

Iranian Military Doctrine and Structure

MP Strategic Studies' Diplomatic Briefing Paper, June 14th, 2025

Purpose

to equip decision-makers with a granular understanding of Iran's force architecture, command culture and deterrent posture, thereby clarifying the political-military costs that Israel or any Western coalition would incur in a ground offensive.

Executive overview

Iran fields the Middle East's largest standing force: roughly 610 000 active troops, split between the conventionally oriented Artesh (c. 420 000) and the ideologically driven Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC (c. 190 000). A further 600 000 – 1 000 000 Basij reservists can be mobilised within seventy-two hours. Defence outlays hover around USD 25 billion ($\approx$ 2.5 percent of GDP), but the cost-effectiveness of home-built drones, missiles and paramilitary networks maximises strategic return on modest cash flow. The system is expressly engineered to survive decapitation strikes, absorb territorial loss and prolong conflict until political objectives of the invader collapse.

1. Structural duality and political logic

- The Artesh answers to the Ministry of Defence and ultimately to the Supreme Leader through the General Staff of the Armed Forces. It retains Shah-era hierarchies, armoured manoeuvre units and legacy combat aircraft: c. 1 600 tanks (about 650 Zulfiqar, 480 T-72, 220 Chieftain; balance older), 230 fighters (F-4, F-5, F-14, Su-24, MiG-29), plus three small frigates and twenty-odd patrol combatants. It is constitutionally restricted to territorial defence and rarely deployed in extraterritorial roles.
- The IRGC bypasses state ministries and reports directly to the Office of the Commander-in-Chief (the Supreme Leader). Its 31 provincial corps integrate ground troops, intelligence branches, cyber units and local Basij battalions (10 000–20 000 each). This horizontal lattice is the material expression of the doctrine known as mosaic defence: every province fights as an autonomous enclave should central control be neutralised.
- Redundant chains of command deter coups and complicate foreign targeting. Disabling Tehran's national command authority would still leave thirty-plus provincial headquarters, each wired to its own fibre-optic mesh, satellite uplinks and secure microwave relays.

2. Doctrinal pillars and force employment

- a. Asymmetric anti-access/area-denial: more than 3 000 ballistic missiles (about one-third high readiness) ranging 700–2 000 km, 700+ land-attack and anti-ship cruise missiles, and an expanding inventory of road-mobile air-defence systems (Bavar-373, Raad, Sayyad-4). Coastal radars provide over-the-horizon cuing for anti-ship batteries covering the Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman.
- b. Unmanned saturation: industrial output of Shahed-136/131 loitering munitions now exceeds 5 200 airframes per annum, thanks to a Russo-Iranian joint plant at Alabuga and three domestic production lines. Unit cost averages USD 23 000, allowing Tehran to trade one drone for every USD 1 million–USD 1.5 million SAM expended by the defender.
- c. Swarm naval tactics: the IRGC Navy controls an estimated 320 fast-attack craft (C-14, Peykaap II, Zolfaghar class), 30–40 Ghadir-class midget submarines and scores of mobile C-802 / Noor launchers. Tactics combine radar-guided mass salvos with suicide boats to exhaust shipborne point defence.
- d. Proxy integration: the Quds Force (5 000–8 000 cadres) underwrites roughly 60 000 non-Iranian fighters between Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Annual external operations budget is assessed at USD 1.5–2 billion. Missile and drone transfers to the Houthis (Yemen) and Kataib Hizbollah (Iraq) extend retaliatory reach to Eilat, Jeddah and the eastern Mediterranean.
- e. Urban and guerrilla defence: Basij reservists train quarterly in small-unit tactics, IED manufacture and crowd mobilisation. War-gaming by the Artesh University of Command (2023) anticipates creating 280 urban strongpoints across twelve conurbations, each supplied for fourteen days of independent resistance.

