



Show of force during Iranian Revolution, 1979

# Embracing Asymmetry

## Assessing Iranian National Security Strategy, 1983–1987

By Spencer Lawrence French

The Iran-Iraq War has affected Iranian leaders' decisionmaking calculus over more than three decades, shaping military strategy, force structure investments, and risk tolerance. The cumulative effects of the war are strikingly evident today in Iran's asymmetric strategy against

the United States and the Gulf States. Iran's decisions in 2019 and 2020 especially—such as attacking international oil tankers, launching missiles at oil and military targets, and leveraging Shi'a proxies across the region—reflect Iran's experience during the Iran-Iraq War when the country faced better equipped adversaries while simultaneously struggling with economic troubles and international isolation. Iran's war strategy was born from the country's inability

to achieve strategic ends through conventional means. Unable to escalate the conflict vertically in Iraq, Iran sought to escalate it horizontally against those supporting Iraq's war effort while deploying proxies, terror, and economic warfare capabilities in a piecemeal and reactive fashion. Thus, while these wartime efforts were often successful at the tactical level, they had limited operational effects and failed to achieve the desired strategic coercion.

---

Major Spencer Lawrence French, USA, is a student at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.

Current supreme leader Ali Khamenei, who was president of Iran during the war, and nearly all of Iran's current top military and national security leaders either helped implement or at the very least witnessed this strategy during the war.<sup>1</sup> From their limited perspective of the war, these leaders potentially concluded that the tactical effects of persistent low-intensity asymmetric warfare did have strategic impact and that better synchronization at the operational level or more resources could have led to victory. The success of Iran's asymmetric warfare in advancing its objectives in Iraq in the 2000s likely reinforced the wrong lessons about the coercive power of asymmetric warfare and colored the country's analysis of the Iran-Iraq War. Given the lasting impact the war has had on Iran's military actions, examining the country's experience during the conflict offers a unique window into Iranian decisionmaking today.

### **Background and the Origins of Iran's Asymmetric Approach to Conflict**

In September 1980, the Sunni-dominated Arab nationalist state of Iraq invaded Iran under the pretext of liberating the ethnic-Arab population of Khuzestan Province and annexing the oil-rich province along the Persian Gulf. To Saddam Hussein, Ayatollah Khomeini "constituted an implacable ideological foe,"<sup>2</sup> and Iran, motivated by political Islam, represented an existential threat to Ba'athist Iraq. By 1980, Iran's post-revolution political isolation and officer purges had begun a spiral of declining armed forces combat effectiveness, which represented a window of opportunity that Saddam felt compelled to seize. The heavy losses sustained in the first months of the conflict exacerbated this decline, and Iran was simply unable to reconstitute, rearm, and retrain its first-rate Shah-era forces. Lacking military hardware and professional leadership, Iran was forced to blunt and reverse the Iraqi gains using massed irregular light infantry forces. While costly, this approach ultimately proved successful, and by the summer

of 1982, Iran had pushed Iraqi forces back to pre-war boundaries.

However, instead of seeking terms, Khomeini expanded his war aims from restoring the territorial integrity of Iran to including the abdication of Saddam, as well as obtaining war reparations from Iraq. Despite the clear military risks, the possibility of exporting its Islamic revolution to Iraq was impossible to refuse. For the next 5 years, Iran mounted largely ineffective offensives while Iraq conducted an adequate defense of the approaches to Baghdad. Iran's ground forces ultimately proved unequal to the task of seriously threatening Baghdad, seizing the centers of Shi'a religious life in Iraq, or convincing Iraq's Gulf financiers to end their support. Iran simply lacked the ground forces capable of seizing territory, air forces capable of breaking Iraqi morale and wartime infrastructure, or naval forces capable of blockading Iraq and the Gulf States.

### **Fighting with Insufficient Weapons**

By 1984, Iran had practically exhausted, and had no way to replace, its pre-war heavy weapons. While able to contain Iraqi counterattacks and launch limited offensives of its own, Iran was incapable of defeating Iraq on the battlefield. The Iranian Revolution terminated the country's relationship with the United States, its primary arms supplier, and caused the United States to curtail Iran's access to other foreign weapons suppliers. Iran's military industrial base in the late 1970s and 1980s was unable to fill the gap, being primarily focused on infantry weapons systems and ammunition.<sup>3</sup> The chaos of the Iranian Revolution further reduced the country's already limited arms production.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in the months preceding the war, Iran had no domestic or international source for arms, technical assistance, or training.

