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# Iranian Military Doctrine

by [Firas Elias](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### [Firas Elias](#)

Firas Elias is an expert in national security and Iranian studies.



### Brief Analysis

**A** military doctrine is "the system of concepts officially adopted by a country and the arrangements taken to fight against threats and ensure security, as well as to prevent wars and armed conflicts." It is also "the system of advanced visions of military formation and preparation of the country, armed forces and other teams to defend the homeland." It includes guidance on preparing for and managing an armed or unarmed conflict in order to defend a country. In essence, military doctrine is a declaration of the state's policy [on defense](#).

Lessons learned from the Iran-Iraq War from 1980-1988 gave rise to important elements of Iranian military doctrine that continue to shape Iranian military actions in the present day. Other experiences—such as the 2003 American occupation of Iraq, the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006, and the conflict between Palestinian movements and Israel—have also yielded lessons that guide the country's political ideology and strategy. Iranian military doctrine centers on asymmetric warfare. It emphasizes the use of geography, strategic depth, and a general willingness to accept losses in the name of jihad as ways to confront technologically-advanced adversaries such as the United States and Israel.

Iran uses religious sectarianism as a strategic tool to expand the country's influence in the region. The role of sectarianism is not merely rhetorical, but manifests on the ground in the country's support for Shia minorities across the Arab world. Where opportunities exist, Iran tries to establish or provide support to Shia political parties or militias abroad, including Hezbollah, that work toward their interests by pressuring their respective government. This is also achieved by the failure of political movements incongruent with Iranian interests. This was particularly apparent in the case of the Houthis, in which case the Iranian government provided military support for the Houthis until the occupation [Sana'a in September 2014](#).

Iranian actions in recent years demonstrate that Tehran's use of sectarianism aims to portray itself as the leader of the Shia regionally and globally. Its constitution permits intervention to defend Shia anywhere, regardless of violations of borders and state sovereignty. In March 2016, comments by President Hassan Rouhani reiterated [this stance](#): "Iran will intervene in any place where Shia are being threatened by terrorists." This pretext has provided

justification for Iranian interventions in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain. With the partial lifting of U.S. and European sanctions on Iran following the implementation of the nuclear agreement in January 2016, Tehran has continued to support its militias, exacerbating sectarian conflict throughout the region.

Under the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iranian military doctrine was based on Western armament and thought. Most of the military deals during that time were with the United States and other Western countries, with many Iranian officers being sent to those countries for training. With the Iranian Revolution in 1979, authorities executed a large number of military officers loyal to the Shah while others fled—particularly those in the Navy. This attrition resulted in the loss of tactical expertise by the Iranian armed forces capable of applying appropriate combat doctrine in the battlefield and striking a balance with regular armed forces. Thus, Khomeini established the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to become the “long arm” of Iran in the region. The aim was to transform Iran's post-revolutionary military doctrine into a doctrine of revolutionary enthusiasm, "Islamic" principles, and Shia ideology—allowing Iran to recruit volunteers fighting in the name of jihad.

It is sufficient to point out that the Iranian constitution constructs the Iranian army and Revolutionary Guard on this sectarian foundation. These forces are not only responsible for protecting and guarding borders, but also for carrying the "burdens of its divine mission:" jihad for the sake of God, expanding the rule of divine law, and the ideology of vilayet-e faqih. **Khomeini announced** in a statement issued on July 30, 1988:

“We will work with all our being to reduce the phenomenon of bribery and immunity of US officials, even if that requires a desperate struggle. We will not allow the repetitive performance of surrender and compromise with America, Russia, non-believers, and infidels in the Kaaba and the Hajj. This is the great stage that should bring the call of the oppressed to the world. We ask God to grant us such power, to spread the message of death to America and Russia, not only from the Kaaba of Muslims, but from the churches of the world.”

Similarly, Qassem Suleimani, head of the Quds Force, **stated in 2016** during a commemoration of the Islamic Revolution that "the leaders of the Islamic revolution have become famous throughout the region, from Bahrain to Syria, Yemen, and even North Africa.”

There are some challenges facing this doctrine, which have resulted from the convergence of political and military leadership and later resulted in political conflict within the military. This negatively impacted Iran’s military philosophy and led to the transfer of political conflict between the conservative and reformist movements into the military establishment, by challenging revolutionary concepts, going against the ideas of the revolution’s leaders, and retreating inside Iran’s borders. This clash, which has been escalating since 2015, is especially pronounced between the army and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The signs of this dispute are evident in statements made by IRGC leader Hassan Abbasi, who strongly criticized the Iranian army and called it weak, angering army leaders. The leaders of the regime, led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, soon became emboldened to contain this crisis. However, the statements of Abbasi revealed the vulnerability and lack of commitment and military discipline within the Iranian security apparatus.

Finally, it must be noted that in light of the political conflicts that have begun to impose themselves on Iran’s military establishment, its military doctrine will be presented with several paths in the future, including a shift to a defensive stance due to domestic changes and external challenges from the increasing pressures of the United States and its allies. The lack of coordination between the IRGC and the military may also have serious implications for the strategic planning process, especially those related to key issues concerning Iran’s role in the region. The new changes initiated by President Rouhani’s government, which aim to fit the curriculum in Iranian schools and universities to suit the requirements of UNESCO, have been met with firm rejection by the conservative movement, which contend that these changes will eliminate many of the revolutionary concepts developed by Khomeini by and therefore will have serious repercussions for Iran’s military doctrine. Furthermore, the prioritization of Iran’s

regional enemies—and thus regional developments—is subject to constant change. Before, Iraq was an enemy. Now, it is an ally. As such, inconsistency in the stability of Iran’s military doctrine will directly reflect upon this ranking of enemies and strategic priorities—and thus on the political and the security stability of the region. ❖



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