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IRAN'S SECURITY STRUCTURE: LESSONS FOR INDIA

PRATEEK PRASHAR

While the Islamic Regime in Iran has entrenched itself deep with its policies, systems, laws, regulations and enforcement of stringent norms since 1979, there are numerous forces at task to destabilise the regime and ultimately overthrow it, replacing with a more pliable form of government. Iran has endured war with Iraq (1980-1988) with virtually no country supporting it, other than Libya, and has also stood strong against the economically and technologically superior US, Israel and Arab nations for the last 40 years, apart from numerous financial sanctions including blacklisting by FATF. Protests in Iran over various social and economic issues do raise hope in the international communities who are waiting on the edge to see the people of Iran overthrow the Supreme Leader, and then these nationwide protests fade away in a predictable and unsurprising style. Iran, thus, continues to remain a strong nation in West Asia in its own way, and one is intrigued to know, "*What is the core strength which keeps Iran as a formidable power?*" In order to understand this aspect of Iran much better, let us delve a bit into the genesis of Iran's security structures and foreign policy choices as well as how Iran succeeds to insulate its citizens from western narratives, leaving virtually very little space for hybrid or grey zone aggression on itself.

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IRAN'S EXTERNAL SECURITY SCENARIO

Iran has been facing threats on its existence as an Islamic Republic since 1979 when the US Embassy in Tehran was under siege which continued for 444 days and laid the foundation of a rivalry which shaped the contours of the West Asian region for decades to come. The Islamic revolution installed Ayatollah Khomeini as the Supreme Leader and at the same time installed the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia as the arch enemies of Iran looking for every possible opportunity to destabilise it. Sensing an opportunity, Iraq invaded the oil rich region in Ahwaz supported by the US and its allies. Iran now was outmanned, outgunned and diplomatically isolated to fight for its existence. Soon Iran was surrounded by US bases in its neighbourhood, including the Persian Gulf, imposing direct action threats to its maritime security with Operation *Praying Mantis* decimating Iranian Naval power in 1988 and ending the Tanker War. Adding to the threats was Israel with its superior military technology and intelligence coverage. To further add to its woes were the economic sanctions imposed on Iran for seeking to develop nuclear weapons which continue till date with the exception of JCPOA coming into force for a couple of years before President Trump pulled the plug on the Iran Nuclear Deal.

Iran now had to improvise its security strategy to cater for the existing and future threats from these adversaries for which it relied on asymmetric means by *use of proxies, dissuasive deterrence* by ballistic missile programme and robust *information operations* directed both at external and internal audiences. Iran raised IRGC Quds Force immediately after the Islamic revolution and has since then become an external arm of Iran's foreign policy execution. As part of asymmetric warfare, Iran raised trained, armed and supported Hezbollah after Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982. The stark difference in the military capability between Iran and Israel was now filled by Hezbollah and its Katyusha rockets directed at Israeli civilian population centres. *Therefore, a strategic equilibrium provided by asymmetric means was utilised to instil mutual deterrence between the two sides.* Today, most of Israel is within range of these

missiles.¹ Quds Force also helped Northern Alliance in fighting the Taliban in the 1990s on the side of Syria's Bashar al-Assad (2011) and supported Houthis (2012), fought and defeated ISIS in Iraq and Syria (2017) under the leadership of Gen. Qassem Suleimani.

So, if we understand the Iranian strategy of *detering any offensive on Iran and localising the conflict on the borders on the stated enemy nations, far away from own borders*, the logic of animosity with the Saudis and Israel becomes clear.

HANDLING INTERNAL UNREST

Having briefly seen the role of IRGC Quds Force, we need to see how the internal security fabric is woven and used to insulate from external narratives. Iran's internal security structure, which is often sidelined as most of us as fascinated by Quds Force, is the most important reason for the longevity of the Islamic regime and deserves a detailed look.

During the protest in Iran in September 2022, triggered by the death of Kurdish woman, Mhasa Amini, the youth, particularly women, in almost all major cities and towns of Iran came out in defiance against oppression by the ruling Islamic power centre. At the core of the protests, as Western media put across, was the 'brutal' regime headed by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. While minor protests are handled by the police and law enforcement agencies, the protests this time had an unprecedented scale as it concerned women's rights, dignity and freedom (*Zan, Zindagi, Azadi*) and youths joined the protests in solidarity. In order to quell the unrest, police had to resort to firing when non-lethal methods proved ineffective. Killing and kidnapping of young women who were part of the protests added fuel to the uprising, leading to a vicious cycle of violence. Pro-regime rallies too proved futile to douse the fire of anger and desperation exacerbated by poor economic outlook, high inflation, corruption and unemployment. Sanctions by the US post its withdrawal from JCPOA (Iran Nuclear Deal) had breached the threshold of patience and tolerance and pushed people to vehemently object to Islamic structure headed by the Supreme Leader.

