The Costs of War with Iran: An Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield

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Abstract

This paper describes the possible Iranian responses to American or Israeli air strikes. Using the U.S. Army’s analytical tool, “Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield,” it will define the operational environment of a war with Iran, and describe Iran’s terrain broadly. The paper describes how Iran’s military has adopted asymmetric tactics to defeat conventionally superior enemies, like America. Using this background, I will lay out the “courses of action” available to Iran at sea, air, ground, in other countries and by conducting terrorism around the globe.

(Portions of this article appeared in individual posts on my website, On Violence, but have been significantly rewritten for this paper.)

Introduction

When it comes to war with Iran--whether a limited air strike or a full-on invasion--proponents for war tend to exaggerate the benefits (preventing a nuclear Armageddon for Israel) while obscuring the costs (the number of dead U.S. soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines). For example, Matthew Kroenig defended his Foreign Affairs article “Time to Attack Iran” by saying:

“As other readers of the article know, I fully engage with the many negative consequences of military action, including possible Iranian missile and terror attacks against U.S. bases, ships, and allies in the region.”

Or Charles Krauthammer describing the U.S. Navy breaking an Iranian blockade of the Straits of Hormuz:

“We will succeed, but at considerable cost.”

I understand why pundits use ambiguous language like “negative consequences” or “considerable cost.” When proponents for war with Iran put numbers to their predictions, support for military action against Iran plummets. When asked “if attacking Iran started a war similar in length and costs to war in Iraq” only 37% of Americans still supported war, according to a Reason-Rupe poll.

But war with Iran might not even resemble another Iraq or Afghanistan; it could be worse. Iran could fire ballistic missiles at population centers, supply the Taliban with guided missiles, or fire anti-ship missiles at U.S. warships in the Persian Gulf. Unfortunately, most reporting on Iran revolves around whether Iran has nuclear weapons, not the costs of starting another war in the Middle East.

With this paper, I hope to explain those costs. I will use my experience and training as a U.S. Army
military intelligence officer to describe the options available to Iran. Specifically, I will answer the question, “What courses of action could Iran pursue immediately after an American or Israeli initiated air war?” To answer this question, I will use the traditional method of analysis of the U.S. Army, the Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB).

First, a few caveats. This will not be a strictly doctrinal IPB. Such an IPB uses maps, rulers and weapon capability charts to define the exact capabilities of an opponent. Since I do not have an intelligence staff, and since readers don’t want to read a document several hundred pages long (the likely length of the CENTCOM IPB for this scenario), my IPB will only sketch out Iran’s broad capabilities and options. Further, an IPB is traditionally a tactical tool. My IPB will venture into Iran’s strategic and operational approaches, a topic much more relevant to the debate than Iran’s specific tactical plans.

Second, I believe America will avoid a ground invasion of Iran. Since America hasn’t made the logistical moves to support a ground invasion, to destroy Iran’s nuclear program America or Israel must launch a coordinated air and naval bombing campaign. As such, my IPB will focus on an Iranian response to that likely attack.

Third, I will not predict how Iran will respond. They could use all of the options at their disposal. Or none of them. I will merely lay out their options and the possible costs. For papers predicting how Iran could respond, please see my bibliography at the end.

Finally, I used no classified material while making this IPB. Because of this hindrance, some of my analysis will miss the mark simply because of Iranian or American deception, exaggeration or confusion.

Many military analysts and think tanks have described the general military options available to Iran in previous papers. However, I believe the Army’s method of intelligence analysis--summarized for this paper--will provide readers with a guide to an Iranian response to an American military attack. It will also give Americans an idea of the possible costs of starting yet another war in the Middle East.

Thesis: Iran has several options--from the traditional to the unconventional--to respond to an American or Israeli air strike. Based on my analysis, I believe Iran easily has the capability to make war more costly in terms of American lives than either of the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Outline of My IPB

A traditional IPB has four steps: define the operational environment, describe the operational environment, evaluate the threat, and determine the threat courses of action. This paper will primarily focus on Iran’s capabilities and courses of action.

In step one, I will define the operational environment, which spans from Iran to Europe to America. In the next section, I will describe the operational environment. Iran’s large land mass and mountainous terrain will not affect the fight as much as the tiny strip of water called the Persian Gulf. Then I will describe Iran’s military in broad strokes, or step three “evaluating the threat.”

Step four--the longest section--will describe the courses of action available to Iran in six different domains of warfare. The first areas I will cover are the conventional domains: sea, air and ground. Then I will cover the unconventional or asymmetric realms of warfare, including ballistic missiles, proxy wars and terrorism.

Step 1: Define the Operational Environment

In the Army’s Field Manual 2-01.3, “Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield”, it explains in pitch perfect Pentagonean that, “if all the relevant characteristics [of the battlefield] are not identified, the
command may be surprised and unprepared because some overlooked feature of the operational environment exerts an influence on the success of the command’s mission.” (FM 2-01.3, Page 2-2)

In English, “Define the battlefield broadly or you may lose.”

When it comes to war with Iran, we should follow this advice. Jeffrey White, Seymour Hersh, James Fallows and others have made this point about a possible war with Iran. The U.S. and Israel cannot contain a war within Iran and the waters touching its shores. In James Fallows words, Iran “has lots of ways to inflict retaliatory damage directly on Israel and U.S. troops...in the region, and...indirectly on the world economy and American interests in general.”

