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The Costs of Containment

The Mechanics of Restraining Iranian Expansionism

A Henry Jackson Society Strategic Briefing

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Introduction

As the West and the Islamic Republic of Iran inch ever closer to open warfare, the debate over whether containment represents a better alternative to all-out confrontation and other options is once again taking center stage in Western capitals. In the United States, the containment debate, once confined to august foreign policy journals, is now becoming the subject of congressional resolutions and a mainstay of cable news punditry.¹ Yet this renewed focus on the Cold War doctrine has not been accompanied by greater clarity regarding its pertinence to the Iranian context. Commentators frequently conflate nuclear deterrence (whether the Islamic Republic can be dissuaded from deploying its emerging arsenal by the threat of nuclear annihilation) with containment (whether the Iranian regime can be prevented from exerting its influence in the MENA region and beyond through violent and non-violent means).

The two questions are closely interrelated. Once the Iranian regime possesses its own credible nuclear deterrent, it will be much more difficult to contain its expansionist aims. Deterrence, in other words, is merely one element of containment. The conflation of the two concepts, however, has resulted in a growing perception that containment is somehow a low-cost option demanding fewer Western military commitments than other measures. In fact, the opposite is the case.

Containment was primarily conceived as a military doctrine in the context of US-Soviet relations during the Cold War. "Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world is something that can

be contained," the American strategist George Kennan famously wrote, "by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy."² To prevent communism from penetrating the Soviet Union's geographic periphery and other regions as Kennan recommended, the West paid an enormous price—including thousands of lives—throughout the twilight struggle. The possession of nuclear weapons on both sides of the Cold War did not mitigate the violence of these outbreaks of armed conflict; it merely increased the likelihood of catastrophic outcomes.

Imposing a containment regime on the Islamic Republic of Iran—a state far more insecure than the Soviet Union was through most of its history—will yield similar outbreaks of armed conflict. Two prominent proponents of the doctrine argue that in order to successfully contain Iran, the West must "...lay down clear 'redlines' defining what it considers to be unacceptable behavior—and be willing to use military force if Tehran crosses them."³

This briefing offers a comprehensive survey of the costs of establishing and maintaining this type of containment regime. The briefing first surveys the Iranian regime's strategic capabilities, including conventional assets, forces, and weapons of mass destruction. The briefing then assesses Iran's ability to project power and political influence across the Middle East and beyond, and concludes by considering the implications of Iranian messianism on the viability of a containment regime.

1 Josh Rogin, "32 Senators Call for 'No Containment' Strategy for Iran," Foreign Policy, 16 February 2012 http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/02/16/32_senators_call_for_no_containment_strategy_for_iran (accessed 28 February 2012).

2 "X" (George F. Kennan), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct, Foreign Affairs, July 1947.

3 Ray Takeyh and James Lindsay, "After Iran Gets the Bomb: Containment and Its Complications," Foreign Affairs, March/April 2010.

Iran's strategic assets, capabilities, and liabilities

Two major factors have shaped the development of Iran's strategic capabilities and military doctrine since the Islamic revolution of 1979. The first is the Islamic Republic's ideological character: namely, the commitment embedded in its founding DNA by the Ayatollah Khomeini, to "export" the Islamist revolution beyond Iranian borders by overt and covert means. The second key factor, which follows in large part from the first, is the regime's isolation from both the West and from Sunni-Arab powers, the latter of which are wary of Shi'a-Persian designs on the region. These factors have led the ruling clerics to adopt what is frequently described as a "hybridic" military doctrine, combining "Western ... military concepts coupled with ideological tenets, including martyrdom and revolutionary zeal."⁴

