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# **Iran: “Weakling” or “Hegemon”?**

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### ***Executive Summary***

*Iran is a state that must be assessed largely in terms of its capabilities, not its intentions. Its political structure is too unstable to predict, and its choice of defensive or offensive options is more likely to be determined by its perceptions of future opportunities and risks than its current policies and strategy. Seen from this perspective, Iran is not a "weakling," but neither is it capable of major aggression or becoming a regional "hegemon" if it meets effective resistance from its neighbors and the US.*

*Viewed from the perspective of its capabilities, rather than its intentions, Iran presents five major kinds of current and potential threats:*

- *The first is as a conventional military power.* Iran has limited capabilities today but could become a much more threatening power if it modernized key elements of its forces and its neighbors did not react.
- *The second is as an asymmetric threat that can seek to intimidate or attack using unconventional forces.* Iran has established a large mix of unconventional forces that can challenge its neighbors in a wide variety of asymmetric wars, including low-level war of attrition.
- *The third is to some extent an extension of the second.* Iran's asymmetric and unconventional capabilities give it the ability to use proxies and partners in the form of both state and non-state actors. Iran's support of Shi'ite militias in Iraq, ties to elements in the Iraqi government, partnership with Syria, and ties to the Hezbollah in Lebanon are all practical examples of such activities.
- *The fourth is a potential nuclear power armed with long-range missiles.* Iran is a declared chemical weapons power. Its biological weapons efforts are unknown but it seems unlikely that it remained passive in reaction to Iraq's efforts. It has openly made the acquisition of long-range missile a major objective, and its nuclear research and production programs almost certainly are intended to produce nuclear weapons.
- *Finally, Iran presents a potential religious and ideological threat in a region and Islamic world polarized along sectarian lines.* For all of the talk about a clash between civilizations, the potential clash within Islam seems far more dangerous. The risk that Sunni and Shi'ite extremists can provoke a broader split between sects and nations could push Iran into a more aggressive religious and ideological struggle.

*These are potential threats, not predictions of Iranian actions. They all can be contained with the right choice of policies and military actions. Barring major shifts in its regime, Iran not only is deterrable, but a nation that will probably respond to the proper security incentives over time. The real question may well be whether Iran's neighbors and the US provide the right mix of deterrence and incentives, and not Iran's current and potential strength.*

*Given Iran and the region's recent history, however, there are several steps that Iran's Arab neighbors need to take to structure the best the mix of deterrence and incentives for Iran and do so in the context of a broader effort to bring regional security:*

- *Rely on actions not words.* If the Arab world has not yet succeeded in talking itself to death, it is not for the want of trying. The Gulf states far too often call for the right

actions without really taking them. In contrast, Iran's rhetoric, particularly that of its president, has been extreme and threatening in ways that often seem far more a matter of posturing than a reflection of Iran's true intentions. The US has overstated the Iranian threat, and referred to a non-existent "axis of evil," without developing real world plans for collective action. Presidential and Congressional rhetorical excess and empty gestures have provoked Iran without changing or containing it in ways that have become a self-inflicted wound. Israel has done almost as good a job in provoking Iran while exaggerating its importance in the Arab and Islamic world. Demonstrating a serious mix of deterrent capabilities, tied to a clear pattern of actions that do not threaten Iran or its regime if it is not aggressively opportunistic, is far better than provocative rhetoric or empty promises on any side.

- *Abandon efforts at active Iranian regime change without abandoning efforts to influence evolutionary change:* The Gulf and Islamic world do not need another example of the dangers of attempting regime change from the outside, and empowering incapable exile groups. Iran's political and economic structure badly need modernization, liberalization, and reform for the good of the Iranian people, but this should be encouraged peacefully and by quietly supporting internal Iranian reformers.
- *Create truly effective deterrent forces with a strong, integrated, and truly interoperable local component:* It may well be a decade or more before the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) can provide a strong mix of regional security and deterrent capabilities on its own. There is, however, a serious danger in simply going on with separate Gulf national efforts, many of which have limited real-world mission capability and deterrent value. There is no reason for the GCC state not to rely on the US, but the more they do for themselves, the less direct and provocative that reliance will be.
- *Resolve strategically unimportant disputes and seek clearly defined mutual agreements.* Many of the current tensions between Iran and its neighbors are over border, riverine, island, and dividing line issues that either have no strategic importance or where both sides would benefit from arbitration, mediation, or turning the issue over to the World Court. As Bahrain and Qatar have shown, persistent efforts to resolve issues on this basis may take years to initiate and complete, but can ultimately be successful.
- *Support negotiating efforts to have Iraq comply with the IAEA and UN, and peaceful solutions to the nuclear issue. However, make it unambiguously clear to Iran that seeking nuclear armed missile forces will trigger a major defensive reaction, and the risk of retaliation and/or preemption far more dangerous than the exercise is worth.* It may be years before Iran can develop a serious nuclear threat to its neighbors or one that could trigger a regional conflict, but it should be made clear to Iran now that the most dangerous military action it can take will steadily endanger its security, if not its existence.
- *Understand that the failure to deal with regional disputes and equity for Shi'ites in the Arab world empowers Iran.* Iran is only as strong in its ability to manipulate most state and non-state actors are partners and proxies as the Arab world is weak or indifferent in resolving its own internal disputes. One key to success is a collective effort to aid Bahrain's "post-oil" economy and its Shi'ites, another is social and economic equity for Saudi Arabia's Shi'ites and broad-based aid to the development of Lebanon.
- *Do not give up on Iraq:* The most important single key to offering Iran security in return for a halt to any adventurism and opportunism will be creating a stable, independent Iraq. It is doubtful that outside powers can produce Iraqi conciliation but they may well be able to offer aid and incentives that will limited forced migration, help bridge over ethnic and sectarian differences, and keep a Shi'ite dominated Iraq from tilting towards Iran. There will be a competition for influence, and if Arab Sunni states take the side of Iraqi Sunnis, they will play into Iranian hands.

- *Persist in the Arab League Effort to Reach a Full Arab Israeli peace and implement King Abdullah's Peace Plan.* The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israeli-Lebanese/Syrian conflicts are additional keys to Iran's ability to create regional problems. This is only one reason to persist in current Arab peace efforts in spite of the frustrations in dealing with Israel, the United States, and the Palestinians. The cause is simply too important to abandon.
- *Talk to Turkey, Syria, and Pakistan; seek Influence in Afghanistan and Turkmenistan;* Do not ignore Russia. This is a regional game in terms of influence, not a Gulf game. It needs to be played as such. The Gulf states need to talk to Iran's neighbors outside the Gulf, as well as Iraq's, in an effort to create a broader mix of containment and incentives.
- *Redefine GCC relations with the US to create a true Gulf security partnership:* The US needs to pay far more attention to its regional friends and allies in shaping its policies towards Iran and its overall security posture in the Gulf, particularly in light of the uncertainties surrounding Iraq and the need for consensus in dealing with Iraq. Gulf states, however, need to both take more responsibility and stop acting in a fragmented and sometimes divisive way. Iran is only one of the catalysts that should make the US and GCC states seriously think out the need to develop a coordinated approach to seeking Gulf security, and one based on pragmatism and military realities.
- *Accept the seriousness of the danger posed by both Shi'ite and Sunni religious extremists.* The moderate Arab states, and religious and intellectual leaders of the Arab world, need to work together to meet the challenge posed by extremists in both sects. A clash between civilizations has always been more of a myth than a reality, but allowing Islam to become the scene of a steadily accelerating struggle between Sunni and Shi'ite, dragging in both state and non-state actors, poses a threat that goes far beyond Iran, the Gulf and the risk of some "Shi'ite crescent."

