

The foregoing discussion suggests that Iran's security strategy stems from a complicated mix of strategic, domestic, and institutional sources. Any assessment of how Iran will respond in a crisis must determine not only the particulars, but also the current balance of influence among Tehran's decisionmakers.

Several observations of Iran's security policy can be derived.

FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICIES CANNOT BE SEPARATED

A distinction is often drawn among internal security, the preservation of the revolution, and Iran's broad foreign policy aims. Closer examination, however, reveals this distinction is at best blurry and at worst dangerously misleading. All of Iran's major policy decisions—how to ensure security against Iraq, whether to improve relations with Washington, how much support should be given to the anti-Israel effort, and so on—involve a complex calculus of Iran's overall vulnerability, the need to ensure the regime is strong, and Iran's commitment to revolutionary ideals.

Over the years, the balance of these influences has shifted. The ardor that characterized Iran's foreign policy in the early 1980s is gone. However, ideology continues to play an important role, particularly with regard to the United States and Israel. Similarly, although the revolution is no longer directly threatened by enemies at home and abroad as it was in the early 1980s, the regime takes any threat of internal unrest seriously. Tehran is often willing to sacrifice other

long-term foreign policy objectives to silence or intimidate regime opponents.

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC IS INCREASINGLY PRUDENT

Although the specifics of Iran's policies vary considerably, in almost all cases there has been a shift toward prudence. Particularly near Iran's own borders, the Islamic regime has tended to support the status quo with regard to territorial integrity and has shown a preference for working with governments over substate movements. Moreover, Iran has tried to contain unrest abroad and has tacitly supported repression by Turkey and Russia, even when this involved suppressing Muslims. Tehran has also curtailed ties to most Islamist movements, keeping its network in tact but not pushing for the overthrow of governments.

Iran has also shown prudence in its military posture, including its quest for WMD. Iran's military budgets have been modest, focused more on defense than on offense. Despite the geostrategic and other imperatives driving Iran to acquire WMD, it has done so in a quiet and deliberate manner, avoiding alarm and preventing the United States from developing a strong coalition to stop its acquisition.

IRAN INCREASINGLY USES IDEOLOGY AS A MASK FOR REALPOLITIK

Iran has long been willing to sacrifice its ideals for its national interest, but this tendency has increased in recent years. Iran still supports Shi'a radicals and other Islamists throughout the world—and champions the anti-Israel front—but its motives and its priorities are increasingly dictated by cold national interest concerns. Thus, it directs the Iraqi Shi'as against the MKO, tries to use the Palestinians to increase its leverage over the peace process, and otherwise uses proxies as means rather than ends.

IRAN'S DECISIONMAKING IS CHAOTIC BUT NOT ANARCHIC

There are rules to Iran's decisionmaking on major security issues, but the rules appear to be in constant flux. The rules are known to

the players involved but never codified. The Iranian system and broader culture stress consensus and keep most major players involved in decisionmaking—a tendency reinforced by personal ties that cut across institutions. On most issues, many important players have a voice. In addition, the system emphasizes consensus, preventing individuals or small numbers of institutions from dominating the overall agenda or acting without higher approval. Even when individuals do not agree on the ultimate policy, a willingness to give and take and horse trade in general enables the policy process to move along, if fitfully.

IMPLEMENTATION IS UNEVEN BUT SELDOM CONFLICTING

Because Iran's security institutions have overlapping responsibilities, they are often called upon to accomplish the same goals. Their different bureaucratic agendas and capabilities, however, often mean that they do so in quite different manners. At times, these efforts work in concert. With regard to Iraq, for example, the *Artesh* manages the conventional threat while the IRGC handles Iraqi resistance groups and Iranian dissidents. The emphasis on consensus, along with the relative lack of military autonomy, prevents too much deviation from agreed-upon objectives.

IRAN'S SECURITY FORCES ARE SUBORDINATE TO CIVILIAN CONTROL

In general, Iran's security forces respect and follow the wishes of Iran's civilian leadership, even though they vigorously champion their own agendas whenever possible. Thus, on issues such as the Chemical Weapons Convention, the military will accept civilian decisions despite its preferences. Similarly, the overall military budget has been limited, despite the wishes of all the institutions. The IRGC in particular has been on the losing end of many bureaucratic battles in Iran in recent years. It has not, however, responded by trying "rogue operations," or otherwise acting without civilian approval.

There is no neat civilian and military split. Given the many disparate opinions often found within the security institutions, it is more

common for parts of the security establishment to be allied with civilians against other factions.

IRAN'S SECURITY FORCES PREFER SHOWS OF FORCE WHILE SEEKING TO AVOID ACTIVE CONFRONTATIONS

Iran's security forces, particularly the regular military, are often voices of restraint. In several of the most recent standoffs, most notably the confrontation with the Taliban after their murder of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e Sharif, Iran's security forces have tried to avoid escalation even as they sought to project an image of strength. Thus, when tension threatened to escalate with Turkey and Iraq—and, most visibly, with the Taliban in 1998—Iran's military forces conducted maneuvers and buildups near the respective areas of conflict but deliberately sought to avoid open confrontation. The military forces fear that almost any broad conflict would be costly and deeply unpopular.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN IRAN'S REGULAR ARMED FORCES AND ITS REVOLUTIONARY ARMED FORCES ARE DECREASING

The once-clear distinction between the *Artesh* and the IRGC, while not gone, has diminished considerably in the last decade. Recruiting is now handled by a central authority. As the IRGC's commitment to professionalism has grown, and its Islamist ardor waned, it has increasingly conducted business in a manner similar to that of the *Artesh*.

ISRAEL AND THE UNITED STATES REPRESENT EXCEPTIONS TO MANY GENERALIZATIONS

Iran's continued rejection of normalization with the United States and its strong ties to many rejectionist groups suggest that its general shift toward moderation does not apply universally. Restrictions on relations with both countries remain one of the strongest parts of the revolutionary legacy. Although raising the possibility of dialog with the United States is no longer taboo, Tehran still pursues an uncompromising policy toward Washington—far less pragmatic than its

policy toward Iraq, which poses a greater immediate danger. Similarly, even though Iran's hostility toward Israel has lost its revolutionary edge, Tehran still exaggerates the threat Israel poses to its security.

FINAL WORDS

This report has tried to provide insight into Iranian decisionmaking and overall security policy. One consistent finding is that the system is in flux. Our findings and analysis should serve as a base for further exploration, but not as the final word. Any conclusions should be recognized for what they are—tentative findings that will change as new players emerge in Iran and as political and strategic conditions change.