However, the war will probably start at sea. The Persian Gulf (the name I will use for this paper), presents U.S. capital ships with severe limitations due to its shallow depth and narrow width. As for importance, approximately twenty percent of the world’s oil supply passes from the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman through the Straits of Hormuz. This makes the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman not only military targets, but economic targets for Iran.

While a war with Iran will probably take place at sea, it will also likely spill over into its neighbor’s territories as well, starting with Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran could target American diplomats, troops, contractors and civilians remaining in those countries. Pakistan has chilly relations with Iran because of Iran’s friendly relationship with India. Turkey will closely watch a war with Iran because of the large Kurdish population they share. Azerbaijan has allegedly leased or rented some airfields to Israel, making it a critical staging ground. This alliance between Israel and Azerbaijan could make Azerbaijan a target in an Iranian counter-attack. While its other neighbors--Armenia, Turkmenistan, Russia, and Kazahkstan--have so far avoided intervening in the Iran conflict, a war could still draw them in.

Yet, we cannot stop there. An Iranian response--or American diplomacy to gain international recognition for a war--will draw in countries from around the region and globe. The Gulf Cooperation Council nations--Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates--all lie across the Persian gulf from Iran. Each country also has generally had strong ties with America and would likely support or assist with American military action against Iran, making themselves targets of Iranian aggression. In any attack, Iran would likely try to harm Israel--one of the more vociferous leaders arguing for military action against Iran. Finally, all the members of the E.U., NATO, or the U.N. Security Council could either support or hinder U.S. military action in Iran. Depending on their support, they could also become targets of Iranian terror attacks.

Step 2: Describe the Operational Environment

While I defined the operational environment above, I am going to specifically describe only the battlefield of Iran in this section. Iran is unlike any country America has fought since 9/11. Mainly, it’s bigger. Iran is larger in terms of both people and land mass (79 million and 1.6 million square kilometers) than Iraq and Afghanistan put together (31 million/30 million and .43 million square kilometers/.65 million square kilometers). This reason alone makes an American invasion unlikely. It will also complicate air strikes from Israel and America. Finally, this will increase the risk of any rescue operations America or Israel could conduct.

Demographically, the Persian ethnicity dominates the country with 61% of the population, followed by Azeri (16%) and Kurdish (10%) minorities with Lur, Baloch, Arab, Turkmen and Turkic tribes. Iran is 98% Muslim, dominated by 89% Shia Muslims. Hypothetically, America could “encourage ethnic tensions” in these minority groups as described by Hendrik Hertzberg in the New Yorker. While some analysts see a strike on Iran encouraging democratic protesters, with its large religious and ethnic
majorities, Iran’s internal situation is largely stable, as seen by the lack of protests during the Arab Spring. (Gardiner, page 35)

Finally, the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman will directly play into Iran’s naval strategy, which I will describe in Step 4, The Sea War. Also, Iran’s distance to various opponents will effect its decision to launch ballistic missiles, which I will address in “Iran’s Courses of Action: Ballistic Missiles.”

Step 3: Evaluating the Threat

On the surface, one can easily dismiss Iran’s military. While Iran does invest heavily in its armed forces, it barely approaches Western spending levels. Take Stephen Walt’s description:

Iran is not a very powerful country at present, though it does have considerable potential...But its defense budget is perhaps 1/50th the size of U.S. defense spending, and it has no meaningful power-projection capabilities. It could not mount a serious invasion of any of its neighbors, and could not block the Strait of Hormuz for long, if at all....

On the one hand, I agree with Stephen Walt: Iran does not have the capability to strike the U.S. or project power conventionally in the Middle East for long, if at all. It cannot deploy troops or control surrounding bodies of water with its navy. It lacks an air force capable of defeating its neighbors in an extended campaign. Western arms embargoes have atrophied Iran’s advanced weapons capabilities, especially in air defense, conventional ships and manned aircraft. Iran has tried to develop an internal defense industry in response, but it still has a long, long way to go before its domestic arms production resembles anything close the Western arms manufacturing. (Cordesman and Wilner 2011, 6)

However, Iran makes up for its resource and technology shortcomings through wit, cleverness, experience and initiative. Unlike previous U.S. opponents, Iran plans to fight the U.S. unconventionally. The most well-funded and trusted branch of the Iranian military--the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)--specializes in asymmetric warfare. The Ayatollahs hold the IRGC in the highest esteem and shower them (relatively) with money. (Cordesman and Wilner 2011, 7)

The IRGC’s most trusted unit, the Quds Force (The closest thing Iran has to JSOC or CIA Operations branch, if the CIA or JSOC supported terrorism.) has operated for the last 30 years in countless countries around the Middle East, gaining experience fighting insurgencies, waging asymmetrical war, and studying the United States and Israeli militaries. The Quds Force and its relationships around the Middle East and world give Iran the ability to project unconventional power in terror attacks.

This strategy could work better than either Iraq’s conventional response during the U.S. invasion or the irregular responses of the Taliban and Iraqi insurgents. Unlike insurgent groups in Iraq and Afghanistan, who use low technology weapons because they lack the funds for anything better, Iran could marry high-tech weapons like anti-ship cruise missiles with irregular strategies.

With this mindset and preparation, Iran might have the best strategy of any opponent the U.S. has faced since 9/11. Afghanistan barely had a military. Al Qaeda hides in caves in Pakistan. Saddam never trusted his military, viewing it as a threat to his power. As a result, the Iraqi Army never embraced irregular warfare. The Ayatollahs--comparatively--love the IRGC; its name literally means “the guardians of the revolution.” Iranian Prime Minister Mahmoud Ahmadinejad worked in the IRGC in the 1980s and under his leadership the IRGC has “expanded their power base.”