There is always a debate among national security experts as to the extent a country should be judged by its intentions or by its capabilities. Both intentions and capabilities are always uncertain, even in the short term. They become progressively more uncertain with time. Domestic politics change perceptions and strategy, reality intervenes with plans, and external factors reshape both intentions and capabilities over time. States may or may not behave as they say, they plan, or as rational actors. In practice, crises sometimes lead to radical changes in intentions that can escalate or mutate as a given crisis develops.

Iran is no different in this respect from any other state. It is, however, politically more volatile than many of its neighbors, and more driven by ideology and religion. The tension between President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Khamenei is only one example of how difficult it is to be sure of Iran's current intentions, much less its future ones. Its security structure is still divided between its regular forces, the Revolutionary Guards, and its intelligence services. Its economy is weak and chronically mismanaged, and population pressure continues to be a problem in spite of a diminished birth rate.

It is unclear just how divided the various factions in its national security community really are. There are some claims that the Iranian National Security Council, or some structure within the Iranian government, exercises relative tight control over Iran's strategy, plans, and actions. At the same time, others claim that Iran now has an adventurist President and more cautious supreme leader that the Revolutionary Guards sometimes act upon their own, and that groups like the al Quds force take covert action or use proxies without full consultation or agreement within the central government. There are indicators to support all of these positions and there is firm evidence to support none.

Iran's intentions are further complicated by its dependence on imports for advanced high-technology weapons, its uncertain ability to fund major arms purchases, its difficulties in obtaining parts and upgrades for its existing systems, and its uncertain ability to execute its plans to develop its own military industrial base. Anyone can draft ambitious plans and goals, and Iran often does. Its ability to execute them, however, has proven consistently limited and many of its claims as to weapons buys, weapons development and production. Moreover, the claimed size and nature of its military exercises and other military activities are often more matters of propaganda than a measure of either its intentions or capabilities.

As for the uncertainties caused by Iran's domestic politics, calling any state a "semi-pluralistic, semi-populist, oligarchic theocracy" should be enough to explain both today's internal divisions and the future uncertainties surrounding Iran's regime and intentions. Iran will probably never again change its leadership because of outside efforts at regime change, but its political structure is simply too contradictory, divided, and inherently unstable for some form of internal regime change not to be inevitable. That change may well be evolutionary rather than radical, but it will occur.

### **Neither "Weakling" Nor "Hegemon"**

Many aspects of Iran's current and future capabilities, however, are as uncertain as its current and future intentions. On the one hand, Iran is surrounded by strong external

powers, many of whose intentions are equally unpredictable. These include a strong US military presence in the Gulf, a nuclear-armed Pakistan, Turkey with some of the most capable military forces in the region, an Iraq in the middle of a civil war, southern Gulf states that are individually weak but could become collectively strong, Russia, unstable central Asian powers, peripheral Sunni powers like Egypt, Jordan, and Syria; and peripheral threats like Israel.

Seen from this perspective, Iran has at least as much reason to think defensively as it does offensively. It may have offensive opportunities for regional political reasons and choose to exploit them if they occur. At the same time, it is "weak" as an offensive military power compared to most of its neighbors and any combination of the US and the Southern Gulf states. Iran certainly has the strength to play a spoiler role, but very limited capacity to finish any offensive major conflict that it starts on favorable terms.

As for becoming a regional "hegemon," this can only happen if Iraq's neighbors so weaken themselves as to become a virtual power vacuum. Iraq is the only state that currently has such potential weakness, it is far from clear that Iran could dominate even a Shi'ite controlled Iraq. Being Arab may well be more important than being Shi'ite. More important, few elites share power gracefully and for long.

It seems useful in this context to point out what the definition of hegemon really is. The word "hegemon" is the Greek word for "leader," and the dictionary definition of hegemony is the ability to exert, "preponderant influence or authority over others." Iran may sometimes be able to do this, but only if another nation chooses to find this to be to its advantage or is temporarily too weak or too badly led to resist. It lacks the current force to do more and can only shift the balance in its favor if other states fail to react.

Using the other party for self-advantage, and competing with the other party to see who can do the best job of using whom, is not "hegemony." It is "opportunism," and the difference between offensive and defensive opportunism is as unreal as the difference between offensive and defensive bullets. While no one can predict Iran's intentions, it is probably as pointless to demonize it as it is to sanctify it. Iran does what it must when it must, and seeks to get away with what it can when it can. Iran's leaders may be an awkward cross between the characters in a play by Samuel Beckett and one by Pirandello, but they all probably broadly understand the limits of Iran's position in spite of their theocratic character, as do most or all of Iran's neighbors. If there are gaps in this aspect of regional realpolitik, they probably occur only in Israel and the United States.

At the same time, Iran's limited offensive capabilities do not make it any kind of military weakling. Saddam Hussein's horrible miscalculations about Iran's weakness and internal divisions at the start of the Iran-Iraq War should be a warning as to what can happen if Iran is invaded or forced into anything approaching total war. Its strengths in overt conflict are more defensive than offensive, but Iran has already shown its has great capability to resist outside pressure and any form of invasion and done so under far more adverse and divisive conditions than exist in Iran today.

Moreover, the US-led invasion of Iraq is a warning that even when outside efforts to depose a regime are successful, they can trigger forces that become virtually uncontrollable unless an immediate successor regime can command both popular support

and the ability to govern. In practice, the law of unintended consequences should be as much a deterrent as Iran's military strength.

### **"Axis of Evil" versus "Opportunities for Opportunism"**

Accordingly, when it comes to analyzing Iranian capabilities, it seems most functional to focus on Iran's current and future opportunities for opportunism, and not whether Iran is part of an "axis of evil" or simply acting in its own defense. Here too, however, there is a need for caution and perspective. US, Israeli, and some Arab rhetoric have often exaggerated such capabilities as much as it has exaggerated Iran's hostile intentions and ambitions. At the same time, some of Iran's defenders have described a benign multicultural martyr to external misunderstanding in ways that border on the theater of the absurd.

Seen from this perspective, Iran could present five major kinds of current and potential threats:

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- *The fourth is a potential nuclear power armed with long-range missiles.* Iran is a declared chemical weapons power. Its biological weapons efforts are unknown but it seems unlikely that it remained passive in reaction to Iraq's efforts. It has openly made the acquisition of long-range missiles a major objective, and its nuclear research and production programs almost certainly are intended to produce nuclear weapons.
- *Finally, Iran presents a potential religious and ideological threat in a region and Islamic world polarized along sectarian lines.* For all of the talk about a clash between civilizations, the potential clash within Islam seems far more dangerous. The risk that Sunni and Shi'ite extremists can provoke a broader split between sects and nations could push Iran into a more aggressive religious and ideological struggle.