Iran became unable to replace platforms and trained crews once they were lost. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimated that, by mid-1984, the Iranian air force, once the preeminent air power in the region, had fewer than

80 fully operational fighter aircraft, compared with more than 400 under the Shah.<sup>5</sup> Estimates suggest that Iraq had an eight-to-one advantage over Iran in combat aircraft.<sup>6</sup> Further combat losses and the lack of replacement parts meant that, by mid-1986, Iran likely had no more than 50 operational fighter aircraft.<sup>7</sup> The situation was no better on the ground. By 1984, Iraq had a four-to-one advantage in armored vehicles,<sup>8</sup> and by 1986, this gap had increased to a six-to-one Iraqi advantage.<sup>9</sup>

### **Fighting on an Anemic and Hobbled Economy**

Crushing arms embargoes, financial shortfalls, and an inability to expand its domestic production of sophisticated weapons systems meant that, while Iran was able to secure some supplies from China, North Korea, Syria, and Libya, as well as spare parts from Europe, its procurement was dwarfed multiple times over by Iraq.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, most of these purchases were for small arms ammunition, infantry antitank weapons, and spare parts, as opposed to combat vehicles, self-propelled artillery, or other sophisticated equipment necessary to truly challenge the Iraqi army on the approaches to Baghdad. Furthermore, Iran was unable to locate a reliable source of Western and, particularly, U.S. parts and end items, thus forcing it to replace U.S. equipment with Eastern Bloc equipment. This complication resulted in logistics, training, and doctrinal problems as Iran attempted to assimilate the new equipment while simultaneously at war.

Throughout the mid-1980s, oil prices were relatively low, but coordinated U.S. and Saudi actions further reduced prices to \$15 per barrel in mid-1986, reducing Iranian state revenue by two-thirds.<sup>11</sup> During the mid-1980s, Iran thereby lacked the currency reserves to meet its procurement requirements on the foreign market and was unable to meet its needs domestically, largely due to "shortages in raw materials caused by import restrictions, low productivity, and faulty management practices," exacerbated by a "scarcity of expert personnel, insufficient



USS Stark listing to port after being struck by two Iraqi-launched Exocet missiles, Persian Gulf, May 17, 1987 (U.S. Navy)

receptivity to innovations, and excessive bureaucratic formalities” and an overall “weak technological industrial base.”<sup>12</sup>

U.S.-sponsored financial and trade sanctions further reduced Iranian access to foreign capital. Over \$6 billion in Iranian assets remained frozen even after the 1981 Algiers Accords. The United States also reimposed sweeping sanctions in 1984 in response to Iranian support for Lebanese Hizballah while blocking Iranian attempts to obtain World Bank loans.<sup>13</sup> Finally, facing domestic pressure over the Iran-Contra affair, and in response to Iranian attacks in the Gulf, the Ronald Reagan administration levied a ban on all Iranian imports to the United States in 1987.<sup>14</sup>

### **A Vicious Cycle and Stalemate**

In short, Iran was caught in a vicious cycle of poor combat effectiveness. Losses in armor or aircraft could not be replaced because Iran possessed neither a reliable international supply nor a robust domestic production base. Even if Iran secured equipment, it was woefully lacking in trained operators and maintenance personnel. Iran was forced

to substitute by drawing on its superior manpower reserves to field primarily mass infantry formations. Yet these formations suffered high attrition and continuously required replacements. Such high throughput meant training was limited, and in 1984, Basiji troops, making up 20 percent of frontline units, received only approximately 2 weeks of initial training before deploying.<sup>15</sup> This resulted in poor combat performance, higher attrition, a generally low level of experience in frontline units, and overall low combat effectiveness.

The Iranian offensive near Basra in February 1984 is illustrative of Iran’s inability to mount a strategic offensive that could legitimately threaten Iraq. Iran suffered at least 40,000 casualties assaulting the marshes north of the city and failed to secure the approaches to Baghdad or isolate Basra.<sup>16</sup> This breakdown clearly demonstrates Iran’s problem. The terrain east of the Iran-Iraq border is more complex than the terrain to its west. The terrain south and east of Basra is waterlogged and unfavorable to armored or mechanized formations, yet the approaches to Baghdad, particularly

west of the city, are open, favorable for a mobile counterattack.<sup>17</sup> Along the northern portions of the Iran-Iraq border, the situation was similar, because “while the mountainous terrain on the border favored infantry operations, the more open terrain lying beyond provided Iraqi armor with an enormous advantage, of which it made full use.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, by 1984, the combination of terrain and Iran’s shortfalls in armor and artillery effectively ensured that the country would be able only to impose cost on Iraq through a bloody stalemate and local attacks on favorable terrain. Iran would not be capable of conducting the type of large-scale offensive necessary to achieve its expanded aims. As the gap between Iraqi and Iranian capabilities grew over the course of the conflict, it only further underscored this reality.

