(U) Iran Likely To Employ Varied External, Internal Defensive Strategies in LSCO

(U) EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(U) During large-scale combat operations (LSCO), Iran would probably employ two distinct strategies to defend its regime and national interests. The first strategy, 'forward defense,' relies on capabilities like proxies, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), naval assets, cyber forces, and long-range missiles to pose a hybrid threat outside of Iran's borders against potential adversaries. The second, 'mosaic defense,' would use a mix of military and paramilitary forces to conduct asymmetric guerrilla-type operations within Iran to maximize enemy casualties without becoming decisively engaged. Should the U.S. Army engage with Iran in LSCO, it would contend with both the forward defense and mosaic defense strategies, highlighting the importance of understanding and identifying the specific capabilities and formations that Iran could employ.

(U) IRAN'S FORWARD DEFENSE STRATEGY

(U) ***The current and preferred Iranian regional military strategy can be defined as a forward defense, which Iran would activate more fully under the threat of invasion.*** Tehran believes this approach allows it to "fight its opponents outside its borders to prevent conflict inside Iran." This more offensive, hybrid strategy is a change from Iran's long-held defensive and deterrent focused strategy, and is a result of threat perceptions arising from the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. To execute forward defense Iran relies on five core capabilities: proxies, UAVs, naval assets, cyber forces, and long-range missiles.

- (U) Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, Tehran has used various proxy forces throughout the Middle East to covertly and clandestinely pursue its political objectives outside Iranian borders. Key attributes of proxy forces are their plausible deniability and multiple potential threat vectors, allowing Iran to direct them without becoming decisively engaged while also forcing its adversary to have to react to multiple potential threat vectors.

- (U) In 2019, the Defense Intelligence Agency assessed that "UAVs are Iran's most rapidly advancing air capability." Iran has employed UAVs for a variety of missions, including intelligence collection and long-range strike, and has proliferated UAVs to its proxy forces, most notably the Houthis in Yemen. UAVs provide Tehran the ability to conduct or enable operations throughout the region with relative anonymity using mass-produced, cheap, and easily employed systems.

(U) Figure 1: JAS 313 Carrier-Based UAVs
(Source: https://armyrecognition.com/news/army-news/2025/iran-strengthens-navy-with-jas-313-stealth-drone-for-reconnaissance-and-bombing-missions)

- (U) The Iranian Navy employs large numbers of fast, small vessels, and submarines, combined with layered coastal defense cruise missiles and antiship cruise missiles that cover the entirety of its operational area. Tehran is increasingly adding multidomain unmanned capability to its manned platforms, including the JAS 313 UAV, Shark 33 unmanned surface vessel, a remotely operated unmanned underwater vehicle, and the Shahid (Martyr) Baqeri "drone carrier" surface vessel designed to conduct drone and helicopter missions in the region. Massed manned and unmanned Iranian naval capabilities provide Tehran the opportunity to exploit the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow chokepoint connecting the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, and have outsized effect on a larger force.

- (U) Iranian cyber efforts are pervasive and global, even targeting U.S. government and civilian entities using a wide range of malicious cyber activity. Tehran employs military, civilian, and "hacktivist" cyber operators to conduct reconnaissance, attacks, and defensive cyber operations. The use of various types of cyber actors and tools provides Iran with plausible deniability, global reach, and the ability to "rapidly bring cyber assets to bear against an adversary."