### **Iran As a Conventional Military Power**

Iran has limited capabilities today but could become a much more threatening power if it modernized key elements of its forces and its neighbors did not react. Iranian training and doctrine has slowly improved over time, although Iran has little practical experience with advanced command and control, targeting, IS&R, and electronic warfare capability; and its efforts to improve its capability in joint operations and sustainability have had only limited success.

It does have a large, if divided force structure. It currently has some 545,000 actives and 350,000 army reserves, not counting Basij. Its army has an active strength of around 350,000 men, although 220,000 are low-grade conscripts and its corps of technicians and non-commissioned officers is poorly trained and given limited initiative.

### **Iran's Conventional Land Forces**

The Iranian army has four corps, with 12 division equivalents, four of which are armored. It has one Special Forces brigade, two brigade-sized commando "divisions," and a small airborne brigade. Its equipment includes some 1,600-1,750 main battle tanks, some 720 other armored fighting vehicles, 650 armored personnel carriers, over 300 self-propelled artillery weapons, over 2,000 major towed artillery weapons, and roughly 900 multiple rocket launchers. It has large numbers of mortars and anti-tank guided weapons – many of which are highly effective systems. The bulk of the army's equipment, however, is still worn, obsolescent to obsolete, and difficult to sustain in maneuver and combat.

The Iranian army has considerable mass and ability to operate in relatively static defensive roles. It is not, however, a modern maneuver force by any means. Only a third of its main battle tanks are modern enough to have moderate capability and most of its other tanks, OAFVs, and APCs are worn and obsolete. It is reliant on towed artillery forces with weak to poor targeting and fire control, and its 50-odd remaining attack helicopters are worn and have limited operational capability. Its short-range air defenses are ineffective against modern attack aircraft with long-range targeting and precision fire capability. Most of its conventionally armed MRLSs and surface-to-surface weapons seem to have some cluster warheads, but are too inaccurate and lacking in lethality to use against anything other than static forces and area targets and then are more likely to produce harassment effects than kills.

There is an additional 100,000 men in the land/air branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps but this too is a largely conscript force organized into many small formations with grandiose unit designations like "division." It has some armor and artillery, but is largely an infantry force. Only selected elements trained in missions like operating Iran's longer-range surface-to-surface missiles, operating as advisors and embedded forces in other armies or militias, special missions, and unconventional warfare have moderate to high capability. The IRGC can, however, potentially draw upon 100,000s of young men in the Basij for local defense missions.

### **Iran's Conventional Air Forces**

The 35,000 man-plus Iranian air force has shown considerable skill in keeping its fleet of aircraft operating, modernizing some sub-systems and avionics, and adapting new weapons to aging platforms. Its core electronic warfare, IS&R, and C4I/battle management systems, however, have low to moderate capability and are severely limited by the age and inherent limitations to the avionics on its aircraft.

It has some 260+ combat aircraft, but operational availability is about 50-60% for US supplied types, all of which are now three decades old or older and none of which have had access to generations of US upgrades. Operational readiness for its Russian and PRC supplied aircraft may be 75-80%, but only some 10-12 Su-25K, 18-23 MiG-29A, and 20-25 Su-24MK represent anything approaching modern aircraft, and all are export versions of Russian fighters with limited avionics. Even with the addition of some 18-22 operational F-14s and 30-50 operational F-4Es, this is a limited force of less than 100 combat aircraft with moderate modern warfighting capability, and it would have severe problems in generating and sustaining high numbers of sorties.

The Iranian air force does have some modern air-to-air and air-to-ground missiles, although much of its inventory is aging severely and has limited capability. It still operates 5 P-3MP Orions with airborne warning, air control, maritime patrol, and remote anti-ship missile targeting capability, but their operational status is unclear and their electronic warfare capabilities are limited. Overall reconnaissance, electronic warfare, battle management, and targeting capabilities are poor to moderate. The Iranian air force remains severely equipment limited.

There are some 15,000 men assigned to land-based air defense forces. Iran's main surface-to-air missile defenses include roughly 150 IHawk surface-to-air missile launchers, 45 SA-2 and additional PRC-clone launchers, and 10 obsolescent long-range SA-5 launchers. It has some operational FM-80 Crotale, 20-30 Rapier, and 3-15 Tigercat shorter-range systems. It also has large numbers of manportable surface-to-air missiles (some modern) and AA guns.

Iran has found some ingenious ways to modernize the sensors, battle management, and electronic warfare systems supporting this force, and to improvise a crude form of netting to integrate some fire units. The new TOR-M1 surface-to-air missiles it is importing from Russia reportedly have been delivered and test-fired in January, however, are the first truly modern systems it has received since the fall of the Shah and they are best suited for short-to-medium range point defense. Barring massive deliveries of Russian S-300 or S-400 surface-to-air missiles, sensors, and battle management systems, the Iranian system is vulnerable and largely obsolete.

### **Iran's Conventional Naval Forces**

The 16,000-20,000 man Iranian navy has many limitations. It has learned how to keep its three Kilo-class submarines operational, but its larger surface ships (three aging missile frigates and two aging gun corvettes) is obsolete and it has limited amphibious capability for anything other than raids or special forces missions against exposed targets in the Gulf, and its amphibious exercises are largely set piece shams. (It has three LSMs with a total lift capacity of around 300-350 troops and 30 major armored weapons.)

The navy does have significant numbers of mine vessels, smaller patrol ships (some armed with anti-ship missiles), and maritime patrol aircraft and mine-laying helicopters. In overall terms, however, it is now far less capable of fighting a conventional battle at sea than it was when it was decisively defeated by the US Navy in the "tanker war" of 1987-1988.

### **Iran's Conventional Weaknesses and Strengths**

This force mix scarcely makes Iran any kind of regional military "hegemon," and the region would have years of warning before Iranian forces could acquire and absorb major numbers of new weapons. It can certainly improve its defensive capabilities and the attrition it can impose on an attacker, but it would virtually require the US to abandon the Gulf for Iran to be able to win a regional arms race that would give it the air and naval capabilities to gain serious offensive capabilities in conventional war, and even then, a cohesive response by the GCC would seriously challenge any capability that Iran could develop.

Geography is also a critical factor. Iran would virtually have to be invited in to cross the Gulf with significant forces. It has little or no foreseeable incentive to strike at most of its other neighbors, and many of the border areas it might advance into present other geographic problems as well as offer little or no strategic advantage. Iran certainly has the ability to wage war, but it does not have the capability to win most wars in ways that give it any advantage.

The two exceptions that must be kept clearly in mind are the defense of its own territory and Iraq. Iran is a highly populated country of over 65 million people with centrally located cities, and its forces are strong enough to make it anything but a defensive "weakling." As the Iran-Iraq War and Gulf Wars show, much depends on popular support, but any invasion of Iran that produced a strong nationalist response, rather than a broad-based uprising against the regime, would almost certainly turn into a bloody and pointless war of attrition.

This would be the kind of war where even major tactical victories against Iran did not offer lasting strategic advantage and would tie the attacker down in exposed positions. As will be discussed shortly, the defeat or large-scale destruction of Iran's conventional forces also would not deprive it of the ability to retaliate using unconventional forces, proxies, or partners. It also might drive Iran to respond over time with far larger efforts to acquire nuclear weapons.