Yet it took Iranian leaders time to comprehend this situation, and Iran oscillated between executing a war of attrition and attempting to seize the initiative through costly and largely ineffectual offensives. The Karbala offensives of 1986 and early 1987 demonstrated that Iran could not sustain large-scale conventional

offensives in Iraq and that Iraqi defenses were more than a match for Iranian capabilities.<sup>19</sup> Recognizing the limitations of its conventional capabilities, and yet intent on fulfilling its expansive war aims, Iran developed an asymmetric strategy aimed at attacking Iraq's perceived weaknesses as opposed to its conventional strengths. Iran increasingly focused on expanding the war horizontally to target Iraq's enablers and fielded a suite of asymmetric tools that it would employ, with some effectiveness at the tactical level, for the duration of the war.

### Targeting Iraq's Gulf Lifeline: Economic Warfare and Terrorism

Key to Iraq's ability to continue the conflict was the financial support of the Gulf States. Throughout the war, Iran suffered a lack of currency reserves due to low oil prices. Thus, Gulf oil production directly contributed to the Iraqi war effort and hurt Iranian finances. Iran's leaders concluded that to offset Iran's conventional weakness and shift the strategic balance, the country needed to expand the horizon of the conflict, coercing Saddam's supporters to abandon him. The difficulty lay in how to achieve this without inviting the outright intervention of the Gulf States or their Western allies. Iranian leaders operated under the hypothesis that a low-level campaign of terrorism and disruption of oil commerce could have this coercive effect. The campaign culminated in 1987–1988 but, despite certain tactical success, never achieved the intended strategic result.

### Shi'a Proxies

The presence of largely repressed Shi'a minorities in the Gulf provided Iran with raw materials for proxy groups. Iran's Shi'a revolutionaries themselves were part of a larger ecosystem of political Shi'ism that had begun to flourish in the 1960s, and thus had an ideological as well as a practical reason for supporting armed movements in the region during the war. As early as 1981, Iran sponsored a Shi'a insurrection in Bahrain,<sup>20</sup> and by 1984 American intelligence began seeing indications

of Iranian training of terror groups in the Gulf, predicting that "because of its military weakness, Iran may now turn to terror as a means to weaken Baghdad's support in the Gulf."<sup>21</sup> In keeping with the strategy of reducing Gulf support for Iraq, while simultaneously driving up oil prices, Iranian-backed saboteurs bombed Kuwaiti oil facilities in June 1986. Four bombings followed in 1987, along with Kuwaiti-Shi'a protests.<sup>22</sup>

The year 1987 also witnessed the birth of Hizballah al-Hijaz, formed by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) primarily from disaffected Shi'a based in the oil-rich Saudi Eastern province. Between August 1987 and March 1988, the group attacked a gas plant and bombed petrochemical installations at Ras Tanura and Jubail.<sup>23</sup> Despite the investment in these groups, at least during the Iran-Iraq War, they posed little danger to global oil markets or regime security. Iranian leaders likely saw their attacks as a way to demonstrate to the Gulf States the vulnerability of their installations and the level of Iranian control over portions of their populations, but there is no indication that Gulf leaders were coerced to lower support.<sup>24</sup> Part of the reason behind this fact is that, despite the tactical successes of these groups in organizing and executing complex attacks, the sporadic nature of the attacks unsynchronized with other coercive tools presented the Gulf States with a real dilemma.

### Mining the Gulf

Similarly, in 1984, Iran faced a concerted Iraqi campaign against the Iranian oil industry. Given that Iraq could count on Gulf finances as a backstop, damage to the Iraqi oil industry had less impact than similar damage to Iran. Mines promised the ability to impose cost on Gulf oil producers in a relatively deniable fashion, thus avoiding the direct intervention of the superpowers while simultaneously expanding the scope of the conflict to target Iraq's financial backers. So, as early as 1984, Iran began expanding its mine-laying program. While Iran never possessed the capability to fully close

the Strait of Hormuz, Iranian leadership hypothesized that the threat of mines would be enough to have a coercive effect, without forcing Iran to engage in a costly and difficult mine-laying campaign.<sup>25</sup> By January 1985, they assessed that Iran could "probably lay enough mines to raise insurance rates and deter shipping to Gulf ports."<sup>26</sup> Under this logic, producers would pass higher insurance rates on to consumers as higher oil prices, thus disrupting Gulf suppliers while making Iranian exports that escaped Iraqi targeting more profitable.

