

# Iran Keeps a Lid on Its Latest 'Great Prophet' Exercise

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Brief Analysis

**The restrained nature of this month's military demonstration could signal a combination of dynamics in Tehran: a reaction to the Trump administration's arrival, a shift in the regime's threat assessments, or continued internal political maneuvering.**

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps concluded its "Great Prophet 11" exercise on February 21, part of a series of annual military demonstrations that typically involve elaborate missile launches, naval swarm maneuvers, highly publicized tests of new weapons, and other grand gestures. This year, however, the drills were relatively low profile, with the IRGC deploying only a limited number of ground units to the eastern border regions and focusing on counterinsurgency tactics, along with some classic "hearts and minds" operations aimed at winning over impoverished local inhabitants.

There could be a number of reasons behind this change. One seems to be a shift in Iran's threat perception, from an emphasis on powerful conventional forces such as the U.S. military to proxy/civil wars involving nonstate actors and potential cross-border insurgencies. But this shift has been evident since at least 2014, without affecting the missile exercises conducted over the past two years. Another potential factor is the formation of President Trump's new security and defense team, which may have had a soothing effect on Iran's often blunt military posture, at least temporarily. Then again, reports of a [secret missile test on January 29](#)

[\(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-latest-missile-test-scenarios-and-implications-for-the-new-administra\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-latest-missile-test-scenarios-and-implications-for-the-new-administra) indicate that Tehran's missile research and development program was

hardly affected by the changes in Washington.

Whatever the case, this year's exercise was the most subdued since the series began in 2006 -- the only comparable year was 2014, when Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei cancelled the drills entirely amid intense nuclear negotiations

with the P5+1. Yet Iran's seemingly mixed motives were evident in that situation as well, with the regime resuming the exercise in all its provocative glory a year later amid similarly intense negotiations, along with separate missile unveilings and tests.

## THE GREAT PROPHET'S PURPOSE

IRGC ground and naval forces conduct the Great Prophet exercises separately from Iran's national armed forces (Artesh), which hold their own drills and seldom exercise jointly with the Guards. Iranian leaders have often used the IRGC exercises as an occasion to convey political messages and strengthen their deterrence, whether against Israel or Western powers that maintain a significant military presence near their borders.

During Great Prophet 1 in 2006, Tehran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz if hostilities broke out, and the IRGC practiced laying sea mines near the congested waterway. In the following three exercises, the regime deployed large swarms of speedboats around the Persian Gulf and fired Shahab-3s and other missiles at desert targets inside Iran. During the 2010 exercise, IRGC naval commandos raided a decommissioned ship and set it afire on live television.

The IRGC upped the ante even further during the 2012 and 2015 exercises. In the former, they conducted a distributed missile attack against a mockup of a regional U.S. air base in the central Iranian desert, firing multiple salvos from separate launch sites. And in the latter, they tried to sink a simulated aircraft carrier with missiles, just as world powers were engaged in laborious negotiations aimed at reaching the interim nuclear agreement (in April 2015) and the final Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (July 2015). At the time, IRGC commanders credited the eventual success of the negotiations to their own military deterrence efforts. In later months, Iran continued to stage isolated "deterrence-boosting events," such as test-firing the new Emad ballistic missile and leading television journalists on a guided tour of an underground missile complex.

More recently, parts of the Iranian government have reportedly sought to manage the Islamic Republic's messaging by limiting activities such as public tests of medium-range ballistic missiles and satellite launches. Even so, the dilution of this year's Great Prophet exercise cannot be taken as a definitive sign that Tehran wants a gradual de-escalation with the United States. It could, however, reflect IRGC deputy commander Hossein Salami's repeated characterization of the United States as a frail and hopeless power with a worn-out, unprepared military that no longer poses a threat to Iran -- a description he repeated on February 20. And one way to visualize that weakness is to make a full-length **animated movie (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-trump-animation-idUSKBN15U1E1>)** in which the U.S. Navy and American military bases in the region are obliterated by Iranian forces (the producer of the new movie claimed to have made it independently, but its imminent arrival in Iranian theaters is clear evidence that it was regime-sponsored).

At the same time, the IRGC may be trying to address what it sees as an increasing threat of insurrection by ethnic Iranian militant groups (including Kurdish elements) in the border regions, as highlighted by IRGC Ground Forces commander Mohammad Pakpour at a February 18 news conference. According to him, long-range missiles would be of little use against that type of enemy. Instead, the preferred weapons would be armed drones, so-called "guided rockets" (presumably the new Fajr-5 with control vanes), landmines, improvised explosive devices, long-range artillery, and small special operations groups -- the very types of capabilities highlighted in this year's Great Prophet exercise.

## CONCLUSION

It is difficult to single out the real intention of Iranian decisionmakers at a time of apparent struggle between ideological firebrands within the IRGC and pragmatists in President Hassan Rouhani's government. The changes in this year's Great Prophet exercise could stem from a desire to avoid a faceoff with the new U.S. administration, or the shifting nature of the Islamic Republic's perceived threats abroad and at home, or all of the above. And there is

no telling whether these changes represent a long-term shift or just a temporary response to recent developments (e.g., the Trump administration's heated criticism and sanctions order following the January 29 missile launch).

In addition, hardline officials and IRGC commanders continue to issue public warnings about growing domestic challenges that threaten to strip the "revolution" of its "jihadi mentality," and these warnings are increasingly being directed at the Rouhani government. On February 10, Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, the Supreme Leader's top military advisor, challenged the executive branch's strategic management of the country at almost every level. Similarly, the IRGC has often used high-profile military drills to counter conciliatory signals sent by pro-engagement government officials such as Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, and to show the United States and other actors that they should not get overenthusiastic about the prospects for improved Iranian relations with the West.

Here the IRGC seems to be grappling with a tension in its identity. As an Islamic revolutionary entity, it is *taklif*, or duty-oriented, a tradition bequeathed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. According to this model, no interests or politics or other worldly calculations should get in the way of the IRGC's revolutionary religious duty, and historically, the Guards have often taken actions that run against Iran's national interests. Today, however, geopolitical realities and domestic developments are clearly complicating that "divine" mission.

With Iran's presidential elections only months away, and with hardliners seemingly eager to push back against the Rouhani camp's lack of enthusiasm for controversial missile exercises, there is no guarantee that the de-escalatory trend seen in this month's military exercises will continue into the future. But the Islamic Republic's key foreign policy actors -- whether within the clerical, diplomatic, or military sectors -- should understand that sending mixed signals in a chaotic neighborhood only increases the risk of misinterpretation and escalation.

*Farzin Nadimi is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region.* ❖

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