### **Iran and Iraq**

It is also important to point out that Iran does have the ability to rapidly deploy a large mix of conventional and unconventional forces into Iraq. Iraq's current military forces are divided and extremely weak and Shi'ite and Kurdish dominated. If Iran was invited in following a US and British withdrawal by a Shi'ite dominated government, and had popular support from most of Iraq's Shi'ite Arabs, it could quickly dominate most areas with a Shi'ite majority, defeat insurgent or Sunni resistance in most areas outside Anbar and Mosul, and defeat Kurdish forces in any clash over Kirkuk.

Iraq is largely a power vacuum. If Iran and Iraq cooperated to secure a Shi'ite dominated "federation," Iran could play a major offensive role with only limited warning and preparation. Much would depend on Iraqi government and Iraq Arab Shi'ite support in such a scenario, however, and on the willingness of the US to permit the movement of Iranian conventional forces.

It should also be noted, however, that no Sunni Arab state is now organized to project large ground force contingents into most of the populated areas of Iraq, although Jordan and Syria could project significant ground forces into the West. Turkey could project a corps-sized force into Northern Iraq (and did so at the time of Saddam Hussein), but its fears of the Kurds are unlikely to make it intervene on the part of the Arabs even if invited.

### **Iran As An Asymmetric Threat**

As even nations as powerful as the US have learned to their cost, the conventional balance is only one balance in modern warfare. Iran has responded to its conventional weaknesses by seeking three different forms of asymmetric capability that it can try to use to intimidate or attack:

- The creation of its own regular and IRGC forces for unconventional warfare.
- The development of long-range strike systems and weapons of mass destruction.
- The creation of ties to proxies and partners it can join or use in asymmetric conflicts.

### **The Threat in the Gulf**

Iran has built up a large mix of unconventional forces in the Gulf that can challenge its neighbors in a wide variety of asymmetric wars, including low-level wars of attrition. These include a wide range of elements in the regular forces and IRGC as well as some elements in the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), or Vezarat-e Ettela' at va Aminat-e Keshvar (VEVAK), which was installed following the revolution to replace the now-disbanded National Organization for Intelligence and Security (SAVAK). In 2006, the MOIS employed about 15,000 civilian staff. Its major tasks included intelligence collection and operations in the Middle East and Central Asia as well as domestic intelligence and monitoring of clerical and government officials, as well as work on preventing conspiracies against the Islamic Republic.

Its air forces remain vulnerable in any form of mission, but are less vulnerable near Iranian bases, sensor coverage, and SAM coverage. Its naval forces include its three Kilo-class submarines, which can harass or seek to interdict ships moving in and out of the Gulf, a wide range of mines and vessels that can be used as mine layers or to release free floating mines. They also include roughly 140 light patrol and coastal combatants, including 11 French-designed Kaman-class missile patrol boats with 2-4 CSS-N-4/YJ-1/"Sardine" anti-ship missiles each. These are sea skimming, solid fueled missiles with a 42 to 50-kilometer range, 165 kilogram warheads, INS and active radar similar to the Exocet, and can be used to harass civil shipping and tankers, and offshore facilities, as well as attack naval vessels. Iran may well have far more advanced Russian and Chinese-supplied missiles as well and claims to be developing advanced anti-ship and anti-fixed target missiles of its own.

Iran made claims in the spring of 2006 that it was testing more advanced weapons for such forces. These included a sonar-evading anti-ship missile that can be fired from submarines as well as surface combatants that IRGC Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi claimed no enemy warship could detect, and "no warship could escape because of its high velocity." Iran also claimed to be testing a new missile called the Kowsar with a very large warhead and extremely high speed to attack "big ships and submarines" that it claimed could evade radar and antimissile missiles. While such tests may have been real, Iran has made so many grossly exaggerated claims about its weapons developments in the past, that it seems they were designed more to try to deter US military action and/or reassure the Iranian public than truly being serious real world capabilities. It followed these actions up in the late summer of 2006 by testing new submarine launched anti-ship missiles.

It has a 20,000 man naval branch in the IRGC that includes some 5,000 marines. This branch of the IRGC has 10 Houdong missile patrol boats with CSS-N-8/C-802/YJ-2 missiles with 165-kilogram warheads, active and inertial guidance, and maximum ranges of 120 kilometers. It operates mobile land-based CSS-C-3/HY-2/Sea Eagle/Seersucker anti-ship missiles that can be rapidly emplaced on the Iranian coast or islands in the Gulf shipping channel. These systems have ranges of 95-100 kilometers, very large warheads, and autocontrol and radar homing guidance. They can be targeted by a remote air link,

and the exact level of upgrading of these missiles since their initial delivery during the Iran-Iraq War is unknown.

The IRGC has large numbers of Boghammar and other patrol boats are with recoilless rifles, rocket launchers, manportable surface-to-air missiles, and anti-armor guided weapons. The IRGC routinely uses small civilian ships and vessels in unconventional operations in various exercises, including mine laying and raids on offshore facilities. This force has facilities at Bandar-e-Abbas, Khorramshar, and on the islands of Larak, Abu Musa, Al Farsiyah, Sirrir and the Halul oil platform. It can make use of additional facilities at Iran's main naval bases at Bander e-abbas, Bushehr, Kharg Island, Bandar e-Anzelli, Bandar e-Khomeini, Bandar e-Mahshahr, and Chah Bahar. These forces can rapidly disperse, and shelter in caves and hardened sites. Small ships can be very hard to detect with most radars even in a normal sea state, and civilian ships can easily change flags and meld in with commercial traffic.

### **"Closing the Gulf?"**

These light naval forces have special importance because of their potential ability to threaten oil and shipping traffic in the Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, raid key offshore facilities, and conduct raids on targets on the Gulf coast. Many Gulf energy facilities are extremely vulnerable, and the GCC states are extremely vulnerable to any form of attack on their desalination and coastal power facilities, and precision strikes on critical high-capacity, long-lead time replacement items in energy facilities and power grids. This vulnerability might also allow Iran to carry out very successful air attacks in a surprise raid with precision weapons, using IRGC "suicide" aircraft, and future UAVs and precision cruise missiles. It is also possible that Iran could conduct coastal raids with IRGC and/or Special Forces that went deeper into Southern Gulf territory.

Iran could not "close the Gulf" for more than a few days to two weeks even if it was willing to sacrifice all of these assets, suffer massive retaliation, and potentially lose many of its own oil facilities and export revenues. Its chronic economic mismanagement has made it extremely dependent on a few refineries, product imports, and food imports. It would almost certainly lose far more than it gained from such a "war," but nations often fail to act as rational bargainers in a crisis, particularly if attacked or if their regimes are threatened.

Even sporadic, low-level attacks on Gulf shipping and facilities, however, could allow Iran to wage a war of intimidation in an effort to pressure its neighbors. As a recent International Energy Agency study shows, the current and future volume of oil export traffic would make any threat that sharply raised oil prices, deterred smooth tanker flows, and otherwise interfered with energy exports of great importance, particularly in a world where every developed economy is critically dependent on global trade and the continuing flow of Asian heavy manufactures that are steadily more dependent on Gulf oil.

