

AGGRANDIZMENT OF IRAN'S NAVAL THREAT IN THE PERSIAN GULF

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The US considers Iran, among other things, to be a threat to the security of the Persian Gulf. Many dire analyses have been made regarding the methods and the mechanisms, with which Iran could destabilize the Persian Gulf region. Precluding regional hegemony by Iran and Iraq, as an American analyst argued, should be one of the main objectives of the US in the Persian Gulf.¹

The revitalization of the Iranian military and arms procurement since 1988 is viewed as acquiring offensive capabilities for various objectives including the domination of the Persian Gulf; the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, if need be, to control the flow of oil from the region; and press outstanding territorial claims against its Arab neighbours.² To achieve these hegemonic objectives, Iran's navy must play a major role. As such the enhancing of the Iranian naval capability in recent years and its power-projection is under close scrutiny by the US and the Gulf states. With the exception of a few, many evaluations of the Iranian navy have given way to its excessively hyped up capability and threat in the Persian Gulf.³

In an attempt to provide a balanced view of Iran's capability in the Persian Gulf, this article, sets out by addressing the military lessons and motivation for the revitalization of the Iranian military. It then focuses on the state of the Iranian Navy after the revolution and during the Iran-Iraq War, followed by its present configuration and capability. The conclusion, puts Iran's military posture into regional perspective.

Military Lessons of the Persian Gulf Wars

After the revolution, the decimation of the Iranian military by the Clergy, through divided loyalties, executions, purges, forced retirement and redundancies, exposed Iran to the Iraqi invasion and inflicted a heavy cost on Iran during the First [Persian] Gulf War.⁴ The Islamic regime failed to achieve its intended aims during the third phase of the war (1983-1988) - punishing Iraq after liberating the lost Iranian territory.⁵ During this phase, by

hedging its bet on the ill-trained, yet ideologically motivated revolutionary guards, the army took a back seat so to speak, and its direct participation in the war was significantly reduced. The operational capability of the Air Force, during this period was at its nadir.

The human wave tactics of the Guards on the Iraqi ground forces were disastrous. This, together with the Tanker War instigated by Iraq, which provided opportunities for overt interventions by the US in Iraq's favor, had demonstrated to the Clergy that ideological fervor can not be a substitute for military reality. It became clear to them that fighting forces can only succeed with better training, leadership and combat equipment. In other words priority of professionalism in the armed forces over ideological belief was established — the opposite of what the Clergy propagated and acted upon after the 1979 revolution.

This military lesson, among others, had a profound impact on the Islamic regime's post-1988 drive to rebuild its military capabilities and reorganize its fighting forces. The introduction of ranks in the Guards and even in its para-military subsidiary, the Basij (Mobilization Force), were some of the initial attempts towards the professionalization of the revolutionary fighting forces.

The massive show of US military strength and performance with its hi-tech weaponry during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and the subsequent devastation of Iraq, caused much security concern for the Islamic regime. This, together with the rapid increases in the quality and quantity of arms transferred to the GCC states, further reinforced Iran's drive to rebuild its military forces. That said, Iran's military expenditure owing to the poor state of its economy, compared with some of the GCC members, is rather small. The total military expenditure of Iran for the six years from 1990 until 1996 amounted to \$24.96 billion, equal to 90% of the sum spent by Saudi Arabia in two years: 1994 and 1995. Put differently, Iran's military expenditure for 1993, 1994 and 1995 accounted for 22% of the sum spent by Saudi Arabia for the same years.⁶

The Navy and Revolution

Towards the end of the Shah's rule, the Iranian Navy was heading for missions beyond the Persian Gulf and into the north-west quadrant of the Indian Ocean. It suffered from cancellation of arms orders by Admiral Madani, the defense minister of the provisional government of Bazargan. He canceled all military orders from the US, paid for or unpaid. The navy's expensively trained pool of manpower was also reduced as a result of the post-revolution execution, resignation, forcible retirement and exile, and desertion. Immediately after the revolution, some 200 officers and 300 ratings were purged. Later, some 200 young officers trained in the West (mainly sub-lieutenants and lieutenants) resigned. Within a year following the Iran-Iraq War, about 95 officers were made redundant. In addition, some 150 officers deserted the navy - the bulk of them jumped ship while under training abroad or on overseas missions.⁷

Although the rate of the navy's loss of manpower was comparatively lower than that of the army, the effects contrary to some analysis⁸ were devastating, for the navy was made up of the regulars (as against national service personnel), trained and specialized in their jobs.⁹ Prior to the start of the Iran-Iraq War, the Iranian Navy was a pale shadow of its former self.