For most of its life, the Iranian regime has also sought to make up for its strategic liabilities—chief among these, technological obsolescence resulting from lack of access to Western arms markets—by adjusting its strategic vision. Since the days of the Iran-Iraq war, Iranian forces have emphasised asymmetric warfare, covert operations, and drawing-out conflicts as a means of projecting power. Iran analyst Michael Connell summarises this well: "Iran is proficient at irregular warfare. It has built up a powerful mix of capabilities for both regular and [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] forces to defend territory, intimidate neighbors, threaten the flow of oil and shipping through the Gulf, and attack Gulf targets."⁵ More recently, Tehran has purchased⁶ or developed a wide range of non-conventional assets—including weapons of mass destruction and an impressive arsenal of

4 Michael Connell, "Iran's Military Doctrine," *The Iran Primer* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2010), p. 70.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Since the 1980s, Iran has purchased numerous missile systems from China and North Korea, including the "Scud-C" (purchased from North Korea) and the M-11 short-range ballistic missile from (purchased from China.) See "Strategic Weapons Systems: Iran," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment—The Gulf States*, 2011.

short- and medium-range missiles—as substitutes to traditional air and naval capabilities. Backed by a credible nuclear deterrent, these capabilities will allow the mullahs to impose heavy costs on Western assets, allies and interests should Tehran choose to cross containment "redlines."

Conventional Assets and Forces

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij Paramilitary

The Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, more commonly known as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), is the centerpiece of Iran's national defence architecture. The IRGC was established in the immediate aftermath of the Islamic revolution as a praetorian militia "...that was loyal to [Supreme Leader Ayatollah] Khomeini, that could countenance the military strength of his opponents, and could also defend the revolution and consolidate its regime."⁷ Battle-hardened after the Iran-Iraq war, as well as early experiences suppressing ethnic-Kurdish rebellions and neutralising Khomeini's erstwhile leftist allies, the Guards constitute a fearsome force, whose influence extends far beyond their original mandate.

Today, the Guards are estimated to number over 150,000 including 125,000 land units of soldiers, 20,000 air and sea units, and a 5,000-strong special forces outfit known as the Quds ("Jerusalem") Force.⁸ The IRGC is the mullahs' primary lever for projecting power beyond Iran's borders. According to Alireza Nader:

"The Guards are ... in charge of executing Iran's strategy of asymmetric warfare in the event of a US or Israeli attack. The IRGC's secretive Qods Force has trained and equipped proxy groups, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Iraqi Shi'ite insurgents, and even elements of the Taliban. Some surrogates have already been used to target US and

7 Emanuele Ottolenghi, *The Pasdaran: Inside Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps*, (Washington: Foundation for Defence of Democracies, 2011), p. 8.

8 Alireza Nader, "The Revolutionary Guards," *The Iran Primer*, p. 60.

*other Western forces in Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan; they could be used against US targets outside Iran in the event of a future conflict.*⁹

To counter the far superior American naval presence in the Persian Gulf, the IRGC Navy has developed a unique asymmetric strategy for making war at sea, involving the deployment of hundreds of small attack boats to overwhelm larger US vessels. While the IRGC's air and naval capabilities are otherwise relatively weak, the Guards operate most of Iran's significant WMDs and strategic missile systems. The Guards' Quds Force is also a formidable element of Iran's national defence strategy. Benefiting from a substantial, secret budget, as well as "...highly advanced training in unconventional warfare and indoctrination," the Quds Force has been responsible for some of the Guards' most daring and dramatic operations beyond Iranian borders, and will likely act with even greater impunity against Western allies and interests once Tehran possesses nuclear weapons.¹⁰

The Basij ("Mobilisation") Force, initially established as a citizen-militia under the Islamic Republic constitution, is today incorporated into the IRGC. During Iran's prolonged and brutal ground war against Iraq, thousands of Basijis served as adjuncts on the battlefield alongside the IRGC and the Artesh (regular army). Today, the Basij Force is estimated to have some 90,000 uniformed members, another 300,000 reservists, and a network of a million or so alumni and non-active members.¹¹ While the contemporary Basij is primarily tasked with repressing political dissent and policing "immoral" behavior among youth and students, the Force can be expected to play a central part in the regime's asymmetric warfare and attrition strategies should regional hostilities break out.