While Iran could be the best opponent the U.S. has faced since 9/11, they still cannot “beat” the U.S. war machine in a fight. They literally don’t have enough planes, boats, soldiers or tanks to invade America, or even stop a conventional U.S. military attack. But Iran doesn’t need to. Iran simply needs the capability to
make war too costly in terms of American lives for U.S. politicians to continue to support the war. Iran will try do that in several domains of warfare, which I will discuss in the next section.

Step 4: Determining Iran’s Courses of Action

To determine how Iran could counter-attack the U.S. with its asymmetric capabilities described above, I will divide step four into the various domains of war. First, the conventional areas: sea, air and land. Second, the unconventional arenas: ballistic missiles, proxy wars in other countries and terrorism. I will end each section by describing, in broad strokes, the various courses of action available to Iran.

The Sea War

Iran plans to fight the U.S. asymmetrically at sea, using hit and run attacks with sea and land-launched anti-ship cruise missiles, mines, mini-sub and suicide boats. In almost no scenario can Iran destroy the U.S. Navy--it just doesn’t have the naval strength--but Iran could possibly inflict thousands of casualties in a short period of time. (Office of Naval Intelligence 2009, 7)

Since World War II, the US Navy has not lost a sea battle or even lost a capital ship. The U.S. also hasn’t fought an even semi-competent opponent--North Korea/China, North Vietnam, Israel (accidentally), and Iraq. In each case, U.S. ships barely suffered any harm while utterly destroying their opponents.

Which brings us to the intersection of the American and Iranian navies. The largest American naval battle since World War II occurred in the Persian Gulf in 1988, during the last year of the Iran and Iraq war. Called Operation Praying Mantis, U.S. military warships obliterated the Iranian Navy. Iran learned a lesson: fight conventionally and you will lose, while inflicting hardly any casualties on the Americans. (Haghshenass 2008, 6)

Iran has two navies preparing to fight the U.S. The first navy, the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy, or IRIN, is the smallest branch of Iran’s entire military. The bastard child of Iran’s armed forces, it has only five frigates, three corvettes and no capital ships to its name. In addition, IRIN suffers from material shortages.

On the other hand, Iran’s leaders shower money on Iran’s other navy, the Iran Revolutionary Guards Corps Navy (or IRGC Navy). The IRGC Navy has roughly 20,000 people spread over hundreds of small, agile boats: patrol boats, commando boats, missile boats, torpedo boats and fast attack craft.

The IRGC Navy has a plan too: guerrilla war at sea. Hiding along Iran’s 1,000 nautical mile coastline, the IRGC’s small boats will emerge to conduct hit and run attacks that avoid America’s conventional superiority. This quote from the Small Wars Journal article, “Iran’s Response to a U.S. Attack” by Michael V. Rienzi sums up my worries:

“While Iran has added some of these [capital ships] recently, the majority of their buildup has constituted mostly of small boats that are fast and capable of firing lethal missiles, including cruise missiles. They have built up these forces partially through acquisitions of Chinese missile boats and Chinese C802 anti-ship cruise missiles and torpedoes. Iran’s use of fast attack crafts have a history of success; during the Tanker Wars in the 1980’s Iran used swarming techniques to overwhelm larger slower moving ships throughout the Gulf.”

With this small, asymmetric navy, Iran has several ways to attack the conventional U.S. Navy:

- Anti-ship guided missiles. Some of these missiles have been mounted onto ships; some are dug into tunnels in islands in the Persian Gulf, hardened and hidden. All these missiles can fire well into the gulf. (Office of Naval Intelligence 2009, 7)
- **Mini-submarines.** Iran also owns 6 “Ghadir” midget submarines. As North Korea showed when it sank the South Korean ship Chenoan, mini-submarines present another threat to large capital ships. (Office of Naval Intelligence 2009, 18)

- **Suicide attacks.** The most successful naval attack on the U.S. since 1987 was the **USS Cole bombing.** Iranian suicide attacks could take place in harbors or at sea.

- **Marine raids.** The IRGC Navy has a highly-trained 5,000 person strong marine unit that “can carry out extensive raids against gulf shipping...or other countries.” (Cordesman and Wilner 2011, 50)

- **Mines.** The IRGC has developed multiple unconventional delivery platforms for this weapon system which, in previous wars, has been its most successful weapon. (Haghshenass 2008, 16)

Iranian naval forces will likely try to attack U.S. vessels with a combination of different attacks. It will also try to swarm U.S. vessels with multiple small craft at the same time, overwhelming U.S. defense. This strategy, of course, would come at a high cost, sacrificing many Iranian sailors to sink one ship. But the rewards—possibly thousands of sailors dead, possibly billions sunk to the bottom of the gulf—well exceed the risks. The ensuing U.S. rescue operations in the Gulf will also carry tremendous risks.

The **Persian Gulf’s geography** suits naval guerrilla warfare; both narrow (340 kilometers at its widest, 55 at its narrowest) and shallow (mostly less than 35 meters), and lined with a 1,000-mile coastline that can hide Iranian small boats and shore-based anti-ship missiles, Iran has tailored its naval strategy to maximize its advantages in this lake disguised as a gulf. Worse, pirates, smugglers and small boats fill the gulf, perfect for the IRGC Navy to hide its ships. The IRGC has a navy designed for the gulf; the U.S. Navy has one designed for the open seas.

