

Iran's Army Suffers Its First Casualties in Syria

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Brief Analysis

Elements of the national army have officially joined the IRGC on Syria's battlefields, but Tehran's apparent public-relations strategy could backfire at home if casualties mount.

Following a string of unverified reports and social media photographs suggesting that members of the Iranian national army (or Artesh) had been deployed to Syria, their presence was confirmed this week via new casualty announcements and official remarks. As suspected, army personnel have been involved in fighting around the same areas where the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) previously established a presence, namely Damascus and Aleppo.

On April 10, reports emerged that a sergeant from the 65th "Nohed" Special Airborne Brigade had been killed in Syria. The next day, Iranian media reported that Col. Mojtaba Zolfaghari-Nasab, head of intelligence for the 45th Special Forces Brigade, had been killed in action as well, along with an officer from the 2nd Brigade, 58th Special Forces Division (a rapid response unit), an officer from the 3rd Mechanized Infantry Brigade, 88th Armored Division, and at least one other officer. They were reportedly killed in firefights with the al-Qaeda-affiliated rebel group Jabhat al-Nusra in the Hani Touman and Zitan districts southwest of Aleppo; in addition, several army personnel were wounded.

Also on Monday, army commander Gen. Ahmad-Reza Pourdestan officially confirmed for the first time that members of the elite 65th Airborne Brigade and other branches of the national armed forces have been fulfilling "advisory" and intelligence-collection roles in Syria. The 65th Brigade was formed in 1959 as the 23rd Special Forces Brigade, complete with an irregular warfare school; American Special Forces advisors helped with its establishment. The brigade was reorganized and renamed in 1991 and now maintains an elite unit specializing in counterterrorism and hostage rescue operations.

During the shah's reign, the army deployed a sizable military contingent (including special forces) to Oman in 1972-1973 to help the sultanate fight Marxist guerrillas. Army elements also helped Iraqi Kurdish forces fight Baghdad's military in the 1970s. In 1982, the post-revolutionary army's 58th Brigade briefly deployed to Syria as part of a joint IRGC task force aimed at blocking Israel's advance in Lebanon. They were soon recalled, though, after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini changed his mind.

In general, then, the army has limited experience abroad, and apart from the navy, other members of the national armed forces are rarely sent on foreign missions -- according to Article 148 of the constitution, they can only be deployed to protect Iran's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In contrast, the IRGC has a dedicated command structure to deal with overseas assignments.

So to keep up, the army has made strides to improve its asymmetric warfighting capabilities, creating more mobile battalions and introducing weapons and tactics more suited to such environments. And in February, the commanders of Iran's air and air-defense forces volunteered their services to help protect the Assad regime and its airspace, while unconfirmed reports indicate that Iranian fighter-bombers might have seen limited action over Syria in late 2015. Tehran and the military leadership both seem to view the Syria intervention as a welcome opportunity to gain experience fighting a determined, well-equipped enemy in irregular environments. Yet the army's apparent efforts to take advantage of that opportunity on the ground have just proven deadly.

One possible explanation for Tehran's decision to employ Artesh elements in Syria could be to improve public opinion on what has become an unpopular and relatively costly foreign adventure. The Revolutionary Guards play a primary role in fighting the Iranian regime's domestic and foreign enemies, and they proved in 2009 that they can be ruthless in quelling civil unrest. Partly as a result of this reputation, the IRGC's insistence on supporting militant groups in Syria and elsewhere has failed to win the hearts and minds of mainstream Iranians, so regime leaders may be hoping that the presence and sacrifices of the popular national armed forces will attract more support among the people. This tactic could backfire, however, if Artesh casualties in Syria continue to mount.

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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