The Artesh (Regular Army)

Established as a modern military during the reign of the first Pahlavi king, Reza Shah, the Artesh is Iran's regular army. It is primarily a conscript army comprised of about 325,000 land, sea, and air units.¹² During the Iran-Iraq war, the Artesh lost significant numbers of conscripts once the Iraqis began deploying chemical weapons and ballistic missiles. The impact of these losses is still felt today. "The Iranian regular military still has not recuperated from the Iran-Iraq war," military analyst Richard Russell has observed. Moreover, to cope with international sanctions, "Iran's military is forced to cannibalise—make some ground and air force equipment into spare parts — to help keep other units functioning. The overall effect of cannibalisation is a further reduction in the amount of forces that the Iranian military could field or fly in a future conflict."¹³

These challenges have been compounded by the mullahs' long-term decision, since the earliest days of the Revolution, to favour the more ideological IRGC. The Artesh must frequently compete with the IRGC to procure equipment and recruit top officers; it has more often than not failed to win this ongoing competition. Ali Afoneh argues that "as long as the IRGC remains the main agent of military procurement, and the engine of the Islamic Republic's nuclear program, the Army can hardly compete with the IRGC when it comes to defence materiel."¹⁴ Nevertheless, the Army's numbers far outstrip those of its better-equipped Arab rivals. Including the IRGC and the Basij, the Iranian regime has an estimated 663,000 battle-ready units.¹⁵ By contrast, the biggest Arab military force—Saudi Arabia's—boasts just over 200,000 units, including Air Defence and Arabian National Guard

¹² Richard Russell, "The Artesh: From the War with Iraq Until Today," *The Artesh: Iran's Marginalised Regular Military* (Washington: The Middle East Institute, 2011), p. 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Ali Afoneh, "Eternal Rivals? The Artesh and the IRGC," *The Artesh*, p. 34.

¹⁵ Michael Rubin, "Boxed In: Containing a Nuclear Iran," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, October 2008, p. 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Ottolenghi, *The Pasdaran*, pp. 10-11.

¹¹ Ali Afoneh, "The Basij Resistance Force," *The Iran Primer*, p. 62.

Missiles and Missile Systems

Tehran's concerted effort to develop advanced missile technology and missile systems as alternatives to traditional air power has also lent the country significant advantages over its regional rivals. Indeed, as Michael Rubin has argued "Iran has a superior ballistic missile capability to any immediate neighbors besides Pakistan."¹ Iran's current slate of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles and other systems are the products of major asset purchases from other rogue states—primarily, North Korea—and indigenous research and development. Should the regime's domestic missile research program continue at its current pace and trajectory, the Iranians can be expected to produce an intercontinental ballistic missile by 2015.² Iran's current arsenal of missiles include unguided, solid-propellant battlefield rockets, short-range ballistic missiles, and medium-range ballistic missiles capable of carrying heavy conventional and non-conventional payloads across most of the region—and even reaching parts of Europe.³ A summary of Tehran's major missile inventory is provided in tabular form, below:

Type	Role	Max. Range (km)	Quantity
FROG 7	Battlefield Rocket System	70	250
Oghab	Battlefield Missile	45	200
Shahin-2 [HAWK]	Battlefield Missile	20	250
Nazeat/Iran 130	Battlefield Missile	130	500
Tondar 69	Ballistic Missile	150	200
Shahab-1 [Scud-B]	Ballistic Missile	1,000	250
Shahab-2 [Scud-C]	Ballistic Missile	750	50
Shahab-3 [No-dong 2]	Ballistic Missile	400	25
BM-25	Ballistic Missile	4,000	18
Qiam 1	Ballistic Missile	750	n/a

Source: Jane's Sentinel¹.

1 Ibid.

2 "Strategic Weapons Systems: Iran," Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment—The Gulf States, 2011.

