulates successful asymmetric practices elsewhere.<sup>153</sup> The formative experiences that shaped the current notion of asymmetrical naval warfare emerge from the ambitious nontraditional amphibious operations (“guerilla on water”) during the Iran-Iraq War and particularly the Tanker War.<sup>154</sup> Iran opted for naval asymmetry not only because of objective material constraints (lack of equipment, ammunition, specialists and training), but because this choice was in harmony with their culture of war. There are three manifestations of non-conventional methods of fighting AW: naval, terror and insurgency, and missiles and WMD.<sup>155</sup>

The theory of victory of both the Artesh (under the impact of the Rostam legacy) and the IRGC (under the impact of its guerilla legacy) rests on the assumption that there is no way for Iran to win a symmetrical, conventional war against the enemy. Thus it should exploit a repertoire of asymmetric capabilities and deter the adversary by threatening unbearably high damage. Exploiting asymmetrical advantages is a continuous legacy of the Iranian military tradition. The ethos of guile and stratagem was part of the imperial Iranian legacy which preceded the introduction of the guerilla type ethos of the revolutionary period. According to the asymmetrical perspective, military innovation must be understood as the constant ability to identify the new weak spots of the enemy and to organize means and tools of war in order to attack them effectively. Naval operations have had priority and strategic importance over the other dimensions of war since the times of the Shah. Control over the region means control over the Persian Gulf and littoral waters, which provide access to the oil fields. Asymmetrical naval warfare is a way to offset, deter, deny, mitigate and negate an enemy’s strengths by exploiting his vulnerabilities through surprise attacks, infiltrations, ambushes, hit-and-run tactics, indiscriminate harassment and swarming techniques. In addition, Iran must use CCD to decrease the situational awareness of the enemy. It must enhance the element of surprise as a core practice on all levels of war, and decentralize the fighting forces and concentrate decisive effects, employ proxies as

---

<sup>152</sup> Haghshenass, p.21

<sup>153</sup> Arasli, pp.11-12

<sup>154</sup> M.M. Slinkin, *Irano-Irakskaia voina 1980-1988: bor’ba na more* (Simferopol: Tavricheskii Natsional’nyi Universitut, 2001); S. Glazov, “Uroki tamkernoi voiny,” *Morskoi Flot*, no.7, 1989, pp.45-47; V. Docenko, “Tankernaia Vina: Uroki I Itogi,” *Morskoi Sbornik*, no.5, pp.69-71, 1989; A. Gurianov, “Razmeshenie protivokorabel’nykh raket v Irane,” *ZVO*, no.9, p.77, 1988.

<sup>155</sup> Minasian (2004).

force multipliers, and conduct sea-denial and disrupting operations, such as massive mine warfare on vital waterways, in order to restrict enemy freedom of maneuver.<sup>156</sup> Such a choice maintains the ancient Persian tradition of naval warfare, a heritage of maritime military ingenuity and the custom of pirate swarming tactics in the Persian Gulf.<sup>157</sup>

In Iranian strategic culture, moral-psychological and ideational aspects are central in warfare and play the most important role in doctrine and in force training and preparation.<sup>158</sup> While planning operations Iranians consider not only direct physical effects, but also implications for the psychological and informational spheres aiming to produce a kind of “Blackhawk Down” effect in which the enemy is not destroyed but loses heart. Emphasis on naval capabilities and demonstrations of force are the central themes in Iranian psyops oriented to enhance deterrence and prevent the enemy’s attack. Thus, the navy is both a strategic-operational lever for wartime and the main tool of psyops in peacetime.<sup>159</sup> The flip side is that Iranians, due to their paranoia, are sensitive to psychological measures as well, so that spreading rumors about the enemy’s invincibility may have a powerful psychological effect on them.<sup>160</sup> Psychological pressure has been noted as a favored form of influence in the Iranian tradition and arsenal of intelligence craft.<sup>161</sup>