In 1987, at the height of the Tanker War, as the United States launched Operation *Earnest Will* and began re-flagging Kuwaiti tankers, mine warfare became Iran's economic weapon of choice. Iranian mines did have a limited tactical effect. They damaged some tankers and forced the United States to deploy additional minesweeping assets to the region; however, they failed to have the desired strategic effect of substantially reducing Iraq's ability to finance the war. After the reflagged oil tanker MV *Bridgeton* hit a mine in July 1987, global oil prices held steady for 3 weeks before continuing the downward trend. In the month following the attack, crude oil prices fell 1.1 percent as compared to 1.6 percent in the month before the attack.<sup>27</sup> This trend suggests that Iranian mining operations might have spooked oil markets and forced the industry to factor their small cost into pricing and insurance rates. However, the change was so inconsequential as to have no lasting effect on the underlying market dynamics. Once the actual costs of Iranian mining operations were shown to be minimal compared with other business costs, markets adjusted. Similarly, while mining allowed Iran to avoid losing a conventional battle with the United States, Iranian use of economic terrorism invited further U.S. military, economic, and political engagement in the region. Thus, while Iran succeeded at the tactical level in employing mines against individual tankers as a means to offset U.S. conventional strengths, the country failed both at the operational level to



Muslim cleric, possibly Mohammad Mousavi Khoeiiniha, speaking behind cloth-draped stand displaying photograph of Ayatollah Khomeini, outside U.S. Embassy, Tehran, Iran, 1979 (Library of Congress/Sharok Hatami)

significantly influence the volume of Gulf shipping and at the strategic level to influence global oil markets and reduce Iraq's ability to finance its war effort.

### Missiles as Economic Terror Weapons

In seeking to threaten Gulf oil supply in addition to transportation, Iran was confronted again by its limited aviation assets. Iran's Gulf neighbors possessed advanced air defense capabilities. While attack aircraft might have been the most cost-effective option for degrading oil infrastructure, such a conventional strategy was not an option for Iran given its limited aircraft and pilots and its inability to procure substantial amounts of new equipment and training. At the same time, Iran's ballistic missile capa-

bility was not up to the task of credibly threatening the destruction of Gulf oil infrastructure. Despite attempts to stand up a domestic ballistic missile manufacturing program, Iran had no ability to domestically produce medium-range ballistic missiles during the conflict, and had limited success in producing short-range ballistic missiles (only starting in 1988).<sup>28</sup> From 1985 to 1987, Iran was almost entirely dependent on Libya for clandestine transfers of a small quantity (at least 50) of Soviet-manufactured Scud-Bs as well as Libyan ballistic missile expertise.<sup>29</sup> From mid to late 1987, Iran procured about 100 North Korean-manufactured Scud-B missiles.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, Iran's inventory remained limited from 1985 through the end of the conflict, almost certainly

never exceeding 100 missiles on hand at any point, and probably averaging substantially fewer than that estimate.

Iran's Scuds had an accuracy of only within 1 kilometer at two-thirds of its maximum range,<sup>31</sup> and while oil facilities are large targets, precision is necessary to deliver truly lasting damage. Iran was thus forced to launch 10 to 20 missiles or more to have a chance of crippling the target.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, Iran never possessed a large enough inventory of ballistic or cruise missiles to meet the task of credibly threatening the destruction of a meaningful percentage of Gulf oil infrastructure.

In keeping with the theory that economic terrorism creates market uncertainty, Iran's leadership hypothesized that firing one or a small number of missiles

at an oil facility might raise prices, even if doing so was likely to cause only minimal damage.<sup>33</sup> As Saudi Arabia began lowering global oil prices through increased production in 1986, Iran brandished its missiles, hoping to spook markets. In October 1987, Iran launched short-range Silkworm antiship missiles at Kuwait's Sea Island petroleum export terminal, seeking to deter Kuwait from cooperating with the United States and Iraq.<sup>34</sup> The markets were largely unaffected, and the threats went unheeded. In April 1988, Iran accused Kuwait and the United States of directly assisting Iraq in launching an offensive on al-Faw.<sup>35</sup> In response, Iran fired a single Scud into the U.S.-operated Wafra oil field in the neutral zone.<sup>36</sup> Iran clearly intended to send the message that continued support for Iraq would have economic consequences for the United States, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia; however, this idea was not credible given Iran's ballistic missile force capabilities. Furthermore, global oil markets were not shocked by this approach, and at best the attack only held prices steady for 2 months before they resumed their downward trend.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the military effect of Iran's missile attacks on Gulf oil facilities during the war was negligible, and the psychological effect on global oil markets was transient at best. Iranian leaders may have seen the utility of ballistic missiles as an instrument of coercion, psychological warfare, and economic terrorism, but the capabilities and inventory of the Iranian ballistic missile program proved insufficient to credibly coerce.

All told, Iran's coercive acts in the Gulf failed to significantly alter the strategic landscape. As the price of oil fell, Iranian state revenues plummeted, Gulf powers continued to support Iraq, and ultimately the United States stepped in to guarantee freedom of navigation. Iran sought to "apply steady pressure on their rivals without using any one instrument with such force that it invites retaliation."<sup>38</sup> The Gulf States might have understood Iran's intended message that lower support for Iraq would result in lower costs to Gulf oil industries, but the relatively uncoordinated and ineffective campaign never forced them or the

United States to do more than rely on Iraq to hold Iran in check, while moderately increasing maritime security. Iran was more successful at the tactical level, leveraging a multiplicity of proxies and weapons systems to strike targets of their choosing. Iranian leaders might imagine that such tactical successes translated into a strategic coercive effect in the Gulf; however, there is little evidence to support this conclusion.