3 Ibid.

personnel.¹⁶ And while Saudi Arabia's battle tanks, fighter aircraft, and combat vessels are technologically superior to Iran's, the fact remains that Tehran enjoys a quantitative advantage over most of its Gulf rivals in relation to such equipment.¹⁷ Arab technological advantage is consequently insufficient to tip the regional balance of power against a nuclear Islamic Republic.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Iran's nuclear weapons program is the subject of intense regional and international contention. Yet the Iranian regime's chemical and biological warfare capabilities have been strangely overlooked. According to Jane's Sentinel's most recent assessment of the country's strategic weapons systems, "Despite Iran's outspoken adherence to the [1972 Biological Weapons Convention], it still maintains a well documented

interest and capability in acquiring and producing biological weapons. It has a highly developed biotechnology infrastructure that includes leading research facilities.”¹⁸ Iranian forces are also highly trained in the offensive and defensive use of chemical weapons. “It is likely that Iran has maintained the capability to produce [chemical weapons] agents and may have used the past two decades to refine aspects of its [formerly scrapped] program.”¹⁹

Shi’a Power

“Establishing the Islamic state worldwide belongs to the great goals of the revolution,” the Ayatollah Khomeini famously declared soon after coming to power in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. While carried out with ideological zeal by Khomeini’s adherents today, the Iranian commitment to exporting the revolution is also viewed as a practical necessity, allowing the regime to project power and secure Iran’s national interests abroad. Traditionally, the Iranian regime’s core constituency beyond its borders has been composed of Arab Shi’a populations, often living under repressive Sunni-Arab states that discriminate against them by dint of sectarian identity. Iran’s support for the Lebanese Shi’a terrorist group Hezbollah—including the transfer of thousands of rockets to the militia’s bases in southern Lebanon—is well documented.²⁰

More recently, however, Iran has made common cause with non-Shi’a entities in the region, including terrorist groups such as the Gaza-based Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the West Bank and Gaza, and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Due to sectarian differences, such alliances are often strained, and even in countries like Bahrain, Oman, and Iraq, which boast significant Shi’a populations, ethnic and linguistic barriers have

constrained Shi’a loyalty to Tehran. Nevertheless, as Western forces begin to disengage and redeploy away from the region, the Iranian regime will be left with ample space to project its influence, including by arranging arms transfers and providing military training to its non-state allies.

Since the 2003 fall of the Ba’athist regime in Iraq at the hands of Coalition forces, Iran has gradually sought to enhance its influence over Iraqi politics and to undermine Western efforts to stabilise the country. At the most practical level, this project has involved training and arming a loose coalition of Shi’a militias, while also developing close relations with the government of Nouri al-Maliki. As the Western forces withdraw from Iraq, Iranian-backed groups are expected to gain prestige, providing the mullahs with additional coercive leverage over Iraq’s government and civil society.

Iran-backed militias—often identified as “special groups” by Coalition authorities—vary in prestige and military capability.

The most powerful of the Iraqi special groups is Kataib Hezbollah; others include the Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Promised Day Brigades. In recent years, the IRGC’s Quds Force has provided these groups with an increasingly advanced arsenal of “factory-fresh small arms, mortars, rockets, explosives, and man-portable air defence systems (MANPADs).”²¹ From the Coalition perspective, the deadliest weapon provided by Iran to Kataib Hezbollah and other special groups have been explosively formed projectiles (EFPs), which have been described as “improvised off-route mines that fire slugs of metal capable of penetrating some armored vehicles.”²² Additional materiel transferred to the special groups by Quds Force include 107 mm rockets, 122 mm and 240 mm unguided artillery rockets, submachine guns, anti-missile tanks, and advanced

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Hezbollah boasts an arsenal of over 33,000 Iranian-provided rockets. “Hezbollah Says Its Rockets Can Hit All of Israel,” MSNBC, 24 July 2007. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19923841/#.T09NsXJWqy4> (accessed 1 March 2012).

21 Michael Knights, “Shia Strength: Iraq Militants Adapt to US Drawdown,” Jane’s Intelligence Review, October 2011, p. 14.