3. Quantitative snapshot, 2025

Active personnel: 610 000
 Basij reserve: 600 000 – 1 000 000
 Defence budget: ca USD 25 bn
 Ballistic missiles: > 3 000 (1 000 ready)
 Cruise missiles: ≈ 700
 Shahed-series drones produced per year: 5 200–6 000
 Fast-attack craft: 320
 Mini-submarines: 30–40
 Provincial IRGC headquarters: 31
 Average IRGC troops per province: 3 000–4 000
 Basij per province: 10 000–20 000
 Cyber/EW personnel: ~ 3 000

4. Operational barriers to an external ground campaign

Political centre of gravity: dual sovereignty (state ministries v. Supreme Leader) means no single authority can capitulate on behalf of all forces. Historical precedent during the Iran–

Iraq conflict shows local commanders prosecuting operations even when national command was degraded for days.

Territorial dispersion: seizure of Tehran, Esfahan and Bandar Abbas would leave at least twenty-eight provincial corps intact. Each commands hardened ammo depots buried 40–60 m under limestone and linked by tunnels able to accommodate transporter-erector-launchers.

Attritional calculus: Israel's active ground forces number roughly 140 000, with 465 000 reservists. Even if all reservists were mobilised, the force/space ratio inside Iran would be 0.2 troops per square kilometre, far below the 2.5–3.0 ratio that U.S. FM 3-24 sets as the baseline for counter-insurgency control.

Saturation threat to logistics: assuming the invader establishes a brigade-sized lodgement (c. 5 000 vehicles), IRGC targeting doctrine allocates twelve Shahed drones and eight Fateh-110 missiles per day to each logistics hub. Current Israeli Iron Dome / David's Sling inventory can intercept fewer than 1 200 fast drones or short-range missiles before reload cycles exhaust ready launchers.

Multi-front retaliation: Hezbollah fielded 150 000 rockets by late-2024; Houthi cruise- and ballistic-missile strikes have hit vessels at 1 000 km. A land war in Iran therefore guarantees parallel fires on Israeli and U.S. interests from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, the Gulf of Aden and possibly the eastern Mediterranean, raising strategic escalation thresholds.

Urban defence depth: six cities exceed two million inhabitants; Shiraz and Tabriz host pre-mapped defensive grids where civilian infrastructure doubles as fighting positions. Even limited encirclement would require extensive rules-of-engagement waivers, risking civilian casualties and diplomatic fallout.

5. Diplomatic implications and recommendations

1. Military signalling should emphasise maritime and air deterrence rather than invasion discourse, preserving coalition unity while avoiding escalation triggers embedded in Iran's mosaic doctrine.
2. Exploiting the cost-exchange ratio, allies could increase directed-energy air-defence procurement (e.g., 100 kW solid-state lasers), reducing per-engagement costs from USD 120 000 to under USD 2 000, thereby undercutting Tehran's drone-centric strategy without kinetic ground presence.
3. Back-channel dialogue with provincial clerical networks may dilute IRGC ideological cohesion; historical instances (1999 student protests, 2009 Green Movement) show that non-military fissures can restrain Basij activation.
4. Regional partners (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain) should be assisted to harden ports and desalination infrastructure, minimising collateral leverage available to Iran's proxy network during any intensified confrontation.
5. Intelligence priorities ought to shift from strategic C2 nodes, which are redundant, to provincial logistics corridors: fuel depots, fibre hubs, drone assembly workshops. These constitute the true choke points in a decentralised resistance strategy.

Iran's armed forces are optimised for denial, not conquest. Their strength lies in structural redundancy and a doctrine that turns geography, ideology and low-cost technologies into a prolonged war of exhaustion. Any terrestrial campaign would therefore demand political endurance, force densities and economic resources out of scale with the limited objectives that Israel or its Western allies might realistically seek. A combined approach of maritime containment, technological counters to unmanned saturation, and calibrated diplomatic coercion offers a more proportionate path to restraining Iranian behaviour without triggering the mosaic defence in full.

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