- (U) The most overt element of Iran's forward defense is its long-range missile inventory. Tehran maintains a substantial inventory of ballistic and cruise missiles, increasingly augmented by attack UAVs, capable of offensive strikes out to 2,000 kilometers.[1] As showcased in strikes against Saudi Arabia in 2017, ISIS in Syria in 2018, U.S. assets in Iraq in 2020, and Israel in 2025, Iran is willing to launch strikes to have deterrent effect, retaliate against perceived slights, or demonstrate capability.[2]
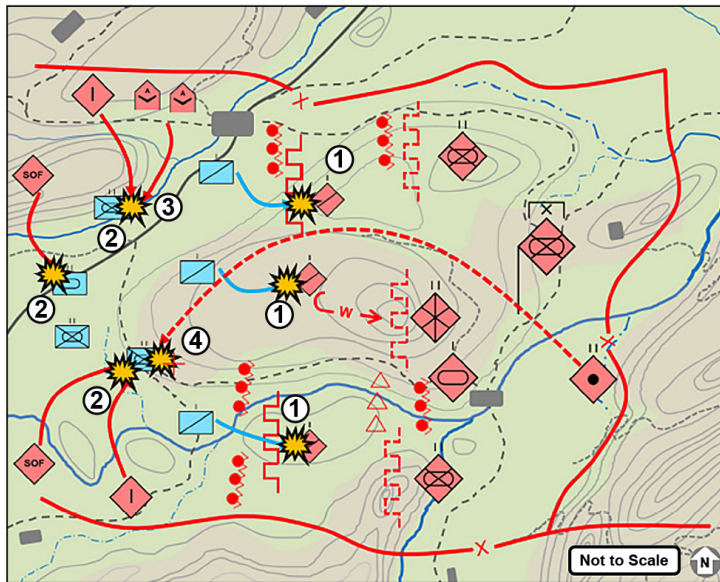

(U) Figure 2: Shahid Haj Qasem Ballistic Missile With a 1,400-km Range
(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haj_Qasem_(missile))

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(U) IRAN'S MOSAIC DEFENSE STRATEGY

(U) ***Should forward defense fail, Iran would then employ its mosaic defense strategy during LSCO against an invading enemy.*** Mosaic defense seeks to challenge any adversary that is invading, or about to invade, Iran with a layered and flexible defense in depth. The objective of mosaic defense is to trade space for time while inflicting the maximum number of casualties on an invading force. Mosaic defense provides Iran with opportunities to exploit advantages in terrain and depth to "attack vulnerable flanks and rear areas through a mixture of conventional forces and insurgents."[3] To execute mosaic defense, Iran would rely on three main organizations: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Artesh, and the Basij.

- (U) The IRGC is responsible for Iran's internal security and defense against external threats through irregular warfare. Most importantly, the IRGC is directly responsible for the stability and survival of the regime, meaning it would form the nucleus of defensive efforts around government and military figures and installations.[4] The IRGC has also established C2 nodes inside each of Iran's 30 provinces to establish grassroots collaboration and decentralize decisionmaking.[5] Additionally, the IRGC trains and exercises guerrilla tactics and asymmetric ambushes—often in urban environments—as well as employs survivability measures consistent with a force expecting to conduct irregular warfare against a technologically superior enemy.[6]

- (U) Supporting the IRGC is the Basij militia, which is Iran's volunteer paramilitary force and reserve pool.[7] In conflict, the Basij would mobilize under the IRGC's Mo'in Plan and augment IRGC forces conducting the irregular warfare tactics described above.[8] Estimates on the size of the Basij vary from 90,000 to millions, and the regime has employed these militia to quell internal dissent and fight in the Iran-Iraq war.[9]

- (U) The Artesh is Iran's conventional military force, which would conduct the traditional defense-in-depth of the nation using a mix of armored, infantry, and mechanized units.[10] Despite employing aging equipment, the Artesh focuses its structure and training on conducting decentralized, rapidly responsive, and in-depth defensive operations against a technologically superior adversary.[11]

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(U) Figure 3: Example Spoiling Attack Supporting Mosaic Defense
(Source: TRADOC G-2, OEI)

1. Advance group retrogrades into prepared defensive position to slow enemy's advance through attrition.

2. Special operations forces and mixed irregular forces conduct hit-and-run raids and ambushes to disrupt and attrit enemy formations and seize prisoners.