22 Ibid.

missile systems based on licensed and unlicensed American and Russian designs.²³

Iran's message—conveyed by radical Iraqi Shi'a clerics such as Muqtada al-Sadr, the intermittent beneficiary of Iranian support—has been clear: "Whoever stays in Iraq will be treated as an unjust invader and should be opposed with military resistance ... A[n Iraqi] government which agrees for [Coalition forces to] stay [sic], even for training, is a weak government."²⁴ Yet, if a successful containment regime is to be imposed on Iran, the West must vigorously combat Tehran's influence in Iraq and bolster elements inimical to Iranian interests inside the country and beyond. This pits two long-term Western strategic commitments against one another: on the one hand, drawing down a costly presence in Iraq and, on the other, restraining Iranian expansionism.

A somewhat different analysis applies to Iran's influence in the Persian Gulf. While each Gulf state—especially Bahrain and Oman—boasts significant Shi'a populations, Iran has yet to gain a substantial strategic foothold on the ground. The minority Sunni regime in Bahrain, for example, has closely allied itself with the American-Saudi bloc, notably hosting the US Fifth Fleet. The Iranian regime for many years sponsored the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, a Shi'a Islamist outfit whose mission is to undermine Manama. Today, members of the Bahraini opposition vociferously insist that they are not beholden to Tehran. But, as a senior member of the Obama administration told the New York Times last March, "Without question, there are people on the extreme end of the opposition who have been in touch with Iran."²⁵ More recently, news emerged of Iranian military cooperation with Oman, including joint naval exercises in the Strait of Hormuz²⁶—although

the depth and breadth of the Iranian-Omani strategic relationship is fairly limited. Finally, in Yemen, the Shi'a ethnic Houthis are increasingly allying themselves with Tehran in response to the repressive policies of the Sana'a regime and its Saudi backers.²⁷

For the purposes of the containment debate, it is pertinent to note the wide geographic range—and politico-military complexity—of restraining Iranian expansionism in the Levant, in Iraq, and in the Gulf. Under a successful containment regime, the stability and freedom of each of these states will constitute a separate but interrelated redline, and Tehran must be confronted each time one is crossed. The West must also deepen strategic ties with the Sunni Arab states, increase arms transfers, and ensure they retain their qualitative technological edge over Tehran. Far from deferring conflict, containment requires intense and prolonged military engagement with the entire region.

Beyond the Middle East, the Iranian regime has enjoyed growing strategic ties to a number of anti-American governments around the world, most notably in Latin America, where an emerging "Tehran-Havana-Caracas axis" seeks to undermine American interests in South America and threaten the US homeland.²⁸ The Iranian regime has a significant presence on Venezuela's Margarita Island, which "... has become the principal safe haven and center of Hezbollah operations in the Americas."²⁹ A network of more than 80 Hezbollah and Quds Force members are estimated to operate in 12 Latin American countries, where they have established paramilitary training centers and propagated Iranian propaganda among the region's over four million Muslim inhabitants.³⁰

6 February 2012. <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1527573> (accessed 29 February 2012).

27 Joost Hiltermann, "Disorder on the Border: Saudi Arabia's War Inside Yemen," *Foreign Affairs*, 16 December 2009. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65730/joost-r-hiltermann/disorder-on-the-border> (accessed 29 February 2012).

28 As a Cuban-American scholar has noted, the axis stretching from the Western hemisphere all the way to Tehran is united by "virulent hostility toward the United States, liberal democracy and market economies." See Jose Azel, "The Tehran, Havana, Caracas Axis in Latin America," *Miami Herald*, 10 December 2011.

29 Robert F. Noriega, "Iran's Gambit in Latin America," *Commentary*, February 2012.

30 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*

25 Helene Cooper and Mark Landler, "Interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran Collide, With the US in the Middle," *New York Times*, 17 March 2011.