## HISTORICAL ANALOGIES

The Iranian leadership learned lessons from Yugoslavia and Iraq, which lacked a nuclear deterrent and thus underwent regime change. The lesson of North Korea teaches how to produce the virtual and then real deterrent capabilities and how to play nuclear diplomatic games effectively in the nuclear field vis-à-vis the international community and the United States. For Tehran, a nuclear capability is a guarantee that what happened to Iraq will not happen to Iran. Instead, the Iranian future would be similar to that of North Korea’s recent history. The bottom

---

<sup>156</sup> Subsurface anti-ship and submarine warfare, shore and boat based anti-ship missiles arsenals, manned conventional and suicidal torpedoes, small boats carrying missiles and mines for covert action, CAS by the fleet of UAVs (laden with explosive charges and remotely operated weapons). Arasli, pp.11-13, 24,30; Haghshenass; A.A.Trofimov, “Analiz vzgliadov rukovodstva Irana na voenno tekhnicheskoe sotrudnichestvo I perspektivy Rossii v regione,” in *Analiticheskie zapiski*, pp.128-137; Kam (2004), pp.82-125; Sh.A.Niazmatov, *Irano-Iraskii konflikt: isotricheskii otcherk* (Moscow: Nauka, 1989), pp.67-68; M.M.Iur’ev, “Sily soprotivleniia Basij v oboronnoi politike IRI,” *IBV*, 01.12.2006; V.Kaminov, V.Anisin, and V.Ol’gin, “Voенno politicheskaiа obstanovka v Kaspiiskom regione,” *ZVO*, no.4, April 2009, p.23; Frolov, pp.62, 70.

<sup>157</sup> E.V.Chernenko, *Skifo-Persidskaia voina* (Kiev: Naukova Dumka, 1984); Razin. Fariborz Haghshenass, “Iran’s Doctrine of Asymmetric Naval Warfare,” *Policy Watch*, no. 1179, 2006.

<sup>158</sup> V.I.Sazhin, “O voennom potenciale IRI,” *IBV*, 02.22.2006.

<sup>159</sup> Arasli, pp.25, 31

<sup>160</sup> Melman and Javedanfar, p. 199

<sup>161</sup> Kuzichkin, pp.209-211, 344-345; The veterans of the Soviet intelligence report on employing psychological pressure as one of the main signature styles of the Iranian intelligence craft. Shebarshin, Kuzichkin

line of the lessons Tehran learned is that the United States is unwilling to confront a nuclear armed state. According to the Iranian view, it is not the big nuclear arsenal of the superpower, but rather the threat to use two or three nuclear devices that might be credible enough to deter aggression and regime change. The Pakistani nuclear history, another strategic model, taught them that the possession of nuclear capability indeed transforms the attitudes of the great nations.<sup>162</sup>

In the missile field, the primary strategic model is the conduct of Iraq during the Gulf War, when Tehran saw what a strong psychological impact missiles war had, how many resources the United States and its allies invested in taking care of this problem, and how survivable these assets were.<sup>163</sup> The other missile related lesson learned for the Iranian asymmetrical school of thought comes from recent conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon, which clearly demonstrated the idea of victory by non-defeat, which in a future war involving Iran would mean “keep on firing whatever happens”.<sup>164</sup>

The judgment of the author is that the Iranian strategic psyche will view economic sanctions in response to the nuclear project through the lens of its siege mentality, and will associate sanctions with a bitter collective memory of foreign intervention and usurpation. Thus, foreign sanctions will be seen by the Iranian leadership as foreign military intervention that might rally the masses around the flag, even if the regime was not popular beforehand. The Iranian leaders and people might be willing to suffer economic hardships as was the case with the experiences of Mossadeq. Experts argue that in the time of hardships, the leadership will escalate foreign policy to enhance domestic cohesion and to increase the regime’s support and legitimacy.<sup>165</sup>

---

<sup>162</sup> Sazhin in *Analiticheskie zapiski*, pp.149-150; Sarukhanian (2007), p.6; Khlopkov, pp.54-55, 56; Sarukhanian, (2005), p.19; Bergman, pp. 340-341.