The Navy and War

In spite of many shortcomings, including lack of spare parts and maintenance, the Iranian Navy maintained its superiority at sea by maintaining the naval blockade of Iraq and the protection of convoys of merchant ships plying to and from the Iranian ports in the northern zone of the Persian Gulf. However, this superiority was lost as the balance of air power gradually slipped from Iranian hands. By taking advantage of its air superiority with the aim of stopping the flow of Iranian oil to the world market, Iraq launched the Tanker War in 1984 which led to the internationalization and subsequent escalation of the war in the Persian Gulf. It is from this stage of the Iran-Iraq War that the Guards' naval units (by using small fast boats and light craft armed with machine guns, RPG, recoilless rifles or multiple rocket launchers) began an unconventional warfare from coastal bases, islands and oil platforms, against the shipping in the Persian Gulf. As far as the Islamic government was concerned, the attacks on merchant ships and tankers was a clear-cut issue. They were in response to Iraqi attacks and against the economic targets of Iraq's allies and partners, regardless of what flag.

In 1987-1988, during exchanges with the US Navy, the regular navy of Iran was battered and by the end of the war, it emerged like the rest of Iran's armed forces, morally exhausted with significant depletion of its capability.

Configuration and Operational Capability

In 1989, with the appointment of Ali Shamkhani - a revolutionary guard who became an admiral overnight - as commander of the Iranian Navy, the regular navy and the naval units of the Guards were amalgamated. Iran's present naval capability, in quantitative terms, in comparison with its neighbors appears impressive. However, the Iranian Navy, beset with numerous shortcomings, is hardly the largest and most potent regional navy as has often been portrayed by some analysts. While efforts have been made to increase its operational capability through procurement and frequent naval exercises, the Iranian Navy, in terms of vessels, suffers from what has been called the 'overall obsolescence'.¹⁰

Surface Vessels - Iran's two remaining destroyers (US-supplied Sumner class transferred to Iran in early 1970s) are now over fifty years old. Their Standard missiles have aged beyond their shelf life. While both ships are officially in service, they lost their operational effectiveness by the end of the Iran-Iraq War owing to old age, obsolete weapons and electronics suite and lack of parts.

Iran has three frigates and two corvettes. The frigates (Vosper Mark 5) were commissioned 25 years ago and since 1978 none of them has been modernized or refitted. One of the frigates was severely damaged by the US Navy. The operational readiness of these frigates, similar to the destroyers, with regard to their missiles and electronics is almost non-existent. In fact some of the missile launchers have been removed and replaced by BM-21 multiple rocket launchers. The two corvettes which came into service over thirty years ago have no sophisticated weapons systems and their operational effectiveness is very limited.¹¹

Out of Iran's 21 officially-considered fast attack craft armed with missiles, one is a

Soviet made OSA II which sailed from Iraq to Iran to escape the 1991 [Persian] Gulf War. The combat capability of this craft is uncertain and it has no missiles. Ten of these craft (French-made Combattante; Kaman Class), commissioned between 1977 and 1982 and used extensively during the Iran-Iraq War, have limited operational readiness and at least two of them are not seaworthy. These boats expended their few (less than ten) anti-ship Harpoon missiles before 1983. The only operationally reliable craft in this group are ten Chinese Hudong Class (five delivered in September 1994 and the rest in early 1996), which are equipped with C-801 or the more capable C-802 missiles.

Most of the coastal and inshore patrol craft, operated by the Guards, are operational but have no sophisticated weapons systems. The ten hovercraft, though some refitted in the UK in 1984, are non-operational owing to age, lack of maintenance and parts.

Out of Iran's five thirty-year old minesweepers, one is stationed in the Caspian Sea and the rest are in the Persian Gulf. They are obsolete and since 1980 lacked seaworthiness, let alone minesweeping capability.

The sizable number of amphibious and auxiliary ships of the Iranian Navy were acquired, in the main, to support the blue water navy that the Shah had envisaged establishing. However, under the Islamic Republic, with the navy's role mainly confined to the Persian Gulf, some of the larger auxiliary ships, such as the fleet supply ships and oilers, are superfluous to requirement, and are used purely for general sea training of new personnel.