Iran has also prepared for the overwhelming U.S. firepower advantage, which will likely target Iranian communications. According to the Office of Naval Intelligence, “Iran also began decentralizing its command structure in order to decrease its reliance on communications and enable continued resistance in the event of an attack.” They can fight without dependency on higher headquarters for decisions, something our own military can’t do. (Office of Naval Intelligence 2009, 7)

This gives Iranian small boats, “the ability to strike at larger conventional forces with little, if any warning.” (Cordesman and Wilner 2011, 7) As John Arquilla has warned, this strategy could work very well. In **Millennium Challenge 2002,** a war game conducted by the Pentagon, General Paul van Riper—simulating a hostile Middle East nation like Iran—used asymmetric tactics and weapons like small boats, cruise missiles and torpedoes to swarm and sink dozens of U.S. ships, killing thousands of sailors, in effect validating the IRGC Navy’s strategy.

Some critics have also pointed out that Millennium Challenge 2002 showed the danger of allowing the enemy the element of surprise and that, now, the U.S. Navy will not let small boats approach it. Except, according to **The Weekly Standard,** they do:

> In the last few months, Iranian boats have retreated only when U.S. vessels have fired warning shots. While the Pentagon does not publicize such incidents, sailors say there are now near daily occurrences. The proximity of the Iranian boats means that, should any be intent on a suicide plot, American sailors would likely lose their lives.

Of course, the American military has prepared for Iran’s asymmetric tactics. When questioned before
congress, Admiral Jonathan Greenert, Chief of Naval Operations specifically described the “counter-swarm” capabilities the Navy has deployed to the gulf to discourage an Iranian counter-attack.

Though the U.S. Navy has a plan for Iran’s naval attacks, the IRGC Navy gives Iran its best option to hurt or kill thousands of U.S. service-members in the conventional areas of war.

Iran’s Naval Courses of Action:

**Most Likely COA:** Iran chooses to fight the U.S. using asymmetric naval guerrilla warfare. In the best case scenario, the U.S. wouldn’t lose a single ship. In the worst case, the Iranian plan succeeds wildly (similar to General Paul van Riper’s success in Millennium Challenge 2002). The U.S. loses dozens of ships and thousands of sailors. The rescue mission would then become a target of increased Iranian aggression. (Technically, this is the same course of action as above, just differing in degrees of success.) In either scenario, there is a good chance the U.S. Navy loses at least one vessel in the narrow confines of the Persian Gulf.

**Most Dangerous Course of Action:** Suicide boats. The IRGC recruits fanatics or die-hards to drive multiple suicide ships into U.S. capital ships. The IRGC recently acquired speedboats which could work perfectly for this tactic, and could probably avoid U.S. Navy counter-fire, designed for missiles.

**Conventional:** Iran learned nothing from 1988 and the IRIN attacks America conventionally. The U.S. Navy defeats Iran conventionally again. Iran loses thousands of sailors several ships while the U.S. Navy would likely emerge with limited damage.

**Marine Raid Option:** Some Iranian small boats avoid attacking U.S. capital ships and conduct raids on ports, oil rigs or civilian targets of G.C.C. nations. Very high-risk for the Iranian marine forces, but could hurt the political resolve of U.S. allies.

**The Escalation Option:** Iran chooses to mine the Straits of Hormuz, requiring a costly American-led mine clearing operation. Depending on the state of the war to this point, Iran could choose to reengage with swarming tactics aimed at U.S. capital ships.

**Most Surprising Option:** The Islamic Republic of Iran Navy somehow uses a submarine to attack a U.S. ship in the Gulf of Oman. Essentially, this means the Iranian Navy would score a conventional victory, which would stun me.

The Air War

I generally agree with Michael Rienzi, **who writes**, “If this war were to ever to take place, it would be conducted mostly from the air and sea, something the Iranians fully understand.” However, while Iran has invested in offensive naval weapons as described in the previous section, crippling Western sanctions have prevented Iran from fielding an even remotely modern air force. Iran will fight the air war on the defensive.

Weapons embargoes have prevented the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force from modernizing, and Iran struggles to keep the planes it does have flying. They may have up to 312 combat air craft, but up to 60% of those planes may be combat incapable. The Aerospace Force of the RGC has scant support compared to the IRGC Navy, and focuses on unconventional capabilities like UAVs, not fighter planes. Thus, compared to its rivals like Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., Iran lags in air power. Though the G.C.C. countries have weak air defense systems, the U.S. could easily bolster them in the event of a war. (CSIS, “Iran and the Gulf Military Balance” page 27) When it comes to projecting air power, Iran has few
options with its air force.

The same Western arms embargo that atrophied Iran’s Air Force has degraded Iran’s air defenses as well. As Anthony Cordesman writes:

“Iran has extensive surface-to-air missile assets, but most are obsolete or obsolescent. All of these systems are poorly netted, have significant gaps and problems in their radars and sensors, and are vulnerable to electronic warfare. Once again, Russia is Iran’s only current potential source of the modern weapons Iran needs, and it would take major deliveries of a new integrated air defense system based around the S-300 or S-400 surface-to-air missile to change this situation.” (Cordesman and Wilner 2011, 26)

Despite these deficiencies, the U.S. Air Force still worries about Iranian air defenses. In a post about the Air Force’s desire for a new long range bombers on Times’ “Battleland” blog, General Norty Schwartz specifically mentioned Iran’s improvements to their air defense weapons. Air Force Assistant Secretary Jamie Morin also worries that air defense technology is “proliferating very rapidly” and “widely available and comparatively cheap.” In other words, relatively inexpensive surface-to-air missiles (versus astoundingly expensive U.S. warplanes) give Iran an affordable approach to the air war.

