

Iran's Air Force Overshadowed by the IRGC

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Brief Analysis

A recent crash highlights the air force's struggles to maintain its readiness and budget at a time when Revolutionary Guard leaders are pushing for a deterrence posture based solely on their own ballistic missile arsenal.

On May 24, the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF) lost yet another young fighter pilot, Maj. Roozbeh Nazerian, in an accident involving a Russian-made MiG-29 jet on a routine training flight. It was the IRIAF's thirteenth aviation accident and fourteenth fatality in just five years, and it triggered an emotional response among Iranians on par with the recent army casualties in Syria. While occasional spikes in accident rates might seem normal in any air force around the globe, Iran's problems are distinctive because it has a shrinking and unrenewable air fleet, lower-than-average flight hours, and massive budgetary disadvantages compared to the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) -- a result of both international sanctions and shifting priorities at the highest levels of the regime leadership.

UNDER PRESSURE

In recent years, the IRIAF managed to secure just enough funding to overhaul and upgrade some of its surviving military aircraft, but their age and wear make full replacement long overdue. The air force has been under pressure from those who question its viability for some time, and it lost all of its air-defense assets to a new army branch in 2009. Meanwhile, the IRGC enjoys a favorable position with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, attracts a much larger share of the direct annual defense budget and indirect funds, and has steadily transformed itself into a dominant economic force. It has also managed to convince the Supreme Leader that a dynamic missile program will enhance deterrence more effectively than the IRIAF ever could.

This argument seemed to have some merit at first -- right up until Russian forces intervening in Syria demonstrated

that flexible and persistent air power could be a better force multiplier than any ballistic missile arsenal. When Moscow ordered its first airstrikes there last September, they were quickly seen as a turning point for the embattled Assad regime; in contrast, a ballistic missile force would likely have limited utility during such a fast-changing, asymmetric war.

The IRIAF reportedly took the opportunity to lobby Khamenei on revitalizing the air force, and for a while it appeared to secure its future by plucking some money away from the IRGC's missile projects. In response, however, the IRGC launched a public-relations frenzy, showcasing the survivability of its medium-range missiles by hosting elaborate televised tours of vast underground missile complexes. It also claimed to possess more accurate missiles, such as the Emad with a claimed "circular error probable" of only 8 meters.

In contrast, despite making about \$230 million in the past year through overhauling military and civilian aircraft (according to the published budget), Iran's aviation industry has been unable to develop a viable design for a modern fighter jet of its own, and any claims to the contrary have proven to be deceptive. This makes a foreign purchase the only viable option for a major IRIAF upgrade in the foreseeable future.

THE RUSSIAN CONNECTION

After the Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988, Tehran turned to Moscow to replenish its battered air force. The first of thirty-five MiG-29s arrived in September 1990, followed by a squadron of Sukhoi Su-24 long-range strike jets. Although these aircraft were delivered with a twenty-year support commitment, the promised Russian technical documentation and assistance were lacking, eventually undercutting the improvement in capabilities that the new planes represented. Today, the IRIAF's fleet continues to lag behind its Western counterparts in both readiness and performance. The air force has even had to bring experienced technicians out of retirement to cope with the growing challenge of keeping its aircraft flying.

Last summer, Iran sent a high-ranking delegation to the MAKS-2015 air show in Moscow. It was led by President Hassan Rouhani's science and technical advisor, Sorena Sattari, son of the late air force commander Gen. Mansour Sattari, who had spearheaded the previous drive to buy Russian jets. According to the Russian state-run media outlet Sputnik, the trip led to announcements that Iran might purchase up to 100 advanced Su-30 fighter-bombers and Yak-130 jet trainers as part of a larger \$8 billion arms deal. Rumors of a similar agreement with China emerged as well.

Yet UN Security Council Resolution 2231 restricts all such sales to Iran for five years after adoption day of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear agreement that went into force in October. During that time, potential sellers need to seek the council's approval before shipping any combat aircraft to Iran. Moscow and Beijing seem reluctant to openly contravene that restriction, so it is unclear whether and when any new fighter jets will actually end up in Tehran's hands.

BUDGET CRUNCH

According to the latest figures published by the Iranian legal portal Shenaname, the government's unclassified defense budget for the current Persian fiscal year of 1395 (March 21, 2016, to March 21, 2017) is \$9 billion, a 43 percent increase over the previous year. While this amount is small in comparison to Saudi Arabia's \$45.9 billion budget, the IRGC and certain other military branches no doubt have additional sources of revenue, and their official funding was further expanded when parliament appropriated another \$1.4 billion using money released under the JCPOA.

Yet the air force was apparently left out of this budgetary windfall. The national armed forces (Artesh) will receive \$2 billion this year, but only \$5.3 million of that is to be spent on "refurbishing the air force fleet" -- a paltry amount when one considers that a single Su-30 costs \$47-53 million. Similarly, only \$3.5 million is earmarked for rebuilding

air bases, and \$8.3 million for overhauling army helicopters. The Iranian aviation industry received nothing from the budget this year, perhaps because it is expected to rechannel some of the money it made last year into overhaul projects.

In contrast, the IRGC has reportedly been allocated \$4.9 billion, a 67 percent increase over the previous year, to which should be added the Basij Organization's budget of \$357 million. Moreover, the General Staff of the Armed Forces will have a separate \$684 million budget -- a 34 percent increase -- which includes \$430 million to be set aside for "improving defensive capabilities." This budget can benefit the IRGC or the Artesh. Currently, Iran sources a majority of its arms and military equipment locally, so the restrictions on foreign purchases are not as crippling to other branches as they are to the IRIAF.

While the current situation favors the IRGC -- which continues to dominate Iran's defense budget and battle planning with its underground missiles and agile naval programs -- the national air force hopes an eventual reintroduction to international suppliers will help it get back on its feet. In the meantime, IRIAF leaders can try to show Iran's decisionmakers that conventional armed forces are a more sustainable option than a secretive ballistic missile program run by a rival revolutionary organization with an eccentric agenda and few practical bounds. And perhaps someday, a responsible, modern Iranian air force can emerge to work with the international community in the region and beyond. Whether the IRIAF is ever permitted to play such a role abroad, or even gain ground at home vis-a-vis the IRGC, will depend on the Islamic Republic's future political trajectory.

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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