I.1 Nest of the Phoenix

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Introduction

The Iranian Phoenix

IN 1978 IRAN AND ITS ARMED FORCES seemed to stand at the peak of their power and prestige in the modern era. Bountiful oil revenues and a strategic position overlooking the vital Persian Gulf oil export routes boosted Iran's standing in the world. Cold War competition made Iran a recipient of Western and Soviet arms and attention. Iran had just passed Egypt, a far more populous country, in having the largest armed forces in the Middle East. In fact, the Iranian military was outpacing some large European countries in the quantity and sophistication of its equipment. Iran was the only country other than the United States to possess the state-of-the-art F-14 Tomcat fighter. Iran's military also was funding the development of the advanced British Challenger tank with its then revolutionary Chobham composite armor. These programs represented only the middle stages of an extravagant rearmament process, with numerous sophisticated ground, air, and naval systems on order. In addition, the Iranian armed forces, the Artesh, had polished their reputation by gaining combat experience battling rebels in neighboring Oman and by participating in a UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon.[1]

The shah of Iran, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, took special pride in reestablishing Iran's military might after more than a century of Iranian humiliation as a victim of Russian and British imperialism. The shah constantly conjured up images of the majesty of ancient Persia, which, 2,500 years earlier, had become the world's first superpower. This heritage was used to help legitimize Pahlavi rule but also supported Iran's claim to a position among the prevailing great powers. During one of his regular military parades in Tehran in October 1978, the shah hosted a delegation of American military officials that included U.S. Army colonel Colin Powell. As the colonel sat in the reviewing stand, an elite troop named the "Immortals" in conscious imitation of fabled Persian warriors of antiquity marched by. Powell, a future chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and secretary of state, noted favorably their tailored uniforms and martial élan.[2] American support to its Iranian ally seemed to be paying off with the

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creation of a strong and well-armed defender of the strategic and vulnerable region of southwest Asia.

Less than three months later, American hopes for Iran had crumbled. Amid widespread popular opposition to his rule, the shah abandoned the Immortals, the rest of his military, and his country in January 1979. The Iranian armed forces virtually collapsed, unwilling to support their undependable monarch and loath to confront the Iranian people. The military's passivity and partial dissolution cleared the way for religious extremists, led by Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, to hijack the revolution and initiate the militantly anti-Western Islamic Republic of Iran. Powell later commented, not quite correctly, that the elite units had "cracked like a crystal goblet." For Americans it seemed that the investment in building up the shah as a regional bulwark for the West had come to naught.[3]

Within another two years, the shattered Iranian military and newly formed revolutionary forces responded bravely and effectively to stop the Iraqi invasion of September 1980. Despite the loss of tens of thousands of U.S. technicians needed to support Iran's advanced equipment and a vigorous international arms embargo, the Iranians fought on for eight years. The regular military and revolutionary forces nearly prevailed by putting so much pressure on Iraq that Baghdad repeatedly offered to end the conflict on terms favorable to Tehran. Only the incompetent statecraft of their theocratic leadership denied Iran's fighting men a triumph. Ultimately the Islamic Republic overreached its objectives, wore down its own forces in pointless offensives, and compelled the Iraqis—by giving them no option but victory—to create the improved military forces used to win the war in 1988. The Iranians view what they call the "Imposed War" as a victory, and, in some respects, the Iranian military deserves no shame for losing the conflict, which ended with a return to the prewar status quo. While virtually isolated and relying almost totally on its own resources, Iran held out for nearly a decade against a regional military power backed by generous Arab allies and both Cold War superpowers. Still, Iran was left militarily exhausted and was stripped of much of the military power the shah had developed.