Iran has two air defense systems. In the first, it relies on Russian imports like the SA-2, SA-7, SA-14 and SA-16. In its second air defense system, Iran has attempted to replace its Russian SAMs with its own domestically produced versions, like the Misagh, Mersad, Sayyad 1 or Gharch. As Anthony Cordesman notes, Iranian generals likely exaggerate the capabilities and quantities of these missiles. So Iran has a variety of missiles with long and short-range capabilities, but many are aging or obsolete. (Cordesman and Wilner 2011, 26-29)

The bottom line on Iran’s air defenses: the U.S.S.R. at the height of the Cold War this is not. Iran has invested heavily in ground-based air defense, but not enough. The equipment it has, it cannot repair. Its long range surface-to-air missiles will remain a threat, and could down several aircraft, but can’t kill nearly as many people as a sunk U.S. capitol ship. Iran will keep investing in air defense weapons, but will lag behind the U.S. for years or possibly forever. With a thorough “suppression of enemy air defenses” mission, U.S. planes could fly with near immunity.

Iran’s Air War Courses of Action

Most Likely Course of Action: Iran aggressively uses its air defenses to counter U.S. war planes. Iran has virtually no incentive to passively let the U.S. attack it on its own soil. In the best case, the U.S. doesn’t lose a single aircraft. In the worst case, Iranian air defenses surprise U.S. commanders, and Iran downs several American or Israeli planes. The most likely result is that the U.S. loses at least one plane to either enemy action or a malfunction.

Least Dangerous Course of Action: Iran saves its surface-to-air missiles to use during a possible U.S. invasion. (It could also export its SAMs to Afghanistan or for use in terror attacks. I will discuss this in “The Proxy Wars” section.)

Most Surprising Course of Action: Iran tries to use its air craft in an offensive role, trying to attack its neighbors it believes supported the air strikes including Azerbaijan or G.C.C. countries. Because of their lack of modern air craft and the advanced U.S. fighters in the air, this option has a low chance for success.

The Ground War
Iran’s ground forces have few options to counter-attack America and Israel. Iran fields a large conventional army according to military observers like the International Institute for Strategic Studies and Jane’s Sentinel—over 350,000 soldiers, with 3,000 armored vehicles and 8,000 artillery pieces—but uses mostly low paid, poorly trained conscripts. (Cordesman and Wilner 2011, 36) Combined with mostly aging and obsolete equipment, the Islamic Republic of Iran Army cannot project power or sustain combat outside Iran, which severely limits its options to attack either Israel or America directly. The IRGC Land Forces do have an additional pool of 120,000-130,000 men in the IRGC, but these force are mostly used for internal security. (Cordesman and Wilner 2011, 19)

Iran’s Ground Forces Courses of Action

Most Likely Course of Action: Iran’s ground forces prepare for invasion. Meanwhile, Iran’s Army and IRGC quickly become the targets of an American bombing campaign. However, Iran’s army commanders would still try to prepare for a U.S. invasion, especially if U.S. forces started massing in Afghanistan. Further, Iranian regular and asymmetric forces would try to capture or attack any downed U.S. aircraft or special operations teams within Iran.

Attacking Israeli Bases in Azerbaijan Course of Action: As I mentioned in Step 1 “Defining the Operational Environment,” Azerbaijan has leased some of its airfields to Israel. If Israeli warplanes attacked Iran, and then landed in Azerbaijan, Iran could hypothetically attack Israeli troops at Azerbaijani bases. Such an aggressive move by Iran would likely unify global support around regime change and the U.S. would use it’s air power to attack massed Iranian ground units.

The Ballistic Missile War

If Iran’s leaders believe America intends to overthrow their regime, their ballistic missile inventory will provide them with their best means to kill large numbers of civilians in a (desperate) bid to sap their enemy’s will to fight. Iran’s missiles threaten countries from Pakistan to Greece. Jeffrey White explains their capability:

“Missile systems (principally the Shahab 3 variants and Sejjl types) allow Iran to strike targets throughout the Middle East, including population centers, military facilities, infrastructure and U.S. forces based in the region.”

Anthony Cordesman elaborates:

“Iran has also created robust nuclear and ballistic missile programs, which have become a focal point of US-Iranian military competition. Iran’s missile program dates to the 1980s, and was fully underway during the Iran-Iraq War. While Iran’s ballistic missile capabilities were initially limited, the range and sophistication of the country’s missiles has increased greatly since its inception in the early days of the Iran-Iraq War. Iran has now created conventionally armed ballistic missile forces that can strike at US allies and US bases in the region with little warning, and could be configured to carry nuclear warheads if Iran can develop them.”