### **Targeting Iraq's Internal Fault Lines: Proxies and Terror Weapons**

Iran attempted to leverage asymmetric capabilities to gain direct advantage over its Iraqi adversary, degrade Iraq's ability to marshal its resources against Iran, and deter Iraq from applying its superior conventional means against Iran. Iranian leadership identified Iraq's ethnic and religious fault lines as opportunities that could be exploited to force the Iraqi government to shift forces from the front to perform internal security roles. Iran also viewed the Iraqi public's growing dissatisfaction with the war as a vector for degrading regime security. Finally, Iraq's oil economy, like that of the Gulf, appeared ripe for disruption. By 1987, Iran was regularly striking Iraq with missile and proxy terror attacks, but the country's assumptions about the weakness of the Iraqi polity and the effect of small-scale strikes proved unfounded.

### **Kurdish Partners and Shi'a Proxies**

While more partner than full proxy, the Kurds were Iran's most capable ally in Iraq. From the beginning of the war, Iran provided direct assistance to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) forces in their conflict with Baghdad but had strained relations with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).<sup>39</sup> By 1984, Iran began more serious attempts to utilize special operations forces and Kurdish irregulars to divide Iraqi combat power, occasionally creating windows of opportunity to seize the approaches to Baghdad. For instance, on May 15, 1986, while Iranian forces

were engaged in offensives near Basra, Iranian paratroopers infiltrated behind Iraqi lines and, with support from the Kurdish Peshmerga, seized positions near Mosul, threatening the Kirkuk-Dortyol pipeline.<sup>40</sup> Confronted with mounting battlefield losses, Iran went to great lengths to broker a comprehensive agreement between the PUK and KDP to form the Iraqi Kurdistan Front (IKF) in the spring of 1987. This unified Iranian-backed Kurdish bloc forced Iraq to deploy up to one-third of its combat power to defeat the Kurdish insurrection.<sup>41</sup> Yet, once again, Iran was unable to capitalize on this temporary advantage to seize momentum, and the IKF soon collapsed under Iraqi pressure and internal infighting.

Iran built new proxies aligned ideologically with Tehran and over which it had direct control. Following the Iranian revolution, Saddam cracked down on Shi'a political groups, and many dissidents, especially those of the Islamic Dawa Party, fled to Iran. In anticipation of the possibility of the overthrow of Saddam, in 1982, Iran used some of these dissidents to form the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).<sup>42</sup> As Iranian forces proved unable to break the stalemate of 1983, Iran established the Badr Corps under the IRGC as SCIRI's military wing<sup>43</sup> and began recruiting and impressing Iraqi Shi'a prisoners of war, dissidents, and refugees into service as guerrillas.<sup>44</sup> These Shi'a militants, while irrelevant when deployed alongside conventional forces, could conduct bombings and assassinations deep in Iraq. Yet Badr terrorism failed to paralyze Iraqi leadership or seriously strain Iraqi security services. Most important, SCIRI and Badr failed in their primary mission to ignite a Shi'a revolution in Iraq. Other Iraqi Shi'a leaders more amenable to working with Saddam, such as Muhammad Sadiq Sadr, had stepped in during the war to fill the Shi'a "leadership vacuum" left by the flight of Dawa's cadre.<sup>45</sup> So, while over 70 percent of Iraq's enlisted men but only 20 percent of its officers were Shi'a,<sup>46</sup> no amount of Iranian organizing engineered enough defection or sabotage in the



USS *John Young* shells two Iranian command and control platforms in response to recent Iranian missile attack on reflagged Kuwaiti super tanker, October 19, 1987 (U.S. Navy/National Archives and Records Administration)

ranks to substantially decrease Iraqi combat effectiveness. Thus, while Iran's more recent success deploying Shi'a militants makes the investment during the 1980s seem prescient, the actual impact during the Iran-Iraq War was negligible.

### Missiles as Terror Weapons

In 1984, Saddam increased airstrikes on Iranian cities in an attempt to break morale and force Iran into negotiations. The high casualties of the previous year's offensives as well as the declining living standards in Iran made the Iraqi bombing campaigns a pressing threat.<sup>47</sup> Lacking attack aircraft and possessing inadequate air defenses, Iran had few options to respond. Given its limited stockpile of ballistic missiles and procurement challenges, Iran sought to use its missiles coercively to force the Ba'athists to confront their own morale issues, thereby restoring deterrence.