<sup>163</sup> Kam (2004), p.148

<sup>164</sup> Arasli, p.38; Frolov, p.68

<sup>165</sup> Melman and Javedanfar, pp.175-177; Melman (2006); V.Kaminov, V.Anisin, and V.Ol’gin, “Voenno politicheskaia obstanovka v Kaspiiskom regione,” *ZVO*, no.4, April 2009, p.22



# TECHNOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ASSISTANCE

The uniqueness of the Iranian nuclear and missile program lies in its very eclectic nature, and is the result of the different countries that were involved in its formulation.<sup>166</sup> The main military-technological and conceptual influence came from China, North Korea and Russia.<sup>167</sup> Iran demonstrated a remarkable absorptive capacity and impressive ingenuity in copying and adapting technology from Korea, Pakistan, China, Russia and the West, acquired both legally and by clandestine means.<sup>168</sup> The Iranian military and defense community showed very high aptitude for combining various technologies and weaponry, adapting them in ways that made them compatible and jointly operable.<sup>169</sup> This can be partly explained by the fact that the committee for scientific-technological research, which coordinates the security-technological cooperation with other countries, is also responsible for the envelopment of concepts of operation, or conops, for acquired weaponry and technology.<sup>170</sup> From the author's perspective, this might suggest that a similarly eclectic and creative approach could be applied to the questions of formulating nuclear strategy.

When Iran began to develop its missile forces in the midst of the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran signed a cooperative agreement in the field of missile technology with the PRC. Since 1985 and until the mid-1990s, Beijing led missile development with Iran. Massive Chinese involvement in erecting the missile technological infrastructure in Iran coincided with the establishment of the Iranian missile corps. China provided Iran with assistance in several additional fields primarily with regard to guidance and control systems. There are grounds to assume that together with technological assistance Tehran also received Chinese conceptual-doctrinal influence in the missile field. For this reason some features of the command and control architecture of the IRGC missile corps may resemble some features of the Second Artillery of the PRC. Almost simultaneously with cooperation with China, Tehran started to cooperate with North Korea which assisted in the production of warheads and built factories for missile engine production. At the

---

<sup>166</sup> Primarily Argentina, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, and Pakistan.

<sup>167</sup> North Korea has been the main source of missile knowledge, China has been the main contributor for guidance systems and engines, and Russians have been the main provider of technological knowledge (missile and nuclear). Sarukhanian, p.57; Victor Mizin, "The Russia-Iran Nuclear Connection and US Policy Options," *MERIA*, vol.8, no1 (March, 2004), pp.71-85; Tal Inbar, "Iranian Ballistic Missile Program,"

<sup>168</sup> Vladimir Evseev, and Vladimir Sazhin, "Raketno-iaderny schit dvukh izgoev," *NVO*, no.5, February 13, 2009. Shoham, p.90

<sup>169</sup> Terenkov in *Analiticheskie zapiski*, p.99; Some experts argue however, that the Iranian scientific-technological potential makes it more apt to absorb the imported technologies more on a scientific – technological, and less on a technological-practical, level. Safranchiuk (1998),p.28; Alimov, p.49

<sup>170</sup> Trofimov in *Analiticheskie zapiski*, p.123; A.Trfimov, "Voenno-tekhnicheskoe sotrudnichestvo IRI s zarubezhnymi stanami," *IIIiBV*, 03.10.2003

subsequent stage Iran entered into a third area of cooperation with Pakistan on missiles technologies.<sup>171</sup>

During the first decade after the resurrection of the Iranian nuclear project and until the late 1990s, among all the countries with which Tehran cooperated, China played the most prominent role. From the mid 1990s Russia and North Korea exchanged places with China.<sup>172</sup> In building its missile shield Iran utilized the conceptual and technological experience of North Korea. Also, the uranium enrichment cycle is conducted on the basis of linkages with North Korea's analogous enrichment program.<sup>173</sup>