3. Lethal UAVs target exposed enemy vehicles and troop concentrations.

4. Fires execute preplanned target reference points to canalize enemy formations.

(U) IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. ARMY

(U) ***Should the U.S. Army engage with Iran in LSCO, Soldiers can expect to contend with both the forward defense and mosaic defense strategies.*** Understanding and identifying the specific Iranian capabilities and formations being employed would help the Army plan and execute operations accordingly.

- (U) When facing the forward defense strategy, the Army would have to contend with Iran's multidomain, clandestine, and covert threats from a wide array of attack surfaces. These threats would primarily require operational-level activities and responses from the United States, including robust intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations; layered force protection measures; defensive cyber operations; and integrated air and missile defense. These would also require close integration with the Joint Force, national assets, and host-nation partners.

- (U) When facing the mosaic defense strategy, the Army would have to contend with Iran's asymmetric tactical threats meant to inflict maximum damage without being decisively engaged. These would include combat and counterinsurgency operations in dense urban environments against a constantly evolving and difficult-to-identify adversary. The mix of regular and irregular forces operating in and among populations would complicate rules of engagement and require discerning targeting.

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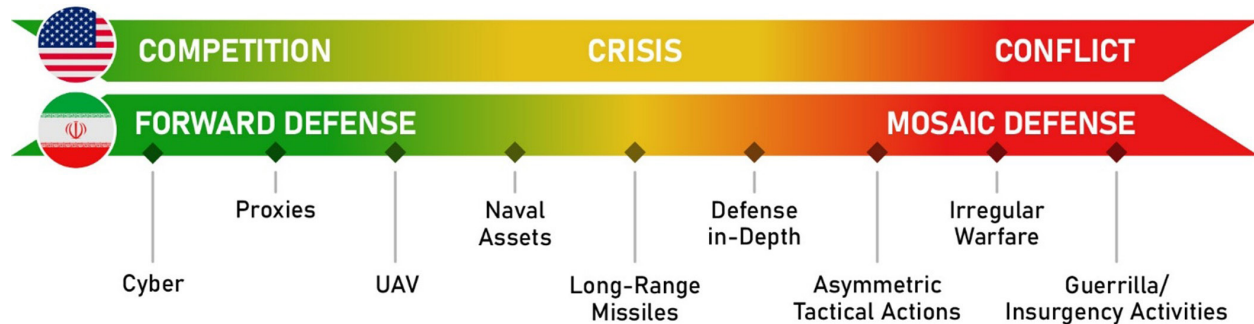
(U) Figure 4: The U.S. Army may face any of these threats at any point along the continuum.

ENDNOTES

1   Defense Intelligence Agency, "Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance," 2019, pg. 30, and Jay Mens, "A War Without a Name: The Iran-Israel Relationship in Historical Perspective, Parts One and Two," June 2024, pg. 27.

2   Jay Mens, "A War Without a Name: The Iran-Israel Relationship in Historical Perspective, Parts One and Two," June 2024, pg. 27.

3   U.S. Army Asymmetric Warfare Group, "Iran Quick Reference Guide, Version 1.1," pg. 16.

4   Ibid, pg. 23-24.

5   Michael Connell, "Iran Primer: Iran's Military Doctrine," 21 October 2010, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/10/iran-primer-irans-military-doctrine.html.

6   Ibid, and U.S. Army Asymmetric Warfare Group, "Iran Quick Reference Guide, Version 1.1," pg. 23-24.

7   Defense Intelligence Agency, "Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance," 2019, pg. 78.

8   Michael Connell, "Iran Primer: Iran's Military Doctrine," 21 October 2010, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/10/iran-primer-irans-military-doctrine.html.

9   U.S. Army Asymmetric Warfare Group, "Iran Quick Reference Guide, Version 1.1," pg. 27, and Defense Intelligence Agency, "Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance," 2019, pg. 80.

10   Michael Connell, "Iran Primer: Iran's Military Doctrine," 21 October 2010, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/10/iran-primer-irans-military-doctrine.html.

11   Defense Intelligence Agency, "Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance," 2019, pg. 73.

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