### The Importance of Gulf Oil Exports

<u>Area of Export Flow</u>	<u>Current Flow in MMBD</u>	<u>Share of World Oil Demand in Percent</u>		
		In 2004	In 2030 Reference	In 2030 Lower Demand
Strait of Hormuz	17.4	21.2	28.1	19.4
Straits of Malacca/Far East	13	15.8	23.7	23.3
Bab el-Mandab	3.5	4.3	4.5	4.9
Suez	3.9	4.7	4.8	5.3

Source: Adapted by Anthony H. Cordesman from material provided by Ambassador William C. Ramsay, Deputy Executive Director, International Energy Agency, February 6, 2007.

### Other Contingencies

At the same time, as the previous discussion has shown, Iran could use its entire mix of forces in unconventional and asymmetric defenses of its own territory, and it conducting deep penetration and border raids and attacks on its neighbors. Iran’s material and resource limits may affect its major weapons systems and military sophistication and modernization. Its internal division may delay or limit some aspects of its military coordination and effectiveness, as does its dependence on conscripts. It is clear from Iran’s military literature, however, that it keenly studies both asymmetric warfare techniques and asymmetric vulnerabilities and opportunities, and while its exercises are of patchy quality, some elements of Iranian forces are highly effective in testing asymmetric methods of operation.

### Iran’s Use of State and Non-state Actors as Proxies and Partners

Iran also can make use of both state and non-state actors. Iran’s support of Shi’ite militias in Iraq, ties to elements in the Iraqi government, partnership with Syria, ties to the Hezbollah in Lebanon, support of Shi’ite Afghan elements, and arms supply and training of elements of Hamas and the PIJ, are all practical examples of such activities. So are past efforts to destabilize the Hajj, and support Shi’ite unrest in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

#### “Proxies” and “Partners”

These can both be “proxies” – foreign forces directly under Iranian control – and “partners” – forces that cooperate with Iran to their own or a common advantage. The issue of who is using who is largely moot if all the actor involved are both willing to cooperate and feel they benefit from such cooperation.

A special element of the IRGC called the Al Quds force is often associated with Iranian efforts to arm, train, and advise foreign states and non-state actors. In practice, however, Iranian intelligence is often involved, such efforts can operated under diplomatic cover, commercial entities and dummy corporations are involved, as are elements of Iran’s regular forces. This is scarcely a unique mix of operations, and one adopted by many other countries. Deniability – plausible or implausible – is the major reason for both the complexity of such efforts and attempts at concealment.

### **The Strengths and Weaknesses of Such Operations**

Like direct forms of asymmetric operations, the use of foreign actors can be both defensive and offensive. It can also serve ideological and religious causes. It also is extremely difficult to establish motive and the scale of such efforts under many conditions, particularly since they can be conducted without attribution to Iranian government support (false flags) or under conditions where the Iranian government can claim any document incident was a rogue operation it did not authorize. A sophisticated effort can take on the character of a three-dimensional chess game in which most of the one side's players are truly what they seem and that player keeps changing the rules without announcing the changes.

The problem Iran faces in most such operations is that they can harass, but not achieve decisive strategic results. The end result is a "spoiler" operation that may damage an opponent, or cause local or regional instability, but does not really benefit Iran. Iranian influence does not give Iran control. The Hezbollah operation against Israel, and Israel's destruction of most of the medium and long-range rocket forces Iran and Syria had laboriously built up, is a case in point. Supporting anti-US elements in Iraq does not necessarily benefit Iran in the long run. Implausible deniability provokes direct or indirect hostile responses, and Iran can find itself dragged into a far more serious conflict or crisis than it intends through the acts of its "partner."

Much depends on the specific case and the skill with which Iran acts. Sheer distance, and the tactical buffer caused by the need to bypass or overfly Arab states, gives Iran some freedom of action in supporting the Hezbollah, Hamas, and PIJ. This also allows Iran to build up its capabilities and influence by appearing to take the Arab side – although not if its efforts in nations like Lebanon provoke Arab states to see such actions as threatening their security or it provokes Israel to the point where its tenuous restraint turns into hostile action.

### **The Iraq Option**

Low-level operations that intimidate a Gulf state or other neighbor without making it react in hostile ways can also succeed, although they involve careful balance and judgment. Simply building up military and security relations can provide both a defensive option and a potential threat to other powers without being a direct provocation.

If there are strategic options where such methods could play a direct role, they seem to lie in three areas, two of which are marginal. Iran could seek to attack the US or any other power by using non-state actors, particularly if they seemed at least partially hostile to Iran. Iran may have supported Al Qa'ida in Iraq for precisely this reason. Supporting Shi'ite elements in Afghanistan would be another way of securing its interests against any resurgence of the Taliban, and Iran could do so without having to confront the US or NATO.

The most serious opportunity is Iraq, for all of the reasons already touched upon earlier in this analysis. It is also one of the only two serious opportunities that Iran has to move from a largely defensive power to one that has seriously expanded its power and influence. The other is the effort to acquire long-range missiles and nuclear weapons discussed in the following section.

Like all of Iraq's neighbors, Iran has an incentive to avoid direct major military intervention that might well provoke a broad regional conflict, which could trigger large-scale US intervention, and which ultimately might alienate the Iraqi Arabs that Iran came to aid. It does, however, have every incentive to see Iraq come under the effective control of a strong Arab Shi'ite government that would be a reliable partner and at least partially dependent on Iran.

Iran has had strong ties to SCIRI and Al Dawa since these exile movements started fighting during the Iran-Iraq War, and trained and equipped their forces from the early 1980s to 2004. It has built up some ties to the Sadr's Mahdi militia, in spite of political and religious differences. It actively supports some elements of the Shi'ite leaders in the Iraqi government, and can increasingly play on both the sectarian civil conflict in Iraq and Iraqi fears that the US may withdraw.

There have also been British and American charges that Iran has supported both Shi'ite and Sunni elements hostile to British and US forces, and armed them with shaped charge bombs, advanced triggering devices, night sights, and other weapons whose transfer had been traced to the Mandali and Mehran border crossings to northeast and southeast of Baghdad. They also charged that Iran had regularly provided money to Shi'ite extremist groups and military training, and that this was done by the Al Quds Force in the Iran's Revolutionary Guards, which reported to Iran's Supreme Leader.

On February 11, for example, US experts gave a background briefing in Baghdad in which they said that Iran had armed Shi'ite militants in Iraq with sophisticated armor-piercing roadside bombs that had killed more than 170 American forces. These weapons included simple systems like mortars, but also included more sophisticated weapons known as "explosively formed penetrators," or EFPs where the "machining process" used in the construction was said to have been traced to Iran. The experts said that the supply trail began with the Al Quds Force, which had armed the Hezbollah, which had begun to use EFP weapons against Israel in the 1990s.

The briefing also included a PowerPoint slide program and sample mortar shells and rocket-propelled grenades that the military officials said were made in Iran after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The EFPs, as well as Iranian-made mortar shells and rocket-propelled grenades, were said to have been supplied to what US experts said were "rogue elements" of the Mahdi Army militia of anti-American Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, a key backer of Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. They did not fully respond to questions as to whether similar weapons had been provided to the Badr Brigade, the military wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq but it seemed clear that this was an issue.