In the maritime field, Iran gets its technical and conceptual assistance primarily from China and North Korea. China is directly assisting the effort to turn the IRGC navy into the strategic arm of the Iranian armed forces in a future war. Beijing is the main provider of the naval anti-ship capabilities and concepts of operations for sea denial operations. China provides the main support in cruise missiles and anti-ship cruise missiles. Iran also views cruise missiles as a substitute in certain areas for ballistic missiles because they are easier to build, harder to detect and easier to operate and deploy with a variety of WMD warheads. The Iranian concept of naval operations, both conventional and unorthodox, was deeply influenced by the South Koreans (before the revolution) and the North Koreans (after the revolution).<sup>174</sup>

---

<sup>171</sup> Safranchiuk, (1998), p.21; Kam, pp.149-154; Khlopkov, p.44; Sarukhanian (2007), pp.54-55; M.Tul'ev, "Sostoianie i perspektivy razvitiia Irano-Kitaiskikh otnoshenii," in Fillonik, pp.138-150

<sup>172</sup> Safranchiuk, (1998), p.21; Kam, pp.149-154, 182.

<sup>173</sup> Trofimov in *Analiticheskie zapiski*, pp.125; Frolov, pp.57-58; Evseev and Sazhin; Vladimir Il'in, "Ballisticheskie roketi tretikh stran," *Tekhnika i Vooruzheniia*, 2001, no.7; Bergman, pp. 340-341.

<sup>174</sup> Arasli, pp.23, 35; Kam, pp. 114-121, 166-169; Novikov in Kozhokina, pp.152-155.



## RELATIONSHIP WITH PROXIES

The Iranian inclination to act by a clandestine proxy, so that the “return address” is not obvious, resonates with the tradition in its political culture “to use shadowy and violent pressure groups in its domestic politics.”<sup>175</sup> In the future, Iran is likely to continue employing its proxies in order to produce operational dilemmas and strategic challenges for its adversaries.<sup>176</sup> Today, the IRGC regularly trains Hezbollah and Hamas (H&H) fighters in its bases in Iran and educates them in its style of war, including professional indoctrination of the pattern of being the guerilla force fighting under clerical strategic guidance.<sup>177</sup> Iranian strategic behavior today is symbiotic with Syria and Hezbollah and the three should be seen as a unified, hybrid strategic system.<sup>178</sup> Iran has extended its proxy projects beyond H&H, supported mujahidin in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Afghanistan, and is active today, in areas as distant as Shia communities in Latin America (Hezbollah Venezuela).<sup>179</sup>

One group of experts attributes a low probability to the chance that Iran will delegate nuclear capabilities to its proxies. According to this view, Tehran will extend its nuclear deterrence to its proxies by explicitly or implicitly signaling its readiness to defend them in the event of conventional military distress with means it has at its disposal. Iran is unlikely to opt for the nuclear option to assist its allies, but it might signal its readiness for the purpose of deterrence.<sup>180</sup> This posture of the imagined nuclear umbrella and the image of Tehran’s enhanced deterrence power might lead Iranian strategic partners, both countries and non-state actors, to assume that they possess a broader freedom of operational action. Experts suggest that this may inspire radical groups to become more reckless and to take the Iranian nuclear umbrella over their conventional escalations for granted. They might consider that Iranian nuclear potential undercuts Israel’s “escalation dominance capabilities.” It might encourage them to opt for strategic adventurism and excessive regional aggressiveness while relying upon Tehran’s safety net.<sup>181</sup> It seems to the author that Tehran’s readiness to intervene on their behalf might be taken for granted by the proxies, exactly as in the case of Egyptian-Soviet relations during the Cold War.

---

<sup>175</sup> Shoham, p.97; Kam, pp. 280-281

<sup>176</sup> Arasli, p.34, 38

<sup>177</sup> Ermakov in Kozhokina, p.120; Arasli, p.33.