Over the subsequent two decades Iran has risen from the ashes to become once again a major regional military power. Iran's more than seventy million people make it the third largest country in the Middle East, behind Egypt and Turkey, and the eighteenth largest in the world. More important, Iran possesses the second largest known oil reserves after Saudi Arabia and is a major producer of natural gas. Its substantial oil and gas revenues provide the regime the wherewithal to add to its military strength and have made Iran an attractive market for China, Russia, and other dealers of sophisticated arms. Iran's conventional armed forces, however, have made only slow and fitful progress in recovering from their 1988 defeat and remain primarily a defensive force. Instead, it has been

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the buildup of missile, naval, and unconventional capabilities under the control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the religiously radical counterpart to the regular armed forces, that has given Iran the ability to project limited power throughout the region and beyond. Iran's security posture was greatly improved after the U.S. military removed Tehran's two closest rivals with the rapid defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 and Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003. Indeed, Iran in the near term may prove capable of "punching above its weight" on the strength of its strategic location, its control of oil and gas resources, and its unconventional and missile deterrent capabilities.[4]

The rise, fall, and recovery of Iran and its armed forces over the past generation are not new features of this ancient country's history. Instead it is the latest in a series of ascents and declines demonstrating the Iranians' remarkable perseverance. Although not literally "immortal," Iran's various armed forces have repeatedly given the appearance of indestructibility. In the ancient, medieval, and early modern periods, the repeated resurrection of the Iranian military dramatically affected the course of world history. Parthian and Sassanian armies often bested the ancient Western powers of Rome and Byzantium, setting the frontier between East and West. The Safavids' use of the sword to establish an Islamic state following the Shia creed to offset the power of the Sunni Ottomans in the sixteenth century had important implications for the entire Middle East and Christendom. Nader Shah's later victories over Mughal armies eased the British conquest of India. Even Iran's prolonging of the Imposed War after 1983 had far-reaching consequences as the war spurred Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and set the stage for the 1991 Gulf War, the repercussions of which played out amid the American invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003.

The Persian empires of the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sassanians ruled much of western Asia from the Mediterranean to the Hindu Kush, a source of pride for Iranians today. Iranians rightly believe that the high civilization of medieval Islam flowed largely from Persia's influence. Even the 1978–79 Islamic Revolution's humiliation of the United States and the unflinching battle with Saddam's Iraq stir national pride. By the same token, the insecurity and distrust that mark Iran's dealings with the outside world stem from a history in which each Iranian empire and nearly all subsequent Iranian polities succumbed to foreign invaders or internal decay. Following Iran's conquest by the Arabs and conversion to Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries, the Iranians have constantly struggled to secure their independence from foreign political, military, economic, and cultural domination. And throughout the centuries, despite invasions by Greeks, Arabs, Turks, and Mongols, Iran's strong culture survived. Still, the resulting nationalist sentiments and xenophobia have driven Iran's national security goals and have been used by monarch and mullah alike in the complex interplay of politics, religion, and military power in Iran.

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The force structure and administration of Iran's various militaries have been greatly influenced by the competition for power between the central government and other Iranian elites, especially the clergy. A major result has been that for most of Iran's history since the rise of the Safavid Empire the country has had dual and sometimes dueling militaries and the attendant problems with control, coordination, and reliability. The primary armed forces have been supported by and loyal to central authority. The offsetting forces of tribal levies, local militias, and other organizations have given their allegiance to khans, feudal landlords, the clergy, or, at the start of the twentieth century, antimonarchical and other political groups. Because all sides were suspicious of strong militaries and their ability to threaten the throne or enforce central authority, enthusiasm for modernizing reforms and military professionalism has often been limited and unsustained. In addition, in the modern era the clerics have been wary of Western influences on the rank and file's observance of the mosque's guidance. To protect their interests, the Muslim clerics or mullahs repeatedly undermined reforms, discipline, and the power of the military in enforcing central authority, except, of course, since 1979 when the clerics became the central authority. Throughout the modern era, the military also was often beset by debilitating corruption and politicization that impeded Iran's fighting forces from reaching their potential.

In turn, the previously mentioned factors generated dynamics that sometimes ensured Iranian success but in the modern era mostly have inhibited military effectiveness. Iranian fighting forces regularly have been hampered by their leaders' uneven appreciation for technology. From the Safavids' early refusal to incorporate firearms through the Pahlavi shahs' procurement of sophisticated yet unsustainable systems to the Pasdaran's disregard for combined arms operations in favor of zealous ill-trained volunteers, Iran's soldiers have paid the price of flawed approaches to warfare. Similarly, poor leadership by politicized and selfish officers and stingy support and outright maltreatment have regularly undercut the perseverance, resourcefulness, and patriotism of Iranian fighting men.