1. "Iran unveils new missile as Tehran marks revolution anniversary", *The National*, February 3, 2019, at <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/iran-unveils-new-missile-as-tehran-marks-revolution-anniversary-1.821162>. Accessed on March 25, 2023.

By late October 2022, there was no sight of the protests dying down. IRGC had to spring into action with its *Basij* and Provincial Guards which were raised for this very situation.

INTERNAL SECURITY STRUCTURE

Basij-e Melli or National Mobilisation, commonly referred to as 'Basij', was raised in April 1980, as envisioned by Ayatollah Khomeini for raising a "twenty-million-man army", trained to engage in armed defence of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Its initial task was to assist IRGC (*Sepah-e Pasdaran*) in enforcing law and order in major cities in Iran. However, with the commencement of Iran-Iraq war, its task was shifted to deployment on the frontlines along with the *Artesh* (Regular Army). As the war was taking a heavy toll on the standing Iranian army, already shaken up by the Islamic Revolution and subsequent killing, arresting of Army officers and men suspected of opposing the Islamic regime, *Basijis* were utilised to fight Baloch, Kurd and Azeri separatists as well as to form human waves while assaulting Iraqi positions. They were also used to move ahead to trigger the mines and sacrifice themselves to clear the way for the regular trained army to advance. For this purpose, they were given a 'key to heaven' to put around their necks before being launched for such cannon-fodder missions. Many of these *Basijis* were teenaged boys.

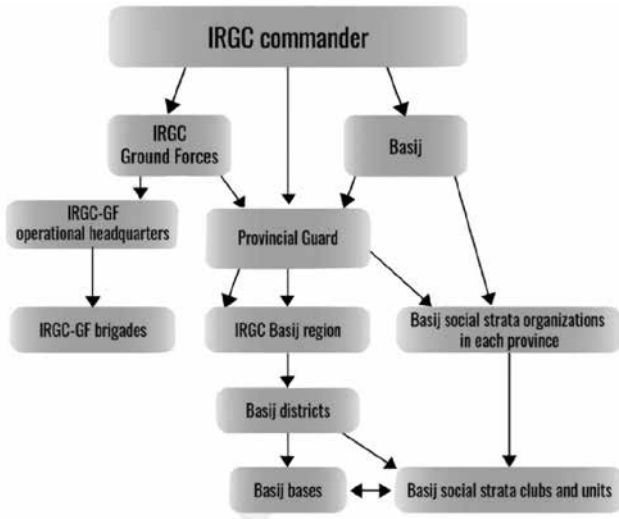
Basij was renamed *Basij-e Mostazafan* and merged under IRGC in 1981, with a twofold aim—one, to act as a popular social base for the Supreme Leader, and second, to maintain social order and political control by moral policing and suppressing internal dissent. After playing an active role in the Iraq war, it was expanded in 1991 by creating Basij Resistance Areas at the Provincial level.² However, the threat scenario rapidly changed post 9/11 terror attacks when Iran was named by the US as part of "Axis of Evil". In 2003, Saddam Hussein was purged and later hanged in 2006 after being tried for genocide and chemical attacks on its own population. Iran's arch enemy, the US, the *Great Satan*, had overthrown the leader in Iran's immediate neighbourhood. The Islamic Republic of Iran now had to prepare for

2. Saeid Golkar, "Taking Back the Neighborhood", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 4, 2020, at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/taking-back-neighborhood-irgc-provincial-guards-mission-re-islamize-iran>. Accessed on March 26, 2023.

fighting a superior army with minimal military hardware and resources after the US had defeated Iraq in no time, something Iran could not do for eight years. While the US did have superior military hardware and technology, the winning facet was the US military strategy of bypassing populated areas and swiftly reaching Baghdad.

Keeping these developments in view, Iran developed ‘Territorial Defence Doctrine’ based on favourable geography, depth and willingness to sacrifice and accept casualties in the face of an enemy threatening its sovereignty. While refining this concept, Iran raised National Passive Defence Organisation (NPDO) in October 2003 after Operation *Iraqi Freedom* with a mandate to strengthen the resilience of Iran’s infrastructure and security of sensitive locations. Use of asymmetric means to fight a superior enemy was practised in 2006 when Iran-backed Hezbollah got into a conflict with Israeli Defence Forces and a barrage of Katyusha rockets were fired over a month on Israeli population centres. At the end of the 34-day conflict, Israel did not win and Hezbollah did not lose but the concept of engaging a superior enemy with asymmetric, low-cost low-tech means succeeded.