While there is a sufficient number of small auxiliaries to support the navy's amphibious ships, at present Iran does not have the capability for offensive actions across the Persian Gulf waters. Any such action, among other things, would require a significant number of amphibious ships supported by major and sustainable air-lift capability, which Iran simply does not have. As stated by A.H. Cordesman, Iran "lacks the air and surface power to support a landing in a defended area".¹² Overall, Iran's aging F-4E aircraft and a modest number of SU-24 (for maritime strike) are less effective in the face of Iran's serious weakness (explained below) in long range maritime reconnaissance capability. In fact the overall weakness of the Iranian Air Force and the navy's air arm, puts the Iranian Navy at a major disadvantage in any likely conflict since it cannot depend on the Air Force for air cover and support.

Naval Air Arm - The navy's air capability, similar to its major surface vessels, is very limited due to old age, worn avionics and sensors, lack of spare parts, and maintenance. Most of the maritime reconnaissance aircraft (3 P-3F Orion and 5 C-130H-MP) are not fully operational and in favorable visibility, the crew use ordinary binoculars and hand held cameras for identification of ships plying the Persian Gulf or approaches to the Gulf of Oman.

The SH-3D helicopters, suffering from problems similar to reconnaissance aircraft, are used sparingly and can hardly carry out simple anti-submarine warfare tasks. Similarly, Iran's RH-53D are hardly airworthy, let alone be used for mine clearance operations.

Submarines - Out of six submarines, three are midget submarines with uncertain operational capabilities. Some guards in the navy, who are assigned to operate these undersea vessels, simply do not have the high level of training that is the pre-requisite for the successful operations of midget submarines. As for the three relatively modern Russian-supplied Kilo-class conventional submarines (the last one delivered in January 1997), Iran does not have

the necessary training, skill and support - in logistical and operational terms -to use them optimally in the near future. Almost all of Iran's submariners trained in the US prior to the revolution were either purged or have left the navy. The Iranian submarine command and control is undeveloped and it does not even have the VLF radio communications to contact the submerged submarines.¹³

These submarines can hardly be used in the shallow waters of the Persian Gulf and the Iranian submariners, in terms of undersea warfare, are novice compared with those of Pakistan or India. Even for sailing from Russia to Iran, the submarines were manned by a predominantly Russian crew. Considering the obsolescence and operational state of Iran's ocean going surface vessels and maritime reconnaissance aircraft, the procurement of three submarines, at a cost of over \$2.00 billion, has its roots less in military security priorities and more in attaining prestige. The use of these submarines in sea-denial operations is doubtful and at this stage their missions can be limited to laying mines in undefended waters.

Overall, in terms of conventional naval force, Iran is weak and hardly superior to the Saudi Navy, let alone the combined naval forces of the GCC. Saudi Arabia, with its high military expenditure and procurement of modern surface vessels (guided missile ships, hovercraft and minesweepers) together with a high rate of modernization of its navy and Air Force, is well equipped to be a powerful military force in the Persian Gulf. In terms of personnel, the Saudi Navy has risen from a strength of 6,000 in the mid-1980s to 13,500 in 1996.¹⁴ Besides the Saudi and other GCC naval capabilities, the Iranian Navy is facing the might of the US Fifth Fleet, composing some 35 ships and an aircraft carrier, and at least 150 aircraft.

Mines - While lacking mine sweeping and hunting capability, Iran has a reasonable capacity for laying mines. The rudimentary capability of mine laying was gained during the Tanker War; when cornered by Iraq's air superiority, Iran retaliated by laying mines (of the First World War type). These mines caused havoc in the Persian Gulf. Since then, Iran has acquired a range of moored contact mines. In addition, Iran is able to make its own moored contact and limpet mines - the initial endeavor for this began by the navy as early as 1981, under the name of 'Kooseh (shark) Project' in Bushehr.