<sup>178</sup> Yaakov Amidror, “The Hizbullah-Syria-Iran Triangle,” *MERIA*, vol.11, no.1 (March, 2007), pp.1-5

<sup>179</sup> This functions in an approach similar to Israel, which feels responsible for Jewish communities elsewhere. Melman and Javedanfar, p.206; Vinogradov, p.446; V.M.Barynkin, “Afganistna: uroki I vyvody,” *Vizh*

<sup>180</sup> Ephraim Kam, *A Nuclear Iran: What Does it Mean and What Can be Done*, Tel Aviv: INSS Memorandum 88, February 2007, pp.10, 54-55, 57, 59; Asculari in Kam, 2008, pp.31-32

<sup>181</sup> Evron in Kam, 2008, p.58

Although most of the sources attribute low probability to an Iranian transfer of nuclear weapons to proxies,<sup>182</sup> because of the general erosion of the nuclear taboo and the Iranian tradition of indirect mode of operations, some experts argue that Tehran may decide to “pass a nuclear device to the terrorist organization.” The fact that the Iranian nuclear capability most probably would be under the institutional control of radicals increases the possibility of this scenario.<sup>183</sup> The history of missile transfers to Hezbollah teaches that in the initial stages the IRGC controls and operates the most strategic capabilities itself, but then incrementally delegates them to proxies.<sup>184</sup> Iran was eager to provide Hezbollah with rockets and trained it in operating them, also because it saw Hezbollah as its “strategic arm” which could retaliate against a potential attack on the Iranian nuclear sites or hinterland (the similar logic applies to arms transfers to Hamas). However the delegation of such a level of strategic authority over operational capability makes H&H potentially independent players that can act alone. For example, during the 2006 war in Lebanon, from the Iranian point of view, the “strategic arm” became uncontrolled. Tehran was not particularly happy with Hezbollah’s conduct when it “wasted” its strategic capability for goals that did not serve Tehran’s interests.<sup>185</sup>

In general, while Tehran envisions its strategic interaction with Hezbollah as a “patron-client” relationship, Hezbollah is inclined sometimes to envision their interaction as a collegial cooperation of “strategic partners.” In the author’s judgment, the same tendency may manifest itself in frames of the “nuclear future,” when Hezbollah would play by its own strategic considerations. It is further conceivable that Global Jihad (AQAM), another potential Iranian subcontractor, might turn uncontrollable after acquiring nuclear capability from its patron.

---

<sup>182</sup> V.V.Khutorskaya, “Atomnaya energetika kak odno iz strategicheskikh napravlenii sotrudnichestva Rossii s IRI,” *Blizhnii Vostok i sovremennost’*, IIBV, no.32, 2007.

<sup>183</sup> Inbar (2006), p.92

<sup>184</sup> Kam, pp.272-284; Those strategic capabilities that Hezbollah employed against Israel in 2006, such as long and mid range missiles and C-102 anti-ship missiles, were supplied by Iran. Barry Rubin, “Iran: the Rise of a Regional Power,” *MERIA*, vol.10, no.3 (September 2006), p.142; This resonates with the Soviet style of missile transfers to Egypt.

<sup>185</sup> Melman and Javedanfar, pp.202, 217-218;

# IRANIAN STRATEGIC CAPABILITIES

The central missile command is subordinated directly to the CINC (Supreme Leader) and controls five brigades (two brigades of Shahab-3D and -3M, two brigades of Shahab-1 and -2, and one brigade of tactical missiles). All these units are mobile and those on duty constantly migrate between military districts from the north-west to the south-west. In addition to those subordinated to the CINC, the Artesh has control of six divisions (about two brigades) of tactical missiles and the IRGC has eight. The Iranian missile order of battle (orbat) can be divided into three categories: non-guided artillery rockets of up to 200 km range; ballistic missiles from the SCUD family of up to several hundred km range; and long range ballistic missiles of over 1000 km range.<sup>186</sup> The IRGC Air Force (AFAGIR) controls Iran's strategic missile force and has an estimated one brigade of Shahab-1/2 with 12-18 launchers, and a Shahab-3 unit. The Shahab-3 unit "estimated one battalion with an estimated 6 single launchers each with an estimated 4 Shahab-3 strategic IRBM." The industries controlled by the IRGC produce Iran's strategic missile forces and WMD for them and AFIRGC operates them. (MoD oversees the force build up for the Artesh.) When Iran produces nuclear weapons, the AFAGIR is likely to seek control of them.<sup>187</sup>