Fig 1: Layered Structure of Provincial Guards



Source: Saeid Golkar, “Taking Back the Neighborhood.” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 4, 2020, at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/taking-back-neighborhood-ircg-provincial-guards-mission-re-islamize-iran>. Accessed on March 26, 2023.

Another aspect of Iranian military doctrine was 'layered defence' also referred to as 'Mosaic Defence'. The four layers which can be seen in territorial defence doctrine are: IRGC Quds Force, which operates beyond Iran's borders and acts as a strong offensive deterrence tool against Iran's adversaries. It has succeeded in taking the conflict away from Iran's borders and engaging its enemies in their own backyards. Raising, training and arming Hezbollah against Israel and Houthis in Yemen acting as a persistent threat to Saudi Arabia are manifestations of this first layer of defence. *Artesh*, which operates along Iran's borders, acts as the second layer. In 2016, IRI Ground Forces were made sleek and effective by reorganising Divisions into Mobile Combat Brigades and Quick Reaction Brigades. IRGC-Ground Force (GF) acts as the third layer and is tasked to operate in the hinterland and protect in the event of urban warfare, insurgency and civil war. In 2009, when a high-ranking IRGC officer, Nur Ali Shustari was killed in a major terrorist attack in Sistan-Balochistan, IRGC-GF decided to launch Sustainable Population Security Plan. It involved hiring of locals who had the knowledge of the terrain, culture and knew the pulse of the local populace. These personnel were recruited in the Basij units especially raised for the Kurds, Azeri, Ahwaz and Baloch tribal areas. IRGC Provincial Guards are the fourth layer of the Mosaic Defence which operates in all provinces and is tasked with passive defence, anti-heliborne operations and neighbourhood defence (Fig 1). In protecting the areas between cities and towns, IRGC GF is expected to operate freely and conduct its missions. The same concept was exported in Iraq and Syria wherein *Al Hashd Al Shabi* or Popular Mobilisation Unit (PMU) were used to provide secure zones and safe neighbourhood for launch of operations against ISIS. The Mosaic Defence has composite 'tiles' which are self-contained in terms of command, control, communication training and administration, should the command structure be disrupted in times of conflict.

In order to implement the layered concept of defence, the innermost layer of Provincial Guards was organised into Commands for each Province of Iran and two for the capital, Tehran. Provincial Guards Command is sub-divided into three verticals—Military Branch, Counter-Intelligence and Supreme Leaders' Representative.

The Counter-Intelligence vertical (*Sazman-e Hefazat-e Ettelaat*) is tasked to identify espionage and protect from moral and physical threats to IRGC personnel. The Supreme Leaders' Representative is tasked for selection and indoctrination of personnel for IRGC and Basij. In this manner, there is a deep selection and validation at multiple levels before a recruit is taken into the folds of Basij, then raised to the next level of induction in Imam Hussain Battalion under IRGC, and finally moving into the IRGC main cadre. The Provincial Command for each Province is sub-divided into Regions for each county (akin to districts in a state) and then broken down into IRGC-Basij Districts at rural and town level (akin to Tehsils or Municipality). In this manner the control of IRGC through Basij percolates down to the rural and urban bases covering the complete nation. These Provincial Guards are tasked to conduct training, and educational, cultural, social, defence and security activities.

Over time, with changed threat scenarios, Basij has transformed into a specialised organisation providing 'cultural defence' and robust internal security by carrying out specialised tasks to include education, perception moulding, media and narrative control, political control and cyber missions. For achieving this vast agenda, Basij focuses on recruitment from both urban and rural areas into numerous branches or domains. These domains are decided on the basis of social strata and profession and include Basij volunteers from: Workers Organisations, Medical Society, Lawyers, Artists, Sports, Culture, Academia, Clergy, Journalists and Engineers, to name a few. Basij organisations based on such domains and more such as this assist in having a voice and support for the Islamic regime which ultimately binds the internal security matrix. The role of Basij as sentinels for the Islamic Regime in the 2009, 2017-2018, 2019 and 2022-2023 protests should be seen with this background so as to understand why the protests always fail to keep the momentum.