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Iran has the largest ballistic missile inventory in the Middle East, most of which can travel 1,000-2,500 kilometers, including a limited store of medium range missiles that could strike southern Europe. More importantly, their missiles could hit Israel, the Green Zone in Iraq, U.S. bases in Afghanistan, and G.C.C. countries.
Fortunately, Iran’s missiles cannot currently hit pinpoint targets. Unfortunately, Iran is desperately working to change that. (Cordesman and Wilner 2012, 5) How have they progressed? The Iranian military tends to exaggerate their achievements, which leads to incredible uncertainty about their exact capabilities. Anthony Cordesman sums the confusion up in one concise paragraph:

“There is no agreement as to when Iran may acquire missiles with homing warheads and the kind of terminal guidance that can hit point targets effectively with conventional warheads. There is no agreement on the reliability and accuracy of Iran’s missiles under operational conditions, there is no agreement on Iran’s ability to deploy systems with countermeasures to missile defenses. There is no agreement on when Iran might deploy a fully functioning nuclear warhead. And, there is no agreement on the future size, character, and basing mode of Iran’s missile forces once its long-range systems are deployed in strength.”

(Cordesman and Wilner 2011, 5)

Two factors determine whether and how Iran will use its ballistic missile inventory. First, ballistic missiles are a “use it or lose it” capability. The moment war starts, U.S. bombers and cruise missiles will attack those sites where they can find them. Second, unless Iran’s missiles have guided capabilities the intelligence community doesn’t know about, Iran will fire their missiles at civilian targets broadly, trying to frighten population centers, including isolated military bases.

This will also test Israel and America’s missile defenses. Israel has designed the Arrow missile defense system specifically for Iran’s Shahab-3 missile. Israeli estimates believe that a sustained missile campaign could kill up to 500 Israeli civilians.

Finally, while Iran cannot arm its ballistic missiles with nuclear weapons, Iran may have chemical or biological weapons. According to Sam Gardiner, Colonel (Ret.), the Director of National Intelligence “judge[s] that Iran maintains a small, covert CW stockpile.” (Gardiner 2010, 43) Even if Iran doesn’t have an operational program, according to Anthony Cordesman, “Iran has all the technology needed” to produce “sophisticated biological weapons.” Obviously, chemical and biological weapons would dramatically increase the number of casualties Iran could inflict, but would outrage the global community. (Cordesman and Wilner 2012, 98-99)

Iran’s Ballistic Missile Course of Action

**Fire Long Range Missiles at Israel:** Most likely option based on Iran’s past statements about Israel.

**Fire Missiles at Azerbaijan:** Possible, if Iran believe Israeli warplanes used airfields in Azerbaijan. This could provoke larger international criticism of Iran.

**Fire Missiles at Gulf Cooperation Council Countries:** Possible, especially if G.C.C. countries support the U.S. military operation. Iran could also try to hit U.S. naval facilities in Bahrain, Kuwait or other G.C.C. countries. America’s base in Kuwait makes an especially enticing target because it is in the middle of the desert, far from any Muslim civilians.

**Fire Long Range Missiles at Europe:** Unlikely. This risks bringing in a host of other countries to join the coalition and a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Iran.

**Fire Missiles at the Green Zone in Iraq:** Unlikely. If they miss, they threaten local Iraqis who have supported Iran. Using other forms of terrorism in Iraq would be less risky for Iran’s military.

**Fire Missiles at Bases in Afghanistan:** Likely. If the IRGC chooses not to escalate, or even if it
does, this could provide an excellent diversion. Iran is less worried about the population’s support in Afghanistan.

Most Dangerous Course of Action, Using Chemical or Biological Weapons: Very unlikely, but very dangerous.

The Proxy Wars

When looking at the three conventional domains of war--ground, sea and air--Iran can hope to inflict some casualties on the U.S. (especially at sea), but it will still most likely lose men, vehicles and weapons to superior American and Israeli firepower. Therefore, Iran could choose to change the battlefield. Instead of fighting in Iran, it could move the battlefields to proxy wars in neighboring countries. As Alireza Nader writes for the United State Institute for Peace’s Iran Primer:

>The IRGC’s secretive Qods Force has trained and equipped proxy groups, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Iraqi Shiite insurgents, and even elements of the Taliban. Some surrogates have already been used to target U.S. and other Western forces in Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan; they could be used against U.S. targets outside Iran in the event of a future conflict.

Iran has a history with using proxies to further its interests around the Middle East, particularly Hezbollah. During the Iraq War, U.S. national security officials frequently blamed Iran for its support for Shia extremists. While Iran did supply some Shia insurgents with IED-making equipment, it always limited its support. Kenneth Pollack, quoted in The Atlantic, sums up Iran’s actual actions versus what they could have done:

>“The Iranians really have not made a major effort to thwart us...If they wanted to make our lives rough...they could make Iraq hell.”

This Seymour Hersh article makes makes the same argument: Iranian agents could have done a lot more in Iraq than they did. As David Kay said when the U.S. was still in Iraq, “Iran is not giving the Iraqis the good stuff—the anti-aircraft missiles that can shoot down American planes and its advanced anti-tank weapons.” Iran held back on its support of proxies in Iraq and Afghanistan to avoid provoking an overwhelming American response.

If America (or Israel) starts an extended bombing campaign against Iran, that restraint disappears. Iran has three options for a proxy war: Afghanistan, Iraq and the G.C.C. countries with majority Shia populations.

Thus far in the war in Afghanistan, Iran has only provided minimal support to the Taliban, nothing like the support they provided Shia extremists in Iraq (Fitzgerald and Varun 2011, 5). Even General Petraeus has acknowledged that Iran facilitates Taliban operations, but nowhere near the level it could.

When generals or analysts talk about Iran’s restraint when supporting proxies in Iraq and Afghanistan, they almost always mean that Iran hasn’t provided guided missiles to insurgents. If Iran wanted to hamper American goals in Afghanistan, it would supply the Taliban with surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), like, ironically, the ones America gave to the Pashtun insurgents in the 1980s. Currently, the U.S. hasn’t lost a single aircraft to a guided surface-to-air missile.