Between March and June 1985, Iran launched a dozen Scuds at Baghdad. To reduce the psychological impact of the strikes, the Iraqi government initially tried to claim the strikes were terrorism or sabotage.<sup>48</sup> Yet this public deception was actually counterproductive, and once the Iraqi government began acknowledging the strikes and civilians became accustomed to their limited lethality, the temporary dip in morale self-corrected.<sup>49</sup> Even when these strikes on population centers were synchronized with large-scale conventional offensives, they failed to produce the intended synergistic operational result.<sup>50</sup> Iran's strategy of low-intensity employment of these terror weapons spread over a long period made their psychological impact less dramatic than if they had been more concentrated in time and space.

Furthermore, there is little evidence to suggest that Iranian Scud strikes had

substantial military effect, as almost all the supposed targets, such as Ba'ath headquarters and military training academies, survived.<sup>51</sup> The strikes' economic effect was, likewise, negligible. While Iranian attempts to degrade Iraqi oil production had begun at the outset of the war, between 1986 and 1988 Iran fired at least five Scud missiles at refineries in Kirkuk and other mid-range ballistic missiles at facilities near Banmil.<sup>52</sup> Damage was minimal, and, as with strikes in the Gulf, the missile attacks had no more than a fleeting effect on global markets.

Iranian ballistic missile strikes did perhaps succeed in increasing Iranian morale. It is likely not lost on Iranian leaders today that missile launches, paired with Iranian state propaganda, enabled the government to communicate to the population that it was capable of retaliating.<sup>53</sup> If messaged correctly, strikes were a source of national pride, increasing

support for the conflict and shifting blame for hardships from the state to the enemy.

In total, Iranian ballistic missile strikes numbered only a few hundred, delivering relatively little total explosive tonnage and doing only marginal damage to the Iraqi economy, security apparatus, or armed forces. The strikes failed to do lasting damage to Iraqi will or regime security and were hardly more effective operationally, doing little to degrade the combat performance of Iraqi army units in their defense of the approaches to Baghdad. Iranian leaders did, however, witness the propaganda value of ballistic missile strikes and explored their potential to provide deterrence.

In short, Iranian leaders saw Kurdish and Shi'a irregulars, as well as ballistic missiles, as a means to offset Iraq's conventional advantages. Yet while Kurdish guerrillas and Badr terrorists fixed some Iraqi resources in internal security roles, they did not come close to forcing Iraq to undermine its defense of the approaches to Baghdad. Likewise, Iranian Scuds failed to degrade Iraqi morale or infrastructure. While Iran's employment of proxies and terror in Iraq may have demonstrated the potential for using Scuds coercively within a conventional armed conflict, the intended strategic effect never materialized, largely due to Iran's inability to synchronize these effects in any meaningful way. At no point did these efforts mass effects synergistically to produce enough pressure on the Iraqi regime to force difficult decisions.

## Conclusion

In 1988, Iran conceded that its maximalist war aims were out of reach, and Khomeini drank the "cup of poison." While somewhat successful tactically, Iran's asymmetric strategy neither broke the deadlock on the battlefield nor bankrupted Iraq. Yet Iran's leaders today, the same individuals who executed the strategy in the 1980s and oversaw the successful use of proxies during the 2000s and 2010s, likely drew different conclusions from the conflict. They may have either conflated tactical success with real strategic impact or attributed the failure of Iran to what

they saw as overwhelming odds stacked against them. For these leaders, the real lesson of the Iran-Iraq War is that, given a fully realized resistance economy capable of withstanding international pressure and a well-developed regional network of proxies, Iran could generate strategic advantage through the skillful synchronization of asymmetric means.

Although this view may appear as a misreading of the conflict, Iran's leaders have both ideological and practical reasons to persist in their belief in the efficacy of an asymmetric offset strategy. The concept that religious faith brings about political change through revolutionary struggle is central to the identity of the Islamic Republic. While clearly pragmatic, Iran's leaders are products of, and in some cases creators of, a system that identifies this concept as an article of faith. In 1979, they witnessed firsthand the power that religious ideals hold to motivate small groups to overcome seemingly impossible odds. Consequently, despite the mixed record of its proxies, particularly during the Iran-Iraq War, Iranian leaders naturally continue to view religiously motivated proxies as a potentially decisive tool. Finally, while Iran has succeeded in developing its own domestic arms production industry and "resistance economy," it remains isolated and financially hobbled. Yet much like during the post-1982 years of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran's regional aims are misaligned with its actual limited conventional military capabilities. Thus, to a certain extent, Iran has no choice but to continue to turn to asymmetric means such as threatening Gulf economic and maritime targets to offset conventional disadvantage. Abandoning this strategy would force Iran to confront this mismatch and dramatically scale back its regional aims of regional leadership and of withdrawal of the United States from Iraq and the Gulf.