A US intelligence analyst stated that Iran was working through "multiple surrogates" - mainly in the Mahdi Army - to smuggle the EFPs into Iraq. He said most of the components are entering the country at crossing points near Amarah, the Iranian border city of Meran and the Basra area of southern Iraq. The previous week, the US had announced that a Shi'ite lawmaker Jamal Jaafar Mohammed was a key actor in allowing main conduit for Iranian weapons entering the country.

US officials did say that said there was no evidence of Iranian-made EFPs having fallen into the hands of Sunni insurgents who operate mainly in Anbar province in the west of

Iraq, Baghdad and regions surrounding the capital. They also said that there was no clear evidence that Iran was the source of the SA-7, SA-14 and SA-16 shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles in Iraqi insurgent and militia forces, although they provided evidence that Iranian-made Misagh-1 manportable missiles had been used by insurgents in Baghdad in November and December of 2006.

The US has seized members of the Al Quds force operating in Iraq. For example, one of the six Iranians detained in Irbil in January 2007, Mohsin Chizari, was the operational commander of the Quds Force there. Iranian advisors have been found in areas like the Ministry of the Interior, and many of the senior officials in the Iraqi government are former exiles that lived in Iran at some point. All of these events could lead to a major expansion of Iranian influence, particularly if a US withdrawal creates a power vacuum in Iraq or the current low-level sectarian and ethnic civil war makes Iraqi Shi'ites dependent on Iran.

### **Iran As A Nuclear Power Armed with Long-Range Missiles**

Iran's second possible option for making a major increase in its regional influence and power is to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Iran is a declared chemical weapons power. Its biological weapons efforts are unknown but it seems unlikely that it remained passive in reaction to Iraq's efforts. It has openly made the acquisition of long-range missile a major objective, and its nuclear research and production programs almost certainly are intended to produce nuclear weapons.

Iran's major long-range missile development program is the Shahab series, which now seems to include both solid and liquid fueled IRBM and MRBMs. While Iran claims some of these systems are deployed, it continues to test new variants with ranges of 2,500-3,000 kilometers and improved warhead designs and accuracy. Iran has also obtained long-range Soviet bloc cruise missiles such as the KH-55 Granit or Kent. This system has a range of 2,500-3,000 kilometers. It has a theoretical CEP of about 150 meters and a speed of Mach 0.48-0.77, and while Iran may have bought some 12 systems to reverse engineer, it is possible that they could be carried and fired by its Su-24s.

Its progress in actually producing usable nuclear weapons and warhead for such systems is uncertain, but US intelligence experts estimate that it is unlikely that Iran will have any form of nuclear device before 2010. Given the accuracy of its longer-range missile systems, it would virtually have to arm them with a nuclear weapon for them to be more than terror weapons, although advanced chemical and biological cluster munitions could be an option.

### **US Preventive and Preemptive Strike Options**

The very fact Iran has embarked on such efforts has led to serious discussions of Israeli and US preventive or preemptive options, although senior US officials and officers have repeatedly said that the US is currently committed to supporting European and UN diplomatic options, and sees no time urgent need for action.

Such operations would be difficult for Israel and challenging for the US. Iran would find it difficult to defend against US forces using cruise missiles, stealth aircraft, stand-off precision weapons, and equipped with a mix of vastly superior air combat assets and the IS&R assets necessary to strike and restrike Iranian targets in near real time. For

example, each US B-2A Spirit stealth bomber could carry eight 4,500-pound enhanced BLU-28 satellite-guided bunker-busting bombs—potentially enough to take out one hardened Iranian site per sortie. Such bombers could operate flying from Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, RAF Fairford in Gloucestershire, United Kingdom, and Whiteman US Air Force (USAF) Base in Missouri.

The United States also has a wide range of other hard target killers, many of which are in development or classified. Systems that are known to be deployed include the BLU-109 Have Void "bunker busters," a "dumb bomb" with a maximum penetration capability of four to six feet of reinforced concrete. An aircraft must overfly the target and launch the weapon with great precision to achieve serious penetration capability. It can be fitted with precision guidance and converted to a guided glide bomb. The Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) GBU-31 version has a nominal range of 15 kilometers with a CEP of 13 meters in the GPS-aided Inertial Navigation System (INS) modes of operation and 30 meters in the INS-only modes of operation.

More advanced systems include the BLU-116 Advanced Unitary Penetrator (AUP), the GBU-24 C/B (USAF), or the GBU-24 D/B (US Navy), which has about three times the penetration capability of the BLU-109. It is not clear whether the United States has deployed the AGM-130C with an advanced earth penetrating/hard target kill system. The AGM-130 Surface Attack Guided Munition was developed to be integrated into the F-15E, so it could carry two such missiles, one on each inboard store station. It is a retargetable, precision-guided standoff weapon using inertial navigation aided by GPS satellites and has a 15-40-NM range.

The United States does, however, have a number of other new systems that are known to be in the developmental stage and can probably deploy systems capable of roughly twice the depth of penetration with twice the effectiveness of the systems known from its attacks on Iraq in 1991. The newest development in the BLU-series is the 5,000 pound BLU-122, which is supposed to be operational in 2007. Further, there is the Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP), weighing almost 30,000 pounds and able to carry 5,300 pounds of explosives. According to some estimates optimum penetrating distance for the MOP is up to 200 feet. A possible alternative to these weapons are directed-energy and high-power microwave (HPM) weapons, none of which are currently beyond testing phase.

It is not clear whether such weapons could destroy all of Iran's most hardened underground sites, although it seems likely that the BLU-28 could do serious damage at a minimum. Much depends on the accuracy of reports that Iran has undertaken a massive tunneling project with some 10,000 square meters of underground halls and tunnels branching off for hundreds of meters from each hall. Iran is reported to be drawing on North Korean expertise and to have created a separate corporation (Shahid Rajaei Company) for such tunneling and hardening efforts under the IRGC, with extensive activity already under way in Natanz and Isfahan. The facilities are said to make extensive use of blast-proof doors, extensive divider walls, hardened ceilings, 20-centimeter-thick concrete walls, and double concrete ceilings with earth filled between layers to defeat earth penetrates. Such passive defenses could have a major impact, but reports of such activity are often premature, exaggerated, or report far higher construction standards than are actually executed.

At the same time, the B-2A could be used to deliver large numbers of precision-guided 500-pound bombs against dispersed surface targets or a mix of light and heavy precision-guided weapons. Submarines and surface ships could deliver cruise missiles for such strikes, and conventional strike aircraft and bombers could deliver standoff weapons against most suspect Iranian facilities without suffering a high risk of serious attrition. The challenge would be to properly determine what targets and aim points were actually valuable, not to inflict high levels of damage.

As has been discussed earlier, Iran's air defenses have "quantity," but little "quality." This would help enable US or Israeli attacks, but this situation could change over the next few years. Iran purchased 20 Russian 9K331 Tor-M-1 (SA-15 Gauntlet) self-propelled surface-to-air missiles in December 2005, which reportedly have been delivered and test-fired by the IRGC in January 2007. Some also reports indicate that Iran is seeking more modern Soviet SA-300 missiles and to use Russian systems to modernize its entire air defense system. If Iran could acquire, deploy, and bring such systems to a high degree of readiness, they would substantially improve Iranian capabilities.