Nest of the Phoenix: Iran's Geostrategic Position and Military Geography

Two constants in Iran's military history and enduring security interests are the country's strategic location and geography. Situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Iran has benefited from dominating major trade routes and from the mix of diverse peoples and the transfer of knowledge and skills that being a bridge between East and West has provided. For much of two millennia, Persia held the commanding heights of the world economy by straddling the Silk Road, the key land trade route between the Mediterranean and China. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Iran's position astride the Persian Gulf,

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Caspian, and Central Asian export routes for the region's large oil and gas reserves once again places it at the center of global attention and, possibly, global rivalries.

Conversely, poised between the great Eurasian steppe to the north and the rich lands of Mesopotamia and the Indian subcontinent to the west and east, Iran has been vulnerable to constant invasions. In particular, the great Mongol warriors Genghis Khan (Chingis Khan) in 1220 and Tamerlane in 1405 devastated Iran with murderous campaigns of conquest. During much of the past three centuries, Iran's potential as an avenue to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean or as an invasion route into Russia made it a special target of czarist and Soviet rulers. In turn, this put Iran in the crossfire of Russian and British imperialism as London sought to protect its Indian "Jewel in the Crown." The Ottomans, the British, and later Iraq desired hegemony over Iran's oil-rich and Arab-dominated southwestern region.

Iran is not only a surface crossroads but sits atop the subterranean intersection of the giant Arabian, Eurasian, and Indian plates, which have formed and still influence the region by their uplifting and folding effect on the earth's crust. The pressure between these gigantic plates created the major mountain ranges that virtually surround the country and make Iran a major earthquake zone. The high mountains, in turn, affect weather patterns by blocking moist air's passage into the interior, making Iran a country of extremes in precipitation, temperatures, and topography. If Iran were superimposed over a map of North America, it would extend north to south from Reno, Nevada, to Monterey, Mexico, and west to east from San Diego, California, to Amarillo, Texas. In fact, the terrain, climate, and latitude of Iran bear considerable resemblance to corresponding features of the American southwest and northwestern Mexico. Iran, however, is much more arid with more extremely hot and barren areas, especially in its central and eastern deserts. The country also is marked by large swamps and marshlands in the southwest, dense subtropical forests in the Caspian region, and nearly two thousand miles of mostly rugged coastline. Iran has only one partially navigable river, the Karun, which flows into the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to form the Shatt al-Arab waterway (called the *Arvand Rud* by the Iranians), which divides southwestern Iran and Iraq. The country's one major interior body of water, Lake Urmia in northwestern Iran, is larger and saltier than Utah's Great Salt Lake.

The most noticeable impact of geography on Iran's military history has been the limited role of sea power, despite long coasts on the Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean. Nearly all of Iran's Persian Gulf coast is cut off by mountains from the plateau's high plains, and the Iranians for most of their history seemed uninterested in developing naval skills. In addition, the Karun River is navigable only by shallow craft and then only until rapids north of Ahvaz. The

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main problem during the age of wooden ships was that much of the Iranian Plateau lacked suitable timber for shipbuilding. In the early nineteenth century, a British Indian Army captain collected all the available geographical intelligence on Iran and reported that the northern shores of the Persian Gulf provided neither timber nor naval stores. Although forests of oak abounded in southwestern Iran, he wrote, the trees were too small for shipbuilding and would have to be transported a considerable distance to the shores over "stupendous rocks and frightful precipices." As a result, wood for ships had to be brought over long distances from India and other faraway locales.[5]