The uncomplicated moored mines, suitable for relatively shallow waters, can be swept if laid in a confined area, however, they can cause major harassment when laid in a wide area, particularly along the shipping routes inside the Persian Gulf. If used in this way, the combination of harassment and heavy resource (and time-consuming operations of mine sweeping) is intended to act as a temporary deterrent. Iran is most likely to use its mines, like that of the Tanker War, as a reaction to offensive actions by the US or the Persian Gulf Arab states. It is noteworthy that the Strait of Hormuz, because of strong currents, among other things, is not well suited for laying moored mines.¹⁵

Iran does not possess the complicated bottom mines with sophisticated actuation mechanisms (pressure, acoustic, magnetic or combined) or anti-sweep device (such as arming clock, ship-count mechanism or delay release sinker). Nevertheless, Iran is keen to buy mines for deep waters and as such has been negotiating with China for its EM-52 rocket-

propelled rising mines.¹⁶

Shore-Launched Anti-Ship Missiles - Following the acquisition of the Chinese-supplied Silkworm (HY-1) anti-ship missiles during the Iran-Iraq War, Iran has also purchased a number of Seersucker (HY-2, a modified version of the Silkworm) and shore-launched C-801 missiles. The mobile operational launchers for these missiles are near the Strait of Hormuz and on Qeshm, Abu Musa and Sirri islands. The capability of these missiles to hit and damage ships is widely accepted. Considering the maximum range of these missiles (50-60 miles) - within the radar range of the operational launchers - the Strait of Hormuz can easily be covered by them. While these missiles present a challenging defensive problem to the US Navy, they are not, however, invulnerable to US massive power and varied and highly advanced countermeasures, for instance, the electronic deception of missile guidance systems; destruction of the launch platforms by aircraft or commando raid; and destruction of the missile in flight.

Naval Guerrilla Warfare Strategy

Apart from the submarines, the Iranian navy in its present form is a guerrilla navy. The strategy - based on the experience of the Guards' naval units in the last two years of the Iran-Iraq war in the Persian Gulf - is on the use of mines, small boats for hit-and-run operations and shore-based anti-ship missiles. Admiral Ashkebous Danekar, the former Deputy Commander of the Iranian Navy for Plans and Operations, in May 1988 (two months before Iran's acceptance of the UN Resolution 598) stated that "... only unconventional operations has compensated our shortage of equipment for conventional warfare".¹⁷ In enumerating the factors that can make the unconventional naval warfare a success in the Persian Gulf, he recommends it as a way forward for withstanding the US hegemonic pressure in the region.¹⁸

In reality, faced with an overwhelming US sea power, short of surrender, unconventional naval warfare is the only option open to the Islamic regime should any conflict arise between the Islamic Republic and the US in the Persian Gulf. Other factors that contributed to the adoption of the naval guerrilla warfare are: the weakness of the Iranian Air Force, the amalgamation of the Guards' untrained naval units (20,000 men at present) with those of the regular navy (18,000), the appointment of two guards as the commander and deputy commander of the navy, and above all, the shortage of funds. Iran's economy is in no shape to finance a major conventional naval force build up.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic's naval procurement, as indicated above, compared with those of its neighbors in the Persian Gulf has been modest and the threat posed by the Iranian Navy in the Persian Gulf has been greatly aggrandized.

In spite of its efforts towards professionalization and modernization, Iran's guerrilla navy suffers from severe weaknesses and its posture is defensive. The many and varied naval exercises of Iran in recent years (38 exercises between October 1995 and April 1996, according to Admiral Shamkhani) are part of its efforts "to show that it is capable of naval power in the Persian Gulf; to thwart enemy operations close to its shore; and to rectify serious

deficiencies uncovered during the Iran-Iraq War...".¹⁹

The notion that the revitalization of Iran's Navy, or for that matter its military, is for the domination of the Persian Gulf is a false proposition. Less convincing is Iran's naval capability to block the Strait of Hormuz in times of crisis. Moreover, Iran does not have a substantial maritime power-projection capability to invade the Persian Gulf states.

Economically, the Strait of Hormuz remains the main artery of Iran through which Iranian oil flows to the world market. Iran's ailing rentier economy more than ever before is dependent on oil revenue and the prospect of closing the Strait would be tantamount to shooting oneself in the foot. Iran's interest in keeping the Strait open is rooted in self preservation and not the threat of the US, real as it is.

Militarily, Iran simply does not possess the naval and air capabilities to close the Strait. The sinking of a few ships in the Strait by Iran is a possibility, however, this would cause no more than a temporary disruption as the Strait has sufficient depth and width (minimum 36 km) to provide alternative shipping routes. That said, it should be noted that a situation of this nature would only occur if Iran's own use of the Strait was being threatened or its sovereignty of Tunbs and shared sovereignty of Abu Musa was militarily challenged. However, should Iran escalate the attacks or broaden the confrontation by use or threat of unconventional weapons, it would face massive military retaliation by the US. In fact this is the worst case scenario that despite all its rhetoric, the Islamic Republic wants to avoid in the Persian Gulf, in which the Iranian and the US forces operate in close proximity and any misperceptions and miscalculations by any force can lead to the collapse of fragile order in the region.