Iran's air forces are only marginally better able to survive in air-to-air combat than Iraq's were before 2003. Iran's command and control system has serious limitations in terms of secure communications, vulnerability to advanced electronic warfare, netting, and digital data transfer. According to the IISS, Iran does still have five operational P-3MP Orions and may have made its captured Iraqi IL-76 Candid AEW aircraft operational. These assets would give it airborne warning and command and control capability, but these are obsolescent to obsolete systems and are likely to be highly vulnerable to electronic warfare and countermeasures, and long-range attack, even with Iranian modifications and updates. There are some reports Iran may be seeking to make a version of the Russian AN-140 AEW aircraft, but these could not be deployed much before 2015.

Iran's air defense aircraft consist of a maximum operational strength of two squadrons of 25 export versions of the MiG-29A and two squadrons of 25-30 F-14As. The export version of the MiG-29A has significant avionics limitations and vulnerability to countermeasures, and it is not clear Iran has any operational Phoenix air-to-air missiles for its F-14As or has successfully modified its IHawk missiles for air-to-air combat. The AWG-9 radar on the F-14 has significant long-distance sensor capability in a permissive environment, but is a US-made system in a nearly 30-year-old configuration that is now vulnerable to countermeasures.

Iran might risk using its fighters and AEW aircraft against an Israeli strike. It seems doubtful that Israel could support a long-range attack unit with the air defense and electronic assets necessary to provide anything like the air defense and air defense suppression assets that would support a US strike. A US strike could almost certainly destroy any Iranian effort to use fighters, however, and destroy enough Iranian surface-to-air missile defenses to create a secure corridor for penetrating into Iran and against key Iranian installations. The United States could then maintain such a corridor indefinitely with airstrikes.

### **Iranian Options for Retaliation**

This does not mean it would be easy or desirable for the United States to exercise its military options. US forces are preoccupied in Iraq, and the lack of security in Iraq makes

a full military attack against Iran all too unlikely. US military options are not risk-free, and the consequences of US strikes are enormous. Tehran has several retaliatory options:

- Retaliate against US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan overtly using Shahab-3 missiles armed with CBR warheads.
- Use proxy groups, including those of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Moqtada Al-Sadr, in Iraq to intensify the insurgency and escalate the attacks against US forces and Iraqi security forces.
- Turn the Shi'ite majority in Iraq against the US. presence and demand US forces to leave.
- Attack the US homeland with suicide bombs by proxy groups or deliver CBR weapons to Al Qa'ida to use against the United States.
- Use its asymmetric capabilities to attack US interests in the region, including soft targets: e.g., embassies, commercial centers, and American citizens.
- Attack US naval forces stationed in the Gulf with antiship missiles, asymmetric warfare, and mines.
- Attack Israel with missile attacks possibly with CBR warheads.
- Retaliate against energy targets in the Gulf and temporarily shut off the flow of oil from the Strait of Hormuz.
- Stop all of its oil and gas shipments to increase the price of oil and inflict damage on the global and US economies.

Many observers argue that a military strike against Iran could add to the chaos in Iraq and may further complicate the US position in Iraq. While the consequences of US military attacks against Iran remain unclear, the Shi'ite majority in Iraq can (1) ask the United States to leave Iraq, (2) influence Shi'ite militia groups to directly attack US forces, and/or (3) turn the new Iraqi security and military forces against US forces in Iraq.

### **If Iran Becomes a Serious Nuclear Power**

The situation will also change strikingly if Iran goes from developing nuclear weapons and long-range missiles to deploying an effective nuclear strike capability. At this point in time, there is no way to be certain what such a force would look like or how capable it would be, but certainly political-psychological impacts would be enormous. There are many different ways in which Iran can proliferate, deploy nuclear-armed or other CBRN weapons, and use them to deter, intimidate, and strike against other nations. All have only one thing in common: they are all provocative and dangerous to any nation Iran may choose to try to intimidate and target, *and* they are all provocative and dangerous to Iran.

Even Iranian ambiguity will probably lead Israel and the United States—and possibly India, Pakistan, and Russia—to develop nuclear options to deter or retaliate against Iran. Israeli and/or US restraint in striking Iran does not have to stop at the first convincing Iranian threat to use nuclear or highly lethal biological weapons, but it could do so.

As of regional options, Iranian nuclear ambiguity might be enough to trigger Saudi, Egyptian and Turkish efforts to become nuclear powers, and some form of Israeli sea basing to enhance the survivability of its nuclear forces while increasing range and/or yield to strike Iran. Saudi Arabia has already said that it has examined nuclear options and rejected them, but this is no certainty and inevitably depends on Iranian action. The successful deployment of a highly capable Iranian force, and Israel's existential

vulnerability, would almost certainly lead Israel to develop a retaliatory capable to destroy Iran's cities and kill most of its population.

Regional powers might show restraint if the United States could provide convincing ballistic and cruise missile defenses and the same form of extended deterrence it once provided to Germany during the Cold War. But these options are speculative and do not yet exist. Successfully deploying a nuclear warhead is one achievement; second-strike capability is another that must be considered by Iranian decision-makers. It borders certainty that Iran's reaching a second-strike nuclear capability will take at least a decade if it will ever be achieved.

Any form of major nuclear confrontation could be a nightmare for all concerned. Iran's effort to limit or control the game will probably end at the first ground zero. Any actual Iranian use of such weapons is likely to provoke a nuclear response and may well provoke one targeted on Iranian cities and its population. Moreover, while Israel may technically be a more vulnerable "one bomb" country, it is highly questionable whether any form of Persian state could emerge from nuclear strikes on Iran's 5-10 largest cities.

The end result is the prospect of a far more threatening mix of CBRN capabilities in the Gulf region and the area that most models project as the main source of continued world oil and gas exports beyond 2015. It is also the near certainty of an Israeli-Iranian nuclear arms race that means crossing Arab territory, US nuclear targeting of Iran in some form of extended deterrence, and the threat of more polarization between Sunni and Shi'ites and broader regional tensions and actions that spill over out of the confrontation over Iran's nuclear activities. None of these prospects are pleasant.

### **Iran As a Religious and Ideological Threat in a Region and Islamic World Polarized Along Sectarian Lines**

For all of the talk about a clash between civilizations, the potential clash within Islam seems far more dangerous. The risk that Sunni and Shi'ite extremists can provoke a broader split between sects and nations could push Iran into a more aggressive religious and ideological struggle. One of the unfortunate aftermaths of "9/11" is that Arab and Islamic states have tended to deal with movements like Al Qa'ida as internal security threats, and avoid the broader issue of ensuring that Islamist extremism does not polarize and divide Islam and the Middle East. Arab and Persian intellectual and religious leaders have also done more to defend their own cultures and Islam than deal directly with the threat such extremism can present.

Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia however, are just some of the warnings of what happens when Islamist extremists threaten to take power, Sunni and Shi'ite Islamists turn upon each other, and other sectarian tensions and discrimination are not dealt with and put to an end. It is also worth noting that much of the vaunted religious tolerance within Western culture was forced upon that largely Christian culture by some of the bloodiest wars in its history during the reformation and counterreformation, and just how consistently horrifying the results of anti-Semitism were during the long centuries before it reached its apogee in the Holocaust.