Iran could supply two types of guided missiles to the Taliban: surface-to-air or anti-tank. The IRGC Quds Force would likely target relatively slower, lower flying U.S. helicopters with their surface-to-air missiles. This would remove one of the biggest U.S. tactical advantages from the battlefield. Without helicopters (or their use severely curtailed), special operations units would have to limit their missions; U.S. forces would then travel the country by vehicle, increasing the risk of IED attacks; NATO forces would also lose...
Iran could complement this anti-air strategy with an influx of anti-tank guided missiles. Several articles in the Jerusalem Post describe Iranian support and training of Gazans in the use of Iranian-made anti-tank missiles. Iran could also begin exporting IED materials (like explosively formed penetrators) or special forces trainers into Afghanistan as well.

The biggest hindrance to supporting proxies in Afghanistan is developing relationships with the insurgency. Iran already has operatives on the ground in Afghanistan, but mostly in predominantly Shia areas, the Western part of the country. They also have strong inroads with Hezara groups, another Shia sect persecuted by the Taliban for years. While Iran has some contact with the Taliban, they don’t like working together. Despite news stories describing the influence of Iran in Afghanistan, Iran doesn’t have nearly the same connections with the Taliban as does Pakistan’s ISI. (Fitzgerald and Varun 2011, 5)

In Iraq, Iran’s best option for a proxy war is to use the sources and proxies it developed during the Iraq war to launch attacks against Americans in the Green Zone in Baghdad. While the IRGC Quds force would have less targets to choose from, it has many more allies and supporters in Iraq than Afghanistan and it would have generally the same tactical options--SAMs, anti-tank guided missiles and IEDs in addition to terror tactics.

In addition to targeting U.S. troops and diplomats in the two countries America has fought lengthy wars over the last decade, Iran could try to start wars or domestic unrest in America’s Middle East allies, the Gulf Cooperation Council nations. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia both have large Shia populations that “could be a useful resource and environment for terrorist and irregular operations.” Iran will believe the G.C.C. nations are complicit in an American attack by either providing staging bases or intelligence. However, trying to start a full-fledged civil war in a Shia majority country like Bahrain will require a massive influx of Quds force operatives, which probably exceeds or matches Iran’s capabilities.

**Iran’s Proxy War Options**

**Most Likely Course of Action:** Iran heavily increases its support of IED operations in Afghanistan through its connections with the Taliban.

**Anti-Air Course of Action:** In addition to IED support, Iran starts importing large numbers of man-portable SAMs into Afghanistan. Iran and the Taliban could launch a coordinated campaign against American aviation assets. To maintain surprise, Iranian agents would try to coordinate their attacks over a handful of days. They could also support a major Taliban offensive, and use SAMs to harass close air support.

**Anti-Tank Guided Missile Course of Action:** Like the anti-air course of action, but smuggling in anti-tank guided missiles to attack ISAF vehicles like MRAPs.

**Most Dangerous Course of Action:** Iran combines all three above courses of action. I find this unlikely since it would divert too many resources, but it could kill large numbers of U.S. troops. As I said above, Iran could either try to pick off helicopters by themselves, or use them to support large “Wanat-style attacks” while holding off U.S. close air support. In the worst case, the war in Afghanistan goes from bad to terrible.

**Most Surprising Course of Action:** Sniper operations. I lived in fear of these when I deployed to Afghanistan. Fortunately, Afghan insurgents don’t have good marksmanship training, or access to top-of-the-line sniper rifles. The IRGC Quds Force doesn’t have these same limitations. Plus, high-powered sniper rifles, and their bullets, are easier to smuggle into Afghanistan than guided
missiles.

**Iraq Course of Action:** Technically, the U.S. doesn’t have troops in Iraq. Realistically, America has thousands of contractors and diplomats. Iran could target them with IEDs, anti-tank missiles and SAMs. It could support Prime Minister Maliki or Moqtada al-Sadr to persecute Sunni minorities or create a more theocratic state in line with Iranian values.

**Start Proxy Wars in GCC Countries:** Support would come either from the sea using IRGC Navy’s marine units for infiltration or from IRGC Quds Forces already in the countries. In the best case, the GCC countries intercept attempts to start revolutions and only low level terrorism results. In the worst case, full-fledged civil wars start in said countries. This escalates the conflict as violence approaches U.S. bases. This could also cause problems with world opinion as the U.S. sides with oppressive regimes against democratic movements.

**The Terror War**

In addition to the more conventional options open to Iran, in the words of Jeffrey White, America could “find itself involved in a ‘secret war’ of terrorist attacks and special counter-terror operations” well outside of Iran and the Persian Gulf. Some experts, like Daniel Byman of the Brookings Institute, say this kind of war has already started. As Magnus Ranstorp of the Swedish National Defense College describes Iran, it “is a superpower in intelligence terms in the region; they have global reach because of their reconnaissance ability.”

Unlike more conventional forms of warfare—which require weapons and vehicles—predicting how Iran will use terrorism is much more difficult.

Take, for instance, predicting where Iran could attack. They could attack America, Israel, allied nations in Europe, Gulf Cooperation Council nations (roughly allied with America), Pakistan or Iraq. Iran could choose to attack Americans in America, Americans in Europe, Europeans in Europe, Americans and Europeans in the Middle East, Israelis in Israel, Israelis elsewhere in the Middle East, or any of its neighbors in their countries.