To summarise, Iran has following attributes which allow it to counter both external and internal security threats:

- **Stable Leadership.** The Islamic Republic of Iran is led by the Supreme Leader whose legitimacy is guarded by IRGC. Going against the Supreme Leader is considered blasphemous. This

stable leadership ensures long-term strategic orientation and achievement of aims.

- **Religious System of Governance.** The Supreme Leader has bestowed upon himself the title of *Velayat-e Faqih* and is revered as head of Shia seat. This entitles Iran to use Shi'ism to garner religious legitimacy and acts a common thread to bind various regional states/proxies.
- **National Strategy.** Iran has navigated the external security fabric by employing forward defensive war and asymmetric warfare to counter conventional disparities and weak financial status. Raising of rocket force, long-range UCAVs, midget craft, fast-attack missile boats, expertise in info operations, both against external and internal targets and cyberwarfare, are the tools being employed to counter the US and its allies.
- **IRGC Quds Force.** In order to unleash asymmetric warfare using religious proxies, Quds Force was raised. This organisation alone has ensured Iran's adversaries are kept busy fighting Iranian proxies at their borders rather than taking the conflict to Iran. Apart from this, IRGC Quds forces fought and defeated ISIS in Iraq and Syria.
- **Basij.** Basij, or volunteer force, was raised during the Iran-Iraq war. They act as eyes and ears of the regime and work in tandem with IRGC. This force is estimated to be around 20 million (25% of population). The presence of this layer ensures that internal threats are nipped before they can become a problem.

LESSONS FOR INDIA

India today too is faced with direct and indirect aggression from its adversaries and this aggression comes in various forms, be it conventional threats at borders, sub-conventional threats and terrorism or threats in the Grey Zone. While we can put the burden of existing threats in the neighbourhood partially on the foreign policy outcomes of the past, internally too India is facing challenges in maintaining peace and harmony. Being a liberal democracy, India is vulnerable to the onslaught of grey zone aggression. With threats being in the grey zone, it is difficult to respond without escalation, further emboldening these surreptitious elements. Therefore, there

is bigger structural vulnerability in India which is being exploited by our adversaries. The question then is, how do we address this vulnerability?

In order to examine the contours of internal strife that can be created and the means of guarding our vulnerable societal fabric, we can take relevant lessons from Iran which stands out as a resilient state surrounded by enemies and has endured such antagonism over time.

A few lessons that can be drawn are:

- **Strategic Guidance.** In a democratic set-up, change in political leadership is the soul of democracy but this does not augur well for following long-term national aims. To remedy this aspect, democratic nations form a Perspective National Security Strategy so that the National Security policies remain insulated from subsequent political changes. We too must, firstly, ensure finalisation of National Strategy document, and secondly, ensure that the timelines are followed rigidly to achieve short/medium-term objectives. Ad hoc policies and appeasement by political leaders is detrimental to national security and must be purged without delay.
- **Capability Development.** India must build capability to unleash grey zone aggression on chosen target nations. This would encompass cyberwarfare capabilities, excellent HUMINT network, nurturing influence in countries through public representatives, enmeshing Bollywood for narrative building and dissemination, gaining say in education institutes for favourable content teaching, to name a few.
- **Social Awakening.** India must carry out social engineering to create a volunteer responsible social fabric to monitor, identify and neutralise internal subversion. Scaling up NCC entries and making it compulsory and/or using the existing set-up of NSS become obvious choices. However, this social security design is not sustainable as youth post service in NCC or NSS merge back into society keeping no links with their alma mater. Therefore, we need to modify these organisations on the Basij model so as to raise sustainable, persistent volunteer strata in society motivated and guided by the principles of nationalism formed to insulate

internal structures from grey zone threats and espionage. It is imperative to raise such an organisation to ensure internal strength and make our nation great in this *Amrit Kaal*.

CONCLUSION

Iran, by its security strategy, has ensured that its external threats and internal unrest are addressed in a sustained and effective manner, and at the same time, its adversaries remain engaged at their borders warding off threats generated by Iran's proxies fighting for the ideology exported by Iran. In spite of being under financial sanctions for the last four decades and diplomatically isolated, Iran continues to find ways to carry out trade and sell its oil in international markets. It has endured mass protests since 2009 which had the potential to overthrow the Islamic regime. To ensure its survivability, Iran has moulded its security strategy and internal organisations to remain relevant, and therefore its security model is worth emulation after customisation to fit our Indian context. Taking these strategy and security lessons, India must form its own *Indianised* concepts for protecting its external boundaries and internal fabric.