Iran is scarcely free of its own form of Shi'ite extremists, but has scarcely been dominated by them. As was the case in Bosnia and Kosovo, the collapse of the existing

power structure in Iraq without any stable replacement has been the source of open religious warfare and this has been driven largely by Sunni, not Shi'ite extremism. At the same time, Iran has been opportunistic in dealing with events in Iraq, in exploiting its ties to Syria's Alewite regime, and in dealing with the Shi'ite Hezbollah in Lebanon. It has supported Shi'ite separatists in Bahrain, and Shi'ite unrest in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province in the past.

The idea of a "Shi'ite crescent" may be more an unfounded fear than a clear possibility, but growing divisions that divide Sunni, Shi'ite, and the other sects of Islam in ways where Iran is virtually forced to play an opportunistic role are all too credible. The potential cost is also indicated by the fact that while some 85% of the world's Muslims are Sunni, Shi'ites are the majority of the population in Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, and Oman; and are 25% to 45% minorities in Lebanon, Kuwait, Pakistan, and Yemen.

Even without a major Sunni-Shi'ite clash, Islamic extremism could lead to a wide range of asymmetric struggles, and partner and proxy conflicts. If there is one area where dialogue, negotiation, and common efforts to promote tolerance and common understanding are truly critical, it lies in doing everything possible to prevent this possibility from becoming real.

### **Limiting Iran's Current and Future Opportunities for Opportunism**

All of the threats Iran poses can be contained with the right choice of policies and military actions. Barring major shifts in its regime, Iran not only is deterrable, but a nation that will probably respond to the proper security incentives over time. The real question may well be whether Iran's neighbors and the US provide the right mix of deterrence and incentives, and not Iran's current and potential capabilities.

There is not space in this paper to discuss all of the problems in Iran's relations with its neighbors, or to indulge in the region's obsession with using history to produce self-inflicted wounds. There is equally little space to discuss America and Israel's mistakes in demonizing what are often real problems in Iran's behavior. The same is true of the tendency of other nations, and private organizations and individuals, to confuse mere dialog with actual negotiation.

Given Iran and the region's recent history, however, there are several steps that Iran's Arab neighbors clearly need to take to structure the best the mix of deterrence and incentives for Iran, and to do so in the context of a broader effort to bring regional security:

- *Rely on actions not words.* If the Arab world has not yet succeeded in talking itself to death, it is not for the want of trying. Iran's rhetoric, however, has been far more extreme and much less productive, and the same has often been true of the United States. Presidential and Congressional rhetorical excess and empty gestures have provoked Iran without changing it ways that have become a self-inflicted wound. Israel has done almost as good a job in provoking Iran while exaggerating its importance. Demonstrating a serious mix of deterrent capabilities, tied to a clear pattern of actions that do not threaten Iran or its regime if it is not aggressively opportunistic, is far better than provocative rhetoric or empty promises on any side.
- *Abandon efforts at active Iranian regime change without abandoning efforts to influence evolutionary change:* The Gulf and Islamic world do not need another example of the dangers of attempting regime change from the outside, and empowering incapable exile

- groups. Iran's political and economic structure badly need modernization, liberalization, and reform for the good of the Iranian people, but this should be encouraged peacefully and by quietly supporting internal Iranian reformers.
- *Create truly effective deterrent forces with a strong and unified local component:* It may well be a decade or more before the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) can provide a strong mix of regional security and deterrent capabilities on its own. There is, however, a serious danger in simply going on with separate Gulf national efforts, many of which have limited real-world mission capability and deterrent value. There is no reason for the GCC state not to rely on the US, but the more they do for themselves, the less direct and provocative that reliance will be.
  - *Resolve strategically unimportant disputes and seek clearly defined mutual agreements.* Many of the current tensions between Iran and its neighbors are over border, riverine, island, and dividing line issues that either have no strategic importance or where both sides would benefit from arbitration, mediation, or turning the issue over to the World Court. As Bahrain and Qatar have shown, persistent efforts to resolve issues on this basis may take years to initiate and complete, but can ultimately be successful.
  - *Support negotiating efforts to have Iraq comply with the IAEA and UN. However, make it unambiguously clear to Iran that seeking nuclear armed missile forces will trigger a major defensive reaction and the risk of retaliation and/or preemption far more dangerous than the exercise is worth.* It may be years before Iran can develop a serious nuclear threat to its neighbors or one that could trigger a regional conflict, but it should be made clear to Iran now that the most dangerous military action it can take will steadily endanger its security, if not its existence.
  - *Understand that the failure to deal with regional disputes and equity for Shi'ites empowers Iran.* Iran is only as strong in its ability to manipulate most state and non-state actors are partners and proxies as the Arab world is weak or indifferent in resolving its own internal disputes. One key to success is a collective effort to aid Bahrain's "post-oil" economy and its Shi'ites, another is social and economic equity for Saudi Arabia's Shi'ites and broad-based aid to the development of Lebanon.
  - *Do not give up on Iraq:* The most important single key to both offering Iran security and limiting its opportunism will be creating a stable, independent Iraq. It is doubtful that outside powers can produce Iraqi consensus but they may well be able to offer aid and incentives that will limited forced migration, help bridge over ethnic and sectarian differences, and keep a Shi'ite dominated Iraq from tilting towards Iran. There will be a competition for influence, and if Arab Sunni states take the side of Iraqi Sunnis, they will play into Iranian hands.
  - *Persist in the Arab League Effort to Reach a Full Arab Israeli Peace and King Abdullah's Peace Plan.* The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israeli-Lebanese/Syrian conflicts are additional keys to Iran's ability to create regional problems. This is only one reason to persist in current Arab peace efforts in spite of the frustrations in dealing with Israel, the United States, and the Palestinians. The cause is simply too important to abandon.
  - *Talk to Turkey, Syria, and Pakistan; seek Influence in Afghanistan and Turkmenistan; Do not ignore Russia.* This is a regional game in terms of influence, not a Gulf game. It needs to be played as such.
  - *Redefine GCC relations with the US to create a true partnership:* The US needs to pay far more attention to its regional friends and allies in shaping its policies towards Iran and its overall security posture in the Gulf, particularly in light of the uncertainties surrounding Iraq and the need for consensus in dealing with Iraq. Gulf states, however, need to both take more responsibility and stop acting in a fragmented and sometimes divisive way. Iran is only one of the catalysts that should make the US and GCC states seriously think out the need to

develop a coordinated approach to seeking Gulf security, and one based on pragmatism and military realities.

- *Accept the seriousness of the danger posed by both Shi'ite and Sunni religious extremists.* The moderate Arab states, and religious and intellectual leaders of the Arab world, need to work together to meet the challenge posed by extremists in both sects. A clash between civilizations has always been more of a myth than a reality, but allowing Islam to become the scene of a steadily accelerating struggle between Sunni and Shi'ite, dragging in both state and non-state actors, poses a threat that goes far beyond Iran, the Gulf and the risk of some "Shi'ite crescent."

One thing is clear: Any effective action to deal with Iran's capabilities and possible future intentions has to be complex, nuanced, and sustained. It cannot be accomplished either by threats or by calls for dialogue and grand bargains. It must be done in the context of finding broader solutions to regional security and in the context of military realities rather than hopes and good intentions.