

# Iran – assessing the threat

Dr Carlo Kopp

Public comments by US Vice President Dick Cheney during his visit to Australia about the military option remaining open for dealing with Iran underscore the ongoing problems the world confronts with the Tehran regime. Given escalating nuclear provocation by the Tehran leadership it is not beyond the realm of possibility that the US will conduct a bombing campaign against Iran in the coming year.

The US is presented with a distasteful moral and political dilemma in dealing with Iran. If Iran is allowed to acquire a nuclear capability the regime will then have the option of delivering nuclear attacks against targets across the Middle East and Europe using North Korean designed ballistic missiles; or against targets globally, including the US, using covert delivery methods including nuclear terrorist attacks by proxy. Denying Iran a nuclear capability would require not only the destruction of Iran's nuclear infrastructure, but also its economic potential to rapidly reconstitute the lost capability. Recent US media reports suggest that the US is developing contingency plans for bombing Iran, and that these are likely to extend well beyond the nuclear infrastructure.

There is much concern in US analytical circles about the impact of any campaign against Iran, as the large shared border with Iraq and the enormous influence of the Tehran regime with the Shia community in Iraq present Tehran with unlimited opportunities to cause mayhem in a demonstrably unstable Iraq. Iraq's internal political split along sectarian lines, exacerbated by Jihadists and proxies of the Tehran regime, is not unlike that observed in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, with similar destructive potential. As much as critics of the US like to crow about the inability of the US to create a stable democracy in Iraq, the deeper reality is that most of the instability seen in Iraq today is a direct result of decades of Saddam's policy of ethnic and religious division. One observer commented last year that 'had Saddam died of natural causes, the West would still have had no choice than to intervene in Iraq to prevent the emergence of another Yugoslavia-like civil war and subsequent domination of the fragments of Iraq by Iran'.

For the Tehran regime, US difficulties in Iraq have been a political and propaganda godsend. Tehran's ability to create mayhem in Iraq has severely constrained US freedom of action in the diplomatic process aimed at dismantling Iran's nuclear capabilities.

However, as instability in Iraq continues, the US has less to lose over time by using military force



*The legacy US Hawk SAM is the primary Iranian area defence weapon.*

against Iran, a factor which appears to elude the Tehran leadership. At some point the US will assess its potential loss from such military action to be irrelevant, upon which Iran is apt to be exposed to the full fury of US military action. Once the US has nothing or little to lose in Iraq, there are no strategic factors mitigating against full scale use of force against Iran.

Given Iran's intransigence in dealing with the world community over the nuclear issue, and the ongoing political divisions in the West over the issue, it is not clear that a military campaign against Iran would produce the same political issues as the invasion of Iraq and toppling of Saddam did. France, Russia and Germany had powerful commercial incentives to keep Saddam in power, but such incentives do not exist in Iran. Russia and China are both exporting military equipment to Iran, and China recently engaged Iran as a major supplier of energy products. It is not likely that either of these nations would risk a major confrontation with the US to defend Iran. China has yet to achieve the military potential to be able to confront the US over Iran; that capability will not be achieved for some years to come.

The only deterrent that Iran has, which is credible, is the likely increase in global oil prices as a result of a conflict which would see Iran's contribution to the global market shut off.

## Tehran's Theocratic Regime

The regime running Iran today is a direct descendent of the revolutionary regime that gained power in Iran with the fall of the Shah in 1979. Until then, Iran was a staunch ally of the US and a linchpin in the US strategy for the Middle East. Flush with oil revenue, the Shah's regime spent lavishly on infrastructure and military hardware. Reza Pahlavi was ambitious and wanted to reshape Iran into a modern nation state, emulating Turkey's success as a secular nation state.