To underline the avoidance of head-on confrontation with US, Ayatollah Khamenei recently stated: "... fighting Estekbar (oppression) does not mean...bombing the US fleet in the Persian Gulf... the Iranian nation and our officials do not wish to provide the US with excuses for frenzied actions against the Islamic Republic... our campaign [against the US] is not a military campaign... however, if Iran is attacked militarily ... our nation will defend itself with all its might".²⁰

External influences on the maintenance of security in the Persian Gulf, particularly that of the US, was a determinant factor in the 1970s. The Iran-Iraq War changed the US over-the-horizon role to a visible one and the 1991 [Persian] Gulf War altered it further to an enduring high profile military presence in the Persian Gulf in order to protect its access to the Middle Eastern oil. Indeed, the US has created a new, yet fragile, balance in the Persian Gulf predicated on US-Saudi Arabia, or more generally, US-GCC hegemony.²¹ Accordingly, the military capability of the GCC states, through massive arms transfers - evident in the surge in their military expenditure - are strengthened, in the main, by the US. As long as the US seeks to maintain the current order and exclude Iran and/or Iraq, the likelihood of establishing a viable and enduring security in the Persian Gulf will be remote.

Notes

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2. M. Eisenstadt, *Iranian Military Power: Capabilities and Intentions*. The Washington

- Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., 1996, pp.2-3. 3. For balanced view regarding the capability of the Iranian military see S. Chubin, *Iran's National Security Policy: Intentions, Capabilities and Impact*. The Carnegie Endowment, Washington, D.C., 1994, pp.29-57; and A. Ehteshami, "Iran's National Strategy: Striving for Regional Parity or Supremacy" *International Defence Review*, Vol.27, April 1994, pp.29-37.
4. P. Daneshvar, *Revolution in Iran*. Macmillan Press, London, 1996, pp.150-153.
5. S. Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War*. Routledge, London, 1988, pp.164-202.
6. *Military Balance*, various years.
7. Figures regarding purges in the Iranian Navy were compiled after interviewing three former senior Iranian naval officers who served in the Navy before and after the revolution.
8. See G.F. Rose, "The Post Revolutionary Purge of Iran's Armed Forces: A Revisionist Assessment," *Iranian Studies*, Spring-Summer 1984.
9. P. Daneshvar, *Revolution in Iran*, Op.cit., p.152.
10. S. Chubin, *Iran's National Security Policy: Intentions, Capabilities and Impact*, Op.cit., p.29.
11. *Jane's Fighting Ships*, 1996-1997.
12. Iran lags behind the rate of modernization of S. Arabia. For further details regarding Iran's hybrid Air Force and its modest offensive capability see A.H. Cordesman, "Threats and Non-Threats from Iran" in J.S. al-Suwaidi, ed., *Iran and the Gulf: A Search for Stability*. The Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, 1996, pp.241-248.
13. M. Eisenstadt, *Iranian Military Power: Capabilities and Intentions*, Op.cit., pp.52-55.
14. For details Saudi military strength see A.H. Cordesman, *Saudi Military Forces in the 1990s: The Strategic Challenge of Continued Modernisation*, 18 August 1993, 65pp.
15. M. Eisenstadt, *Iranian Military Power: Capabilities and Intentions*, Op.cit., p.56.
16. Ibid.
17. A. Danekar, "Jangha-ye Qayr-e Klasik dar Khalij-e Fars" [Unconventional Warfare in the Persian Gulf] in *Majmu'a-ye Maqalat-e Seminar-e Barrasi-ye Masa'el-e Khalij-e Fars* [Compendium of Papers from the Seminar for the Study of Persian Gulf], The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Iran, 2nd edition, 1369 (1991), p.271.
18. Ibid., pp.272-284.
19. A. Hashim, "The Crisis of the Iranian State: Domestic, foreign and Security Policies in Post Khomeini Iran," *Adelphi Paper* 296, IISS, 1995, p.54.
20. *Iran Times*, Vol. XXVI, No. 35, 8 November 1996.
21. S. Chubin and C. Tripp, "Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order," *Adelphi Paper* 304, IISS, 1996, 75-80.