Or try predicting how they could attack. They could bomb buildings, take hostages, or shoot down airliners. They could use chemical or biological weapons. They could use terrorism techniques counter-terrorism analysts haven’t thought of yet or capabilities we don’t know they have, like cyber-attacks. And good luck predicting the intentions of an elite unit shrouded in secrecy like the IRGC Quds Force. (CSIS Gulf Military Balance, Page 23)

Unlike other options for war--such as a vicious naval war in the Persian Gulf or a proxy war in Afghanistan--when it comes to launching terror attacks, Iran has time on its side. While America could bomb Iranian ballistic missile batteries as soon as the war starts, it would have to run difficult, resource-intensive and time-sensitive counter-terrorism operations around the world to eliminate suspected IRGC Quds Force members, Iranian intelligence operatives or proxies.

Iran will have its own difficulties running a terror campaign. Terrorism requires an extraordinary amount of planning. The Mumbai attacks, for example, required dozens of visits by at least one operative, and countless hours of training for the attackers. The 9/11 attacks required flight school training for at least eight people. Even the well-funded IRGC Quds Force only has so many people it can spare for terrorism. (Anthony Cordesman estimates the Quds Force has between 5,000 to 15,000 people total in the organization.) (Cordesman and Wilner 2011, 51)

The IRGC Quds Force, Iranian intelligence and their proxies have a pupu platter of options for how to
attack, but only a small cadre of personnel to carry out those attacks. Further, any terror attacks risks a global backlash.

Iran’s Terrorism Courses of Action:

**Conduct terror attacks on G.C.C. nations:** Possible. The Quds Force has intelligence operatives spread throughout the region and each G.C.C. country has a sympathetic Shia population.

**Conduct terror attacks in America:** While the Quds Force does have a “North American Directorate,” I do not think Iran has terror cells in America. If discovered, it would give America casus belli for regime change, something the Ayatollahs want to avoid. (Gardiner, “The Israeli Threat” page 36)

**Conduct terror attacks in Europe:** Unlikely for the same reasons Iran will avoid upsetting America. Attacking Europe would draw in European support for regime change.

**Conduct terror attacks on Israel:** Possible, but I believe Iran will target Israel with ballistic missiles.

**Conduct Cyber Attacks:** Iran has invested at least one billion dollars to develop cyber-war capabilities. Like other forms of asymmetric attacks, Iran’s cyber capabilities remains shrouded in secrecy.

**Conclusion: Escalation**

“Wars begin when you will, but they do not end when you please.”

Machiavelli, *The History of Florence* Book III, Chapter 2

“There is no such thing as a quick, clean war... War will always take you in directions different from what you intended.”

Colonel T.X. Hammes, *The Atlantic* “Will Iran Be Next?”

Unlike either Iraq or Afghanistan, Iran could fight America at sea, in air, in other countries and by threatening civilians. Far and away, though, the most dangerous option for war with Iran isn’t a downed bomber, a sunk aircraft carrier or surface-to-air-missiles targeting U.S. helicopters in Afghanistan; the biggest threat comes from a war which escalates out of control. As Jeffrey White in *The American Interest* tells it:

“Given the political context in which military engagement would rest, even a minor attack would likely become a major test of strength involving not only the United States and Iran but also a host of allies and associates.”

Or as Jonathan Marcus describes the situation for the BBC:

“With so much instability in the Middle East—not least because of the Syria crisis—there is a very real risk of an Israeli strike sparking a much broader regional conflagration.”

Or as Jeffrey White reflects:
“It seems fairly clear then that a conflict with Iran is unlikely to be an isolated event in which the U.S. strikes, Iran retaliates, and it’s over—with Iran either left with a viable nuclear program or not.”

For example, if America loses a fighter, bomber or transport plane, America will have to mount a rescue operation, which means sending in helicopters. Helicopters, as special operations troops learned in the Osama bin Laden raid, can crash. Of course, America might have to send in ground troops regardless. As Seymour Hersh wrote in “The Iran Plans”, “Some of the facilities may be too difficult to target even with penetrating weapons. The U.S. will have to use Special Operations units.” Any American ground troops found in Iran could easily escalate the conflict.

If Iran sunk an American aircraft carrier, shot down over a dozen U.S. helicopters in Afghanistan, conducted a terrorist attack in America or Europe, used a ballistic missile to kill over a hundred people or some other worst case scenario I previously described, then world opinion could quickly turn against Iran. And that might compel America to invade Iran.

One final note: I am sure that many readers will disagree with some of my assessments in this paper. Perhaps they will find the threat of terrorism more likely. Perhaps they will say that the IRGC Navy cannot even dream of sinking a U.S. carrier. Perhaps they worry that Iran will respond in some method I didn’t write about here. I hope that dissent happens, and I look forward to it, because it will mean that the U.S. is finally having a dialogue about the costs of a war with Iran in a substantive manner.

Bibliography


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Michael Cummings is veteran and a writer, who deployed to Afghanistan in 2008 with the 173rd Airborne Brigade as a platoon leader, and Iraq in 2010 with 5th Special Forces Group as an intelligence officer. Eric Cummings is a writer who lives in Los Angeles. We run a milblog at www.onviolence.com, Our outside writing has appeared in the Washington Post, Stars and Stripes, The New York Times’ “At War” blog, FP.com/Thomas Ricks’ “The Best Defense” blog and Infantry magazine. In addition, the Small Wars Journal has linked to our blog several times over the years.


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