Paradoxically, Pahlavi's success was his undoing, as the large demographic shifts resulting from economic growth saw large numbers of rural poor migrating to Iran's cities, becoming an economically and politically powerless underclass. The enormous disparities in wealth developed between the nation's elites and poor produced the 'cannon fodder' for Khomeini's revolutionary movement. The Shah was toppled in 1979 by a popular revolution led by radical Shia followers of Ayatollah Khomeini. Shortly thereafter, the US Embassy was stormed and the ensuing hostage crisis destroyed the relationship with the US permanently. The hostage crisis and failed US rescue raid destroyed the presidency of Jimmy Carter, with a resurgence of the Republicans led by Ronald Reagan. The rest is history.

Khomeini's followers instituted a reign of terror in Iran, which compares best to the French revolutionary terror. The targets of this terror were those loyal to the Shah, but also nationalists, intellectuals, socialists, communists, people with any wealth, adulterers, homosexuals, and religious minorities (especially Bahais and Zoroastrians). Radical Shia Islam was imposed as a state religion and enforced by a religious police force, best compared to the Nazi Gestapo. Public hangings became a popular national spectacle, which continues to this day. An award was even given to an inventor who designed a portable gallows made from steel tubing, designed for multiple public hangings.

Iran continues to persecute and kill adulterers, homosexuals, and religious minorities and is known to have executed many individuals for the crime of apostasy, no differently to the papal inquisition centuries ago in the West.

Shortly after the revolution, Saddam invaded southern Iran with the stated aim of 'protecting the Arab minority from oppression' and the actual aim of stealing Iran's richest oilfields. The resulting conflict lasted a decade, with more than a million dead including victims of vicious attacks using mustard gas and nerve agents. Iran drove back Saddam's forces to the pre-war boundaries, achieving this by massive human wave attacks, and a new weapon, the suicide bomber. Strapping on a jacket full of explosives is a technique developed by Iran.

Since then, Iran has become a major player in Lebanon and in the Palestinian state, following its policy of opposition to the existence of the Jewish state. Funding, political support, military training, advisors and weapons were provided to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories. The Israelis are often described as obsessive about Iran, and for good reason, as Iran has been the principal supporter of anti-Israeli movements in that region.

Since the 1990s, Iran has actively sought a strategic weapons capability, primarily acquiring North Korean hardware to develop an indigenous intermediate-range ballistic missile capability. The official party line on Iran's nuclear capability is that it is intended for power generation, but given that Iran has some of the world's largest natural gas reserves, only the naïve could possibly believe this claim.

The theocratic state in Iran can best be compared, structurally, to the fascist states of Europe during the first half of the 20th Century. While many scholars vehemently disagree with the fascist label, the reality is that most of what differentiates the Tehran regime from past European fascists is ideological, rather than functional. Iran is effectively a single party state with a massive police and paramilitary apparatus, which exists to maintain the regime in power. While popular elections are held, the choices in candidates vary between the extremely radical religious and moderately radical religious, a distinction lost on many Western observers.

Attempts to reform Iran from within and shift it away from its extreme ideology have failed. Many middle class Iranians and intellectuals are not happy with the regime and its oppressive ideology, but public dissent and protest typically results in the mass imprisonment and persecution of dissenters. The popular view held by many Western observers is that Iran should be treated gently to facilitate internal change to democracy.

Unfortunately, like most regimes of this ilk, such change is easy to talk about but often impossible to effect.

The backbone of the regime's power is the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), formed after the revolution in the mould of the Nazi paramilitary Sturm Abteilung, and later evolving into a genuine military and paramilitary police force not unlike Himmler's SS empire.

The IRGC is today a genuine all arms force, including a fighter equipped air arm, naval units, land force units, police units and Special Forces units. Not unlike Himmler's SS, the IRGC exists to guarantee that a military coup cannot be effected and to provide a coercive mechanism to keep the populace under control. Highly motivated ideologically, the IRGC is the principal obstacle to political change in Iran, and as long as it exists a shift to representative democracy is fantasy.