Because the people of the Iranian Plateau had limited experience with larger watercraft, Iran has lacked reliable naval crewmen and commanders throughout the centuries. Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, relied on Phoenicians to battle Greek and Egyptian fleets during the sixth century BC, and only much later did Persians serve on ships and become commanders and admirals. Another Achaemenid emperor, Darius the Great, resorted to moving seafaring people from the Mediterranean to the head of the Persian Gulf to improve his maritime capabilities. During the mid-sixth century, the Sassanian emperor Chosroes I needed a navy to prevent the development of alternative trade routes to the Silk Road that would undercut his ability to collect tolls and duties. He briefly created maritime forces that relied on ethnic Arab or mixed-blood people living along the coast to conduct a series of naval operations to conquer Sarandib (modern Sri Lanka) and Yemen. After the Arab conquest, the empires and other kingdoms in Iran faced no neighbors with significant naval forces. As a result, few rulers exhibited interest in developing sea power, but focused instead on the more imminent threats from Mongol, Ottoman, Afghan, and Russian armies. Iran continued to rely on various foreigners, including Arabs and later Europeans, to provide its sailors and fleets through the early twentieth century. The Islamic Republic has had more success in developing indigenous naval forces, as shown by the creative tactics used by revolutionary naval units during the Tanker War with the United States in the 1980s.[6]

Iran's geography and the limited military wherewithal the heartland provided to protect the nascent Persian state possibly created the impetus for its initial territorial expansion. Around 559 BC Cyrus II, later called Cyrus the Great, took the throne of the petty kingdom of Anshan, in the southwest of modern Iran. His initial holdings, however, did not provide many resources for a would-be conqueror. Although the Persians later were known as great horsemen, Cyrus's forces were not initially mounted. The dry plains of Anshan and neighboring Parsa to the east made poor horse country, and the locals relied on donkeys. With his early conquests Cyrus gained the abundant high summer pastures of the Zagros Mountains, which provided good breeding grounds for the famous Median chargers that became the foundation of Persian cavalry. At the same

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time, Persian infantry and cavalry became masters of the composite bow because the heartland lacked the ferrous metals with which to fashion good swords. In the hands of Cyrus's men, the composite bow could shoot effectively over several hundred yards and gave the Persians a significant advantage over many of their opponents. It was only with the early expansion of the Persian Empire that Cyrus gained the mineral wealth, especially in iron, to make his army so formidable.[7]

To provide extra protection against invading armies and to support offensive operations, the Persians developed engineering skills to enhance the land's natural obstacles. During the Sassanian Empire between 226 and 641, the Persians constructed massive walls to help fortify the frontiers. One major bulwark was six to ten meters wide and extended from the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea northwest for nearly one hundred miles. It was the largest defensive wall in the world after the Great Wall of China, and its remnants are known by their Turkic name, the *Qizil Yilan,* or "red snake." A second wall near Sari in north central Iran was built in the mid-sixth century to hold off Turkic raiders and probably included a large moat on its eastern side. Another Sassanian defensive fortification included a wall that extended several miles into the Caucasus Mountains from the great citadel at Derbend—or Derbent, now the southernmost city in Russia—on the western coast of the Caspian Sea. Persian engineers also became skilled in handling problems involving waterways as their imperial ambitions led them to the great rivers of the ancient world. Darius the Great had a canal wide enough to accommodate two war galleys dug between the Nile and the Red Sea. During his massive invasion of the Greek city-states in 480 BC, Xerxes had a lengthy canal dug across a peninsula between Thrace and Macedonia to allow his six-hundred-ship navy to avoid a stormy coast where an earlier Persian flotilla had been lost in a gale. Centuries later, at the start of the Iran-Iraq War, Iranian engineers took advantage of the swamps and canals in southwestern Iran to induce flooding to create massive water barriers that helped stop the Iraqi invasion.

Fortress Iran

It is not much of an exaggeration to describe Iran as a fortress because of its extensive natural defenses. In general, the terrain around Iran's periphery favors the defender and is ill-suited to maneuver warfare, whether conducted by ancient armies or modern armored and mechanized ground forces. Iran's extensive mountain ranges virtually encircle the country and parallel the coast and land boundaries. Snow-covered during the winter and spring, most of Iran's mountains are steep and bleak with minimal tree cover and vegetation. Their narrow, winding mountain passes are the only means to access the high basin areas of

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Iran's interior. Supply lines are constrained by a still limited road network that is vulnerable to sabotage and ambush. The loss of bridges and blockages of the mountain passes would be a significant impediment to troop movements. Major built-up areas along the main avenues of approach into Iran also form effective artificial obstacles to invading forces. Tehran, the Iranian capital since the late eighteenth century, had more than fourteen million residents in 2007, and the uncontrolled urban sprawl surrounding the city would make an opposed entry into it a daunting prospect for foreign military forces. To the north, the Caspian region is Iran's wettest, and rain and fog hinder visibility and movement there. Along the northern slope of the Alborz Mountains, small trees, bushes, and vines make the woods nearly impenetrable. The woodlands in the southern part of the Gilan region also consist of dense foliage and swampy ground that limit off-road movement. The heavily forested areas of the region have served for centuries as a haven for rebels and revolutionaries.[8]

