Deterring Iran:

Lessons from History

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Brief Analysis

On June 18, 2009, David Crist and Steven Ward addressed a special Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to discuss the lessons that Iran and the United States drew from their military encounters in the 1980s. David Crist is senior historian for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and author of the forthcoming Washington Institute study, Gulf of Conflict: a History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea (2009). Steven Ward is a senior CIA intelligence analyst and author of the critically acclaimed Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces (2009).

Steven Ward

Immortal argues that Iran's history provides important insights into the country's current military practices, doctrine, and tactics. Understanding this history would give the United States and its allies the tools to deter and, if necessary, to contain and combat the Islamic Republic.

Different Iranian governments throughout history have faced many of the same national security problems and consequently have developed many of the same solutions. Some of the recurring issues that have shaped Iran's history include the political elite's relationship with the armed forces, the role of the dominant religious establishment, the government's continual struggle to maintain central authority against competing power centers, and the country's frequent confrontations with technologically superior enemies. Despite these internal obstacles, Iran has been able to use unconventional military, political, and economic means to frustrate U.S. regional aims for decades.

Certain aspects of Iran's military history echo in its current armed forces. Ancient Iranian civilizations, notably the Parthians, employed cavalry archers to attack their opponents quickly and unexpectedly. In the nineteenth century, the Qajar dynasty deployed cavalry with expert marksmen armed with muskets. These swarming hit-and-run tactics have remained a mainstay of the Iranian military to this day. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) claims that a similar guerilla strategy was responsible for Hizballah's 2006 victory over Israel and that this type of approach would be used to close the Strait of Hormuz in the event of war.

IRGC commanders have publicly stated that in the event of an Israeli military strike on Iranian nuclear installations, Iran would retaliate by using both ballistic missiles and "other means," such as involving its proxies Hizballah and Hamas. More likely, however, IRGC operatives would carry out terrorist attacks against Israeli interests around the world, instead of attempting to target Israel itself. The Iranian response, of course, would depend in part on the scope and success of the Israeli attack.

Regarding current events: It is important to note that Iranian unrest is usually triggered by government action that brings public unrest to a boil, and the perception that the recent Iranian election was stolen certainly fits this pattern. Looking back to 1979, the shah's army should not have had any difficulty quelling the Islamic Revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini, however, acted very shrewdly by coopting -- instead of attempting to destroy -- the army. The

actions of the security services, and how they are perceived by the Iranian people, will play a vital role in how events unfold. It will be interesting to see if the Iranian opposition will follow the playbook of the 1979 movement, because this would offer the best prospect for neutralizing the military.

Although it will be challenging, Iran can be deterred. The Iranians have proven to be incredibly opportunistic -- primarily through the use of asymmetric threats and proxies -- in exploiting U.S. weaknesses in the region. Nevertheless, Iran is capable of rationally balancing its interests and determining when it is necessary to back off in order to avoid a full-blown conflict. Iranian leaders are primarily concerned with survival, and their decisions rest on remaining in power for the long term.

David Crist

From 1987 to 1988, the United States engaged in its only protracted military confrontation with Iran. Operation Earnest Will was primarily a naval operation designed to protect Kuwaiti oil tankers from Iranian attack during the Iran-Iraq war. For the most part, it was waged as a counterinsurgency campaign, much like Iraq or Afghanistan today. During this conflict, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) developed many unique strategies for dealing with the asymmetric Iranian threat.

This confrontation offers many lessons that are still applicable for both sides. For Tehran, the confrontation shows that while its asymmetric tactics were sound, a lack of proper military equipment and technology doomed the attacks. For Washington, the conflict provides a good case study for blunting Iranian military threats and understanding Iran's current military posture.

The IRGC navy utilized two primary asymmetric tactics to conduct attacks against neutral shipping in the Persian Gulf. The first was the use of mines, which provided Iran the same advantage -- plausible deniability -- as improvised explosive devices do for Iraqi militias today. With both Iraqi and Iranian forces laying mines, the Iranians were able to launch attacks against the United States without leaving behind conclusive proof of their culpability.

The second tactic was the use of small boats -- Boston Whaler-type cabin cruisers armed with rocket-propelled grenade launchers and machine guns -- which would swarm out and attack neutral ships. This "mosquito fleet" was not particularly effective at sinking anything, but it could inflict a fair amount of damage on large tankers. The small boats also had a fairly sophisticated method of operation, using offshore oil platforms and small islands as forward staging bases. This allowed Iran to project naval power throughout the Gulf.

To counter these tactics, the United States developed a counterinsurgency strategy that centered on intelligence, surveillance, and patrol operations. In order to patrol effectively, CENTCOM divided the Gulf into eight separate zones. CENTCOM maintained a ship or a helicopter in each zone, which allowed the military to react quickly if a suspected minelayer was spotted or if a small boat attack was thought to be imminent. This approach effectively shut down Iranian naval operations.

Iran's naval strategy in the Persian Gulf today is an improved version of its approach in the 1980s. If conflict with the United States escalates, Iran maintains a counterattack plan to shut off the Strait of Hormuz. The Iranian military now possess sophisticated, mobile, Chinese-made missiles, which are less susceptible to air strikes, and has acquired somewhere between three thousand and five thousand mines, which would allow the military to mine anywhere in the Gulf. These new capabilities give Iran a chance to at least temporarily shut down the Strait in a way that it was unable to do during the 1980s.

Iran has also improved its position greatly by acquiring antiship missiles and investing heavily in missile patrol boats, a strategy that has come at the expense of a larger, conventional navy. One of the lessons that Tehran took away from the confrontation in the 1980s is that it cannot stand up to the U.S. Navy in a traditional engagement. But these small missile patrol boats are able to blend in with normal sea traffic in order to get close to U.S. warships and

then launch a number of missile salvos that could inflict significant damage.

CENTCOM must continue to anticipate unconventional threats from Iran. For example, if the United States and its allies decide to impose a strict embargo on Iran because of its nuclear program, it would not be surprising if Iran resorted once again to a strategy that targeted coalition warships. Fortunately, from the U.S. perspective, Operation Earnest Will also confirmed that "coercive deterrence" worked in the end; after CENTCOM proved it could deal effectively with Iran's asymmetric threats through the use of force, the Iranians backed down.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by David Kenner. ❖

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