

# Laboratory of Asymmetry



## The 2006 Lebanon War and the Evolution of Iranian Ground Tactics

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*The main objective of this exercise is to adopt new tactics and use new equipment able to cope with possible threats. . . . [Iran has] been vigilant to what has happened in the world . . . and we have invested in both modern tactics and equipment.*

—Brigadier General Kiyumars Heidari, Islamic Republic of Iran, a spokesman for the Zolfaqar's Blow military maneuvers, August 2006.<sup>1</sup>

**T**HE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC of Iran is no stranger to asymmetric warfare. Ever since the regime faced a technologically superior adversary during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Iran has attempted to leverage its human assets to overcome its weaknesses in a conventional military conflict. In the Iran-Iraq War, Iran threw waves of human bodies at better armored and better equipped Iraqi forces. The losses were staggering: by some reports upwards of 1,000,000 Iranian casualties, compared to an estimated 375,000 Iraqi casualties.<sup>2</sup> In the wake of that conflict, Iran has consistently sought more efficient