Importantly, the incumbent Iranian President, Ahmadi-Nejad, has a long association with the IRGC, and is no slouch intellectually, holding a PhD in civil engineering. Ahmadi-Nejad is genuinely dangerous, insofar as he is an intellectually competent individual deeply steeped in his ideology, and with a lifelong involvement with the IRGC he is accustomed to using unrestrained force to achieve his ideological aims.

Many sources claim that Ahmadi-Nejad belongs to an apocalyptic sect, which believes in an ultimate Armageddon conflict between the forces of good (radical Islam) and evil (secular West) and must be prepared for. Ahmadi-Nejad has made numerous public statements declaring his aim of destroying Israel, and he sponsored a recent gathering of those denying the Holocaust to foment anti-Israeli sentiment on a global scale.

The widely held view in media circles that Ahmadi-Nejad is irrational is not correct. His ideological belief system may be irrational, but his reasoning faculties are sound. Since his rise to power he has consolidated regime control in Iran, brutally suppressed dissent, raised Iran's profile and standing in the minds of anti-Western aligned Muslims, and strengthened Iran's ties with Russia and China. These are not the actions of an irrational leader, but rather a calculating and purposeful individual with a fanatical commitment to an ideology and the extension and growth of its power. While the ultimate command of Iran's military remains vested in the upper echelons of the theocracy, the influence of Ahmadi-Nejad and his hand picked followers should not be disregarded. If any individual has the potential to start a military conflagration, Ahmadi-Nejad is that individual.



China has sold Iran a respectable number of HQ-2/SA-2 SAM systems. The Chinese HQ-2 is very different from the Soviet S-75 Dvina and is usually carried on a tracked TEL.



Iran acquired several batteries of the very long range 5V28/S-200 Volga / SA-5 Gammon SAM.



Iran's best air capability are the remaining Grumman F-14A Tomcats.



Iran's most numerous fighter is the MDC F-4E Phantom, which formed the backbone of the Shah's air force.



Iran recently acquired new Russian SA-15/Tor M1 point defence SAM systems.

## Iran's Military Capabilities

When the Shah fled Iran in 1979, it had the most potent inventory of military equipment in the Middle East, largely sourced from the US. The jewel in the crown of Iran's military was its air force, equipped with the best the US could supply at the time.

At the time of the fall of the Shah, Iran had acquired no less than 79 Grumman F-14A Tomcats, 32 F-4D Phantoms, 177 F-4E Phantoms, 16 RF-4E Phantoms, 166 F/RF-5E/F Freedom Fighters, five Boeing 747-100 heavy tankers, 10 Boeing 707 tanker/transports, six P-3F Orion LRMP and 50 C-130E/H Hercules. Iran had ordered 300 F-16A Falcons but the regime collapsed before any could be delivered. Iran's primary air defence weapon was the MIM-23 Hawk, supplemented by UK supplied Rapier point defence SAMs.

This was by inventory the most formidable air force in the Middle East, even if by operational skills it was no match for Israel, the other US ally in the region.

The Shah's army was also formidable by regional standards. Air mobility was a priority, and the army was equipped with 265 AB.212/AB.214A assault helicopters, 80 AB.206 scout helicopters, 20 AB.205 (UH-1) utility helicopters, 60 CH-47C Chinook heavy lift helicopters, and 10 AH-1J Cobra attack helicopters. Armour was a priority, with 460 M-60 A1 tanks, over 200 M-48 tanks, 160 M-47 tanks, 187 improved Chieftains, 124 M-24 light tanks, 575 M113 APCs and 1425 Russian BTR-50 and BTR-60 APCs.

Iran's Navy was the poorest of the three Services, equipped with Vosper Mk.5 patrol frigates (IIS Faramarz, Saam, Rostam, Zaal), Combattante II missile boats (IIS Tarbarzin, Gorz, Zoubin, Kaman, Khadang, Peykan, Joshan, Falakhon, Shamshir, Gardouneh, Khanjar, Neyzeh), a Sumner class destroyer (IIS Babr), a rebuilt Battle class destroyer (IIS Artemiz), and several landing ships. The Navy operated a mix of AB.205, AB.206 and AB.212AS helicopters.

