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## Iran's Military Might Be Getting Ready to Make Some Sweeping Changes

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On September 1, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said something quite remarkable. In a speech at an Iranian military expo, the ayatollah stated that the development of

Iran's "defensive and offensive capabilities" is an "inalienable and clear right," comments subsequently echoed by important clerics and major state media outlets. Iranian leaders almost always describe their military as strictly "defensive" as a point of moral and political pride. The word "offensive" is rarely, if ever, used by Tehran when discussing its armed forces.

The United States and its allies are constantly worried about the threat from terrorism and destabilization from the growing power of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) proxies or even potential escalation in the Persian Gulf from aggressive IRGC small boats, so it is sometimes difficult to imagine calling the Iranian military a defensive one. But the Pentagon classifies Tehran's military doctrine as primarily defensive, and with good reason. The Iranian military does not generally possess the type of weapons or doctrine to successfully execute a campaign to seize and hold foreign territory or destroy and adversary's critical military assets or infrastructure. Iran, to be blunt, does not have a 'normal' army, air force, or navy that could achieve those types of objectives the way the United States, Israel, Turkey, or Pakistan do.

Why does the Iranian military look this way? First, Tehran has simply not had access to the resources and technology since the 1979 revolution to build and maintain such a force. Second, there is an important revolutionary image to protect of not being an imperialist power like the shah's Iran. Iranian leaders love to claim the state has not invaded another country for over 250 years, which is technically true in a conventional military sense. Third, the part of the Iranian military that would normally possess classic offensive systems, the Shah's old Artesh, is burdened by distrust and relative neglect by the senior leadership. This why Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini created the more loyal though unconventional IRGC in the first place, to protect his revolution.

Fourth, and most importantly, Tehran built a military in response to the threat posed by Washington. Unable to match American conventional power, Iran instead constructed its security forces as an amalgam of unconventional and more traditional capabilities that could target supposed US weaknesses and deter US and allied actions through the fear of bloody terrorist or missile retaliation. In short, the Iranian military looks the way it does largely because it was a rational course of action given Tehran's ideological commitment to oppose the world's only superpower.

The arrival of the nuclear deal and the Islamic Republic's grinding campaigns in the region have set the stage for change, however. The JCPOA brings significant new financial resources, relaxation of restrictions on technology and weapons acquisition, and the much-reduced prospect of US or Israeli military strikes for a decade or more. At same time, the IRGC's struggles in Syria and Iraq have shown that their army of proxies and ballistic missiles forces is simply insufficient for the types of conflicts Tehran is most likely to face in the coming years. If Iran hopes to avoid depending on Russian or US air power every time a critical national interest is at risk, something needs to give.

Signs of that shift have already emerged. Over the past year, the IRGC began integrating Artesh elements and more conventional weapons into the militia front fighting for Syrian President Bashar al Assad. In July, the Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS), which coordinates and oversees both the IRGC and Artesh, had its most significant personnel overhaul since the Iran-

Iraq War, signaling a move to greater professionalism, interoperability, and effective power projection.

And now Khamenei is apparently indicating the Islamic Republic is moving beyond some of the political and ideological concerns that have restricted the evolution of its armed forces. If the supreme leader is blessing investment in offensive capabilities, what could we soon see from the Iranian military?

--*Precision-guided missile force.* Iran's ballistic and cruise missiles cannot be used to any significant military effect (beyond psychological terror) unless they become more accurate.

--*Long range air power and close air support (CAS) capabilities.* Fighting the Islamic State and Syrian opposition have shown that without CAS Iran can have no effective way to defeat unconventional enemies beyond its borders. Tehran will also need long range air strike ability to complement its cruise and ballistic missiles if it hopes to legitimately threaten to degrade or destroy a regional enemies' command and control, surveillance, air or air defense capacities.

--*Accurate target acquisition.* Iran needs much better intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems, over-the-horizon radar, target tracking, and fire control capabilities to conduct any offensive military campaigns.

--*Blue water navy capacity.* New AFGS Chief of Staff Mohammed Bagheri has already stated Iran must invest in projecting power into the Indian Ocean. Expect submarines to be the major focus for the Iranian naval forces.

--*Tanks and helicopters.* The conflicts in Iraq and Syria have already prompted the reassignment of helicopters from IRGC Air Forces to the IRGC Ground Forces to form an independent "Air Assault Unit" Iran has also undertaken a major push to deploy more advanced tanks.

All of this will cost serious money. Even after the JCPOA, Iran will be unable to fund a full modernization of its air, navy, ground, and missiles forces to match its rivals. As long as Tehran sees the United States as a threat to its existence, it will seek deterrence through proxies, unconventional weapons, or whatever feasible means it can support. It is clear, though, that current regional conflicts are encouraging the Iranian military to become more balanced between conventional and unconventional abilities.

Whether the United States can, or should nudge Iran away from its asymmetric doctrines and deterrence -- focused on the terror of proxies, inaccurate ballistic missiles and the like -- and towards a more conventional force-on-force approach is an even bigger question for policymakers. A more traditional military is theoretically easier to predict and deter and the United States can be assured of having the upper hand in the long-term arms competition. Having effective offensive capabilities, though, may make it easier for Iran to decide to use force in the first place, especially against our allies. The unconventional, terrorist-sponsoring Iranian military is, after all, the devil we know.