In the modern era the mountains surrounding Iran have not been an obstacle to airpower, but even here Iran's vulnerability has some limits. Iraqi air and missile attacks against Iranian cities during the Iran-Iraq War showed that it is still difficult to harm Iran decisively from the air. Many of Iran's major strategic facilities and Tehran are positioned well within its interior at distances that can be challenging to pilots operating from bases outside the country. Air operations do benefit from Iran's normally cloudless skies. At the same time, Iran's dryness contributes to blowing dust and suspended dust particles that create a haze affecting visibility. The condition, called desert "brownout," causes the blending of the ground's grayish-brown color with overcast skies and can seriously impede low-level air operations, especially by helicopters. Such a dust storm was instrumental in the U.S. military's failed attempt in April 1980 to rescue fifty-two American hostages held by Iran.

Where Iran's borders are not marked by mountains, they are covered by major water obstacles and rugged coastlines. Behind the mountains and along the western border, precipitation and snowmelt can render ground virtually impassable to military vehicles in areas prone to natural flooding, in the mountain valleys, and along intermittently dry stream beds. Even when water levels are low, the steep riverbanks are difficult to traverse by infantry and wheeled and tracked vehicles conducting fording operations. Mobility also is hindered by irrigation canals and ditches in these regions. The Persian Gulf coast of Iran, meanwhile, is generally unfavorable to amphibious operations because of adverse surf conditions and the small number of suitable inland exits from the beaches. In addition, behind the southern beaches the land is low and swampy and is ill-suited for anything but infantry or amphibious combat. The conduct of operations in the Persian Gulf requires passage through the choke point of the narrow Strait of Hormuz, which Iran dominates from its mainland and from

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numerous nearby islands. The eastern frontier is mostly arid, but the point where the Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan borders meet is a sunken, low-lying alluvial basin with swampy lagoons. The water in these marshy areas is replenished each year by the Helmand River's spring flow from the Hindu Kush snowmelt.

At the other extreme, desert covers about one-fifth of Iran. The Dasht-e Kavir in the north and the Dasht-e Lut in the south are the desiccated remains of ancient lakebeds. The northern desert is noteworthy for areas, called *kavirs,* where a brittle saline crust covers a layer of viscous mud. Iran also suffers from excessive summer heat conditions throughout most of the country, desert or not. Stress from the high heat and humidity can make hard physical labor almost impossible, even when troops are young, fit, and fully acclimatized. Summer heat, for example, is over 120 degrees Fahrenheit in southwestern Iran and can cause temperatures in closed vehicles without air conditioning to exceed 140 degrees. Such conditions complicate water needs and supply problems and intensify the wear and tear on all types of equipment. The shamal, a persistent northwesterly wind lasting for one to five days from May through September, blows down the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys of Iraq into Iran bringing extremely dry air, dust storms, and dust haze that affect operations and foul weapons and other types of machinery. Nighttime cooling is limited, even along the southern Iranian coastal plain, so military forces engaged in combat in Iran get little relief from the heat.[9]

The geography of "Fortress Iran" along with its stark climatic conditions combine with the country's heritage to contribute to an Iranian sense of uniqueness and insularity that today is seen in its strongly nationalistic posture when dealing with the outside world. Most of Iran's neighbors are Arab or Turkic peoples who have at some point invaded the Iranian homeland and even today compete with Iran for influence in the region. In this sense, Iran stands alone with few natural allies. Since the sixteenth century, Iran has been the largest and most significant Islamic state following the Shia creed, and the Iranians' rejection of many Sunni beliefs isolates them from much of the wider Islamic community. In the coming century, this uniqueness and the historical memory of the greatness of past Persian empires could feed the Islamic Republic's ambitions for regional preeminence and a more strategically significant revival of Iran's armed forces.

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