After the fall of the Shah the West cut off the supply of spare parts, forcing Iran to develop a domestic cottage industry to maintain what assets it could. Saddam's invasion and the subsequent decade of war saw considerable attrition in Iran's inventory of US supplied equipment. The tanker war also saw Operation Praying Mantis in which the US Navy sank several of Iran's best warships in a single day. Operation Desert Storm saw a minor gain for Iran when the best of Saddam's air force sought refuge in Iran, with 137 aircraft flown out. These aircraft were impounded and many integrated into the Tehran regime's air force. These aircraft are claimed to comprise 12 MiG-23 Floggers, 7 MiG-25 Foxbats, 4 MiG-29 Fulcrums, 24 Mirage F-1, 4 Su-20 Fitters, 40 Su-22 Fitters, 24 Su-24 Fencers, 7 Su-25 Frogfoots and 15 Il-76 Candids.

In attempting to oppose any US air campaign, the key assets available to Iran today are the air force, IRGC air arm and SAM missile defences.

Exact figures or the operational status of the Iranian air force are hard to come by, in part due to the secrecy the regime imposes, and in part because the serviceability of many assets cited is not known. Recent US reports, for instance, indicate that Iran has been attempting via proxies to acquire F-14 components from AMARC, an operation closed down by the FBI.

Since Desert Storm, Iran has acquired Russian and Chinese hardware, supplementing the Iraqi equipment and adding additional capabilities.



LRMP capability is provided by the remaining P-3F aircraft.

Iran acquired several 747-100 heavy tankers.



Public US sources indicate the current composition of the air forces includes 65 F-4D/E Phantoms, 25 F-14A Tomcats, apparently modified to carry other missiles, 60 F-5E/F, 30 Su-24MK Fencers, 15 MiG-23 Floggers, 25 MiG-29 Fulcrums, 25 Mirage F.1, 25 Chengdu J-7 Fishbeds, and an unknown number of Chengdu J-6 Farmers. There are claims that US personnel successfully sabotaged all of Iran's tankers during the collapse of the Shah's regime.

Iran has built up its SAM defences, and is now credited with 150 Modified MIM-23 Hawk launchers in 30 fire units, many mounted on 8x8 vehicles, 30 remaining Rapier fire units, in addition to new equipment supplied by China and Russia. The latter is claimed to include 10 SA-5/S-200 Gammon long range SAM batteries, 50 Chinese SA-2/HQ-2J Guideline batteries, 29 new SA-15/Tor M1 Gauntlet mobile point defence SAM systems, with some sources claiming that the S-330PMU-1/2 Grumble has been acquired, and the SA-6B/9M9 Gainful.

Many of the systems operated by Iran may not be standard, for instance reports exist that Hawk batteries have been modified to launch the RIM-66 Standard SAM and AGM-78 Standard anti-radiation missiles. Late model Chinese SA-2s are also quite different from the Cold War Russian variants, and are claimed to use new midcourse datalinks, and terminal seekers, both of Chinese design. A typical late model HQ-2 battery has mobile tracked launch vehicles.

In practical terms, Iran's air force and SAM forces are no match for the US Air Force, and in a well planned campaign would be unlikely to survive the first few days of the campaign. The US Navy, lacking stealth aircraft, would be reliant on the Air Force to suppress Iran's defences.

Whether the US opts to initiate military action against Iran remains to be seen, but should this transpire then the outcome for Iran is unambiguously clear – military defeat – likely with very low losses on the US side of the campaign.

The failed US hostage rescue mission was performed using the RH-53D minesweeping helicopter.



Iran had the largest tanker force in the Middle East, mostly comprising Boeing 707-320 variants.



Iran operates a small number of MiG-29 Fulcrums, some 'inherited' from Saddam's air force.