While asymmetric means failed to generate strategic advantage for Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, such an approach may be somewhat more suited to the environment today. The IRGC has spent the past four decades transforming the disaffected Shi'a minorities of the region into coercive levers. Iran,

while continuing to enjoy the advantage of being geographically positioned to threaten the world's most important petroleum production centers and shipping lanes, now possesses "the largest and most diverse missile arsenal in the Middle East,"<sup>54</sup> with systems many times more accurate than those deployed during the war. Economically, Iran also has learned how to mitigate the damage of sanctions over the past 40 years and has adapted its economy to build resiliency.<sup>55</sup> On the diplomatic front, while Iran remains largely isolated, Iraq is no longer a foe, and unlike the 1980s, the superpowers are not aligned against Iran. As long as Iran avoids conventional escalation with the United States, it need not be concerned with battlefield defeat and regime removal as it had to during the war. Thus, situated in a more favorable geopolitical landscape, Iran now has greater coercive capabilities and ability to resist foreign pressure. Yet in an echo of the 1980s, the question remains whether Iran's expansive aims exceed its total coercive capabilities. Success will hinge, as it did in the Iran-Iraq War, on Iran's ability to synchronize its asymmetric means to generate sufficient coercive power to dramatically alter its adversaries' strategic calculus. JFQ

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Today, virtually all general and flag officers within the armed forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran and numerous senior civilians within the Iranian defense and security community served in some capacity during the Iran-Iraq War. For example, the current secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani (Ret.), served in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) navy during the war. Current chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces general staff, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, served in various combat and intelligence positions within the IRGC during the conflict. The current IRGC commander, Major General Hossein Salami, and the current IRGC Quds Force commander, Brigadier General Esmail Ghani, were both ground forces commanders during the war. The now-deceased, long-serving former IRGC Quds Force commander, Major General Qassem Soleimani, famously was gravely wounded numerous times during the conflict.