Iran started its chemical weapons program in 1983 after the Iraqi use of gas on the battlefields. Between 1985-7 the first capabilities were introduced. Iran produced sufficient lethal agents for its means of delivery and by the end of the war had significant amounts of mustard and nerve gas. Iran cooperated with Libya and Korea on producing chemical warheads for operational-tactical missiles and with China on airborne devices for diffusion of chemical agents. The armed forces gained experience using chemical weapons during the war with Iraq. The first use of chemical weapons by Iran was in 1985 when it fired unexploded Iraqi artillery shells back at Iraqis. During the last decade Iran was engaged in research related to biological weapons as well, which is closely related to its research in civilian biotechnology and microbiology. According to the current doctrinal-conceptual views of the military leadership, chemical (and biological) weapons should compensate for the lack of strategic functions associated with nuclear capability.<sup>188</sup> In other words, Iranian attitudes today toward "bio-chemistry" may indicate future attitudes toward nuclear capabilities. Some CW capabilities are deployed today on some ships but mostly installed in mines, shells, bombs, rockets and missile warheads. Armed forces conduct regular training and maneuvers which involve these capabilities.<sup>189</sup>

According to Russian and Israeli assessments the Iranian ballistic missile programs do not make sense either in military-operational terms (even if equipped with HE warheads) or in terms of

---

<sup>186</sup> V.I.Sazhin, "O raketnykh programmakh Irana," *IBV*, 05.12.2008; Kam, p.143.

<sup>187</sup> Ermakov in Kozhokina, pp.106-108, 114,

<sup>188</sup> Sazhin in *Analiticheskie zapiski*, pp.181-197; Sazhin in Mamedova, p.75; Karsh in Karsh, Navias and Sabin, pp.34-35. 40; I.A. Novikov, "Oruzhie massovogo porazheniia Islamskoi respubliki Iran: bolshe voprosov chem otvetov," in *Analiticheskie zpaiski*, pp. 180-185; Shoham.

<sup>189</sup> Shoham, p.113

strategic prestige, unless equipped with WMD warheads.<sup>190</sup> Initial, pre-revolutionary Iranian nuclear aspirations – Israeli Jericho SS missile -were also intended to carry nuclear weapons and clearly demonstrated the thinking of the Shah and his generals.<sup>191</sup> There is full consensus in scientific-technological circles, among the political elite and also among the population in general about the necessity to develop a nuclear potential.<sup>192</sup> Three approaches are conceivable: proceeding to the nuclear threshold without producing an operational nuclear weapon, adopting a policy of nuclear ambiguity or announcing the possession of the weapons, followed by the test.<sup>193</sup> Considerations of costly international implications and penalties might push it to produce an “incomplete” nuclear option. However, to generate both regional and domestic prestige it might opt for the “ambiguity” option, hinting or even declaring (without the test) that such an option exists. This concealing position is strategically comfortable because it makes it possible to build an arsenal secretly and still generate the necessary amount of deterrence and prestige regionally and domestically. This kind of nuclear behavior is in keeping with the fundamental traits of its strategic culture. The downside of the declaration without testing is the inability to test the effectiveness of the device.<sup>194</sup>