26 "Iran, Oman Navy Chiefs Meet, Call for Closer Military Cooperation," *Mehr News*,

Tehran's successful penetration of Latin America and the US homeland's near periphery suggest that containing the Iranian regime will involve a global effort, with many more "redlines" potentially crisscrossing the globe, far beyond the Middle East and North Africa.

The Ideology Factor

Perhaps the most contentious aspect of the containment debate is the question of whether or not the Iranian leaders can be considered rational actors. Proponents of containment contend that, even if the mullahs were to cross the nuclear threshold, they would not risk national suicide by launching first strikes against Israel or their Arab rivals. Opponents of containment emphasise the Iranian leaders' admiration for martyrdom, professed desire to "wipe Israel from the pages of history," and messianic views regarding the return of the Shi'a messiah, Imam Mahdi, whom Shi'a theologians believe has been in a millennial state of divine occultation and will return for the apocalypse.

The Iranian regime is complex entity, with multiple factions vying to shape its future. Yet the fact remains that one of these factions—the one currently ascendant in Iranian politics—is genuinely beholden to an apocalyptic, messianic worldview. This faction—of which President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is only the most visible representative—includes both clerics and laymen. As a threshold matter, according to many Shi'a jurisprudents, any "[weapon] that frightens the enemy is good."³¹ And although the traditional clerical hierarchy in Qom and Mashhad views messianism with disdain, recent years have witnessed a proliferation of such views among laymen and non-specialists, including many in Iran's national security establishment.³²

31 Mehdi Khalaji, *Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Politics* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2008), p. 29.

32 *Ibid.*

As one scholar of Shi'a fundamentalism has noted:

*Contemporary Islamic fundamentalism in Iran—and even generally in the Islamic world—finds its representatives not in the traditional seminaries but among modern educated engineers and doctors. One of the remarkable consequences of this fact for Western policy makers is that while Shiite traditionalist theologians are thinking and acting within a specific theological framework which makes their behavior highly predictable, the new fundamentalists do not follow any established theological system and model. Therefore, understanding their rationale as well as predicting their political actions becomes very difficult.*³³

It is this unpredictability that has the greatest impact on the viability of a containment regime directed at Tehran. Flashpoints triggered by the regime's crossing a certain "redline" will most likely not involve nuclear exchanges. Yet Tehran's ideological extremism—combined with a credible nuclear deterrent—will likely leave Western powers and their Arab allies in an unenviable position: confronting Tehran and risking nuclear catastrophe or acquiescing to Iranian aggression, thereby weakening the containment regime.

Conclusion

Barring a domestic uprising in Iran that achieves regime change or military intervention of American or Israeli provenance, the prospect of a nuclearised Islamic Republic is nearing realisation. At that point, containment may indeed appear to be the most appealing amongst a limited range of bad options. Seen in light of the current strategic balance in the Middle East, however, the current trajectory of long-term Western military disengagement appears inimical to the successful implementation of a containment regime against an aggressive and insecure Iranian regime. Compared with the Arab powers dotting

33 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

its periphery, Tehran possesses a quantitative advantage of both troops and materiel, despite the technological setbacks that continue to trouble the Iranian regime. Tehran also possesses an intimidating arsenal of short- and medium-range missiles, and may well achieve intercontinental missile systems in the next three years. Tehran's support for Arab Shi'a

militias—including ongoing arms transfers, ideological indoctrination, and military training—provides it with additional leverage over its Arab rivals. Finally, the messianic ideology of some elements of the regime further complicates any containment strategy, as retaliatory action must always be considered against the risk of a catastrophic nuclear exchange.

About the author

Sohrab Ahmari is a nonresident associate research fellow at the Henry Jackson Society. A widely published journalist and commentator, he has written for *The Wall Street Journal*, *the Guardian*, *the Boston Globe*, *The New Republic*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Foreign Policy*, *Tablet*, *Commentary*, *Dissent*, *City Journal*, and *World Affairs*, among other publications. Ahmari is co-editor of *Arab Spring Dreams*, a forthcoming anthology of essays by young Mideast dissidents (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

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