- <sup>2</sup> Nigel Ashton and Bryan Gibson, *The Iran-Iraq War: New International Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Nikola B. Shahgaldian and Gina Barkhordarian, *The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1987), 58.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.
- <sup>5</sup> *Iran's Air Force: Frustrations of a Former Power* (Langley, VA: Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], September 1984), iii, available at <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp85t00314r000300020001-7>>.
- <sup>6</sup> *Iran-Iraq War* (Langley, VA: CIA, August 28, 1984), 1, available at <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp85t00287r001302000001-7>>.
- <sup>7</sup> *Iran: The Search for Arms* (Langley, VA: CIA, August 12, 1986), 4, available at <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp86t01017r000302830001-4>>.
- <sup>8</sup> *Iran-Iraq War*, 1.
- <sup>9</sup> *Iran: The Search for Arms*, 4.
- <sup>10</sup> *Iran-Iraq: Buying Weapons for War* (Langley, VA: CIA, May 1984), 4, available at <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp85t00283r000500120005-5>>.
- <sup>11</sup> Pierre Razoux, *Iran-Iraq War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 335.
- <sup>12</sup> Shahgaldian and Barkhordarian, *The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic*, 62.
- <sup>13</sup> Patrick Clawson, "The Iran Primer: U.S. Sanctions," U.S. Institute of Peace, October 11, 2010, available at <<https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/us-sanctions>>.
- <sup>14</sup> Ray Takeyh and Suzanne Maloney, "The Self-Limiting Success of Iran Sanctions," *International Affairs* 87, no. 6 (2011), 1301.
- <sup>15</sup> Razoux, *Iran-Iraq War*, 346.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.
- <sup>17</sup> Kevin M. Woods, Williamson Murray, and Thomas Holaday, *Saddam's War: An Iraqi Military Perspective of the Iran-Iraq War*, McNair Paper 70 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2009), 10, available at <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/saddams-war.pdf>>.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Razoux, *Iran-Iraq War*, 400.
- <sup>20</sup> *Iranian Threats to Persian Gulf States* (Langley, VA: CIA, June 29, 1987), 3, available at <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp90t00114r000700390001-9>>.
- <sup>21</sup> Razoux, *Iran-Iraq War*, 5.
- <sup>22</sup> *Iranian Threats to Persian Gulf States*, 3.
- <sup>23</sup> Ahmad Khalid Majidiyar, *Saudi Arabia's Forgotten Shi'ite Spring*, Middle Eastern Outlook No. 5 (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, August 2013), 4, available at <[https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/saudi-arabias-forgotten-shiite-spring\\_15503177253.pdf](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/saudi-arabias-forgotten-shiite-spring_15503177253.pdf)>.
- <sup>24</sup> *Iranian National Security Policy: Growing Pragmatism and Effectiveness* (Langley, VA: CIA, March 25, 1987), 5, available at <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp90t00114r000600900001-3>>.
- <sup>25</sup> *The Iranian Mine Warfare Threat* (Langley, VA: CIA, November 1984), 1, available at <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp85t00314r000300100002-7>>.
- <sup>26</sup> *Iraq-Iran: Stepping Up Pressure in the Gulf* (Langley, VA: CIA, January 11, 1985), 5, available at <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp-85t01058r000405710001-9>>.
- <sup>27</sup> Michael Ratner, *Iran's Threats, the Strait of Hormuz, and Oil Markets: In Brief*, R45281 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, August 6, 2018), available at <<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R45281.pdf>>.
- <sup>28</sup> Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, "Iran Missile Milestones 1985–2017," September 27, 2017, available at <<https://www.wisconsinproject.org/iran-missile-milestones/>>.
- <sup>29</sup> "SCUD-B Shahab-1," Federation of American Scientists, updated October 20, 2016, available at <<https://fas.org/nuke/guide/iran/missile/shahab-1.htm>>; *Iran-Iraq: Ballistic Missile Warfare and Its Regional Implications* (Langley, VA: CIA, March 1986), 7, available at <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp-88t00096r000100120003-6>>.
- <sup>30</sup> Joseph Bermudez, "New Developments in North Korean Missile Programme," *Jane's Soviet Intelligence Review* (August 1990), 343–345.
- <sup>31</sup> *The Iranian Missile Threat* (Langley, VA: CIA, March 27, 1985), 4, available at <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp85t01058r000406030001-3>>.
- <sup>32</sup> *Iran-Iraq: Ballistic Missile Warfare and Its Regional Implications*, 8.
- <sup>33</sup> *Iranian Reactions to Saudi Oil Project* (Langley, VA: CIA, April 25, 1986), 3, available at <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp86t01017r00020270001-7>>.
- <sup>34</sup> John Kifner, "Missile Reportedly Fired by Iran Damages a Kuwaiti Oil Terminal," *New York Times*, October 23, 1987, available at <[www.nytimes.com/1987/10/23/world/missile-reportedly-fired-by-iran-damages-a-kuwaiti-oil-terminal.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/23/world/missile-reportedly-fired-by-iran-damages-a-kuwaiti-oil-terminal.html)>.
- <sup>35</sup> Patrick E. Tyler, "Iranian Missile Hits Kuwaiti Desert Near U.S.-Run Oil Field," *Washington Post*, April 21, 1988, available at <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/04/21/iranian-missile-hits-kuwaiti-desert-near-us-run-oil-field/8324060d-f4fd-480c-ad63-ba6fa99b8e04/>>.
- <sup>36</sup> *PRG Meeting on the Persian Gulf* (Langley, VA: CIA, April 20, 1988), available at <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp89g01321r000600540002-6>>.
- <sup>37</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Petroleum and Other Liquids: Cushing, OK WTI Spot Price FOB," available at <<https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/rwtcd.htm>>.
- <sup>38</sup> *The Iranian Missile Threat*.
- <sup>39</sup> Michael M. Gunter, "The KDP-PUK Conflict in Northern Iraq," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 2 (1996), 231.
- <sup>40</sup> Razoux, *Iran-Iraq War*, 361.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.
- <sup>42</sup> Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 111.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>44</sup> J. Matthew McInnis, with Ashton Gilmore, *Iran at War: Understanding Why and How Tehran Uses Military Force* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2016), 18.
- <sup>45</sup> Joel Rayburn, *Iraq After America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2014), 172.
- <sup>46</sup> Michael Rubin, "Has Iran Overplayed Its Hand in Iraq?" American Enterprise Institute, May 13, 2014, available at <<https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/has-iran-overplayed-its-hand-in-iraq/>>.
- <sup>47</sup> *The Iranian Missile Threat*, 2.
- <sup>48</sup> *Iran Missile Chronology* (Monterey, CA: Nuclear Threat Initiative, August 2011), 471, available at <[https://media.nti.org/pdfs/iran\\_missile.pdf](https://media.nti.org/pdfs/iran_missile.pdf)>.
- <sup>49</sup> *Iran-Iraq: Ballistic Missile Warfare and Its Regional Implications*, 7.
- <sup>50</sup> *Iran-Iraq Military Activity* (Langley, VA: CIA, September 13, 1986), available at <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp91b00874r000100260003-1>>.
- <sup>51</sup> *Iran Missile Chronology*, 471.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.
- <sup>53</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran's Rocket and Missile Forces and Strategic Options* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2014), 167.
- <sup>54</sup> Missile Defense Project, "Missiles of Iran," *Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 14, 2018, last modified July 16, 2020, available at <<https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/iran/>>.
- <sup>55</sup> Jackie Northam, "Why Iran's Economy Has Not Collapsed Amid U.S. Sanctions and 'Maximum Pressure,'" National Public Radio, January 16, 2020, available at <<https://www.npr.org/2020/01/16/796781021/why-irans-economy-has-not-collapsed-amid-u-s-sanctions-and-maximum-pressure>>.