On the one hand Iran seeks to equip undetectably its ballistic missiles with WMD warheads in order to minimize political and physical vulnerability to any potential preventive action of its adversaries. The flip side of this choice is that, in order to attain and exercise its regional supremacy and enhance the effectiveness of its deterrence, it must disclose its capabilities. Current disclosure of missile capabilities is the initial step in this direction. If the main motivations behind the nuclear efforts are deterrence, hegemonic ambitions, internal support and coercion via threats, then Tehran needs at least an apparent proof to make internal and external arenas aware of Iranian capabilities. Consequently, the concealment option seems counterproductive. An underground test might not be an option because it will be spotted very quickly. Also, its failure could be easily observed. In that case Tehran could hint at its nuclear potential through demonstration of its delivery capabilities. Some ambiguous declarations of capabilities for internal and domestic consumption might also suffice.<sup>195</sup>

---

<sup>190</sup> Arbatov and Dvorkin, p.471; A.A.Kokoshin, *Iadernue konflikty v 21 veke* (Moscow: Media Press, 2003),p.63. Novikov in Kozhokina, p.156; Ivan Safranchiuk, “Iadernye I raketnye programmy Irana I bezopasnost’ Rossii: ramki Rossiisko-Iranskogo sotrudnichestva,” *Nauchnye Zapiski*, no.8, 1998, p.3; Ephraim Asculai, “How Iran Can Attain its Nuclear Capability and Then Uses It,” in Ephraim Kam, *Israel and Nuclear Iran” Implications for Arms Control, Deterrence and Defense* (Tel Aviv: INSS Memorandum no.94, 2008), pp.18-20.

<sup>191</sup> Melman and Javedanfar, pp.82-93

<sup>192</sup> Khlopkov, p.55; Mamedova (2006);

<sup>193</sup> Kam, (2007), p.8

<sup>194</sup> Kam, 2007, p.62

<sup>195</sup> Asculai in Kam, 2008, pp.23-26; Shoham, p.131

# CONCLUSION

The fact that Iranian national security organizations are composed of competing units with overlapping responsibilities clearly suggests that treating Iran as a unified actor may be misleading. Conventional Western analysis tends to treat the existence of multiple actors in hostile countries as reassuring: hostility must be the attitude of only one faction, so if there are competing groups, some will want to work with us more than others.

This study draws several conclusions about the implications of Iranian patterns of organization:

- The multiple competing groups may not be able to develop mutually compatible plans and capabilities. The existence of multiple groups will inhibit the development and realistic exercise of nuclear weapons capabilities before a crisis. Even if a single organizational component has control of Iranian nuclear technology and nuclear doctrine, as may be the case on the basis of one report noted above, the fact that nuclear warheads will be owned by one organization, delivery systems by another, and chemical and biological weapons by yet another suggests that in a real crisis, the Iranian response is likely to be uncoordinated, ragged, and delayed. This could present significant military options for powers threatened by Iran. Ragged crisis response may make Iranian weapons easier to identify and locate before they are ready for a coordinated launch, and so vulnerable.
- On the other hand, Iranian patterns of organization may lead to conflict, but then to one Iranian organizational component deciding to take action with the assets at its disposal, even if this action is not coordinated, or against the orders of the central government. The commitment of the IRGC to the defense of the revolution may override its organizational obligations, leading to unauthorized but deliberate use of nuclear weapons or ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.
- If the patterns of Iranian organization are general across the Iranian military, as the data surveyed by this report suggests will be the case, the ability of the Iranian military to conduct effective non-nuclear military operations may be severely degraded. Knowing this, the Iranian leadership may place a greater emphasis on nuclear weapons use in crisis and war. In the eyes of Iranian leaders, nuclear weapons may suffer from competing lines of command, but may nonetheless be easier to control and more effective than the army and navy. Rapid escalation from conventional conflict to nuclear weapons use, then, may be a consequence of Iranians' self-perception of military weakness, which is in turn the result of their duplicative patterns of organization.
- Finally, we might speculate that in the face of weak conventional power, and in light of a fractious organizational culture and a tendency to look to proxies, one way of "using" the nuclear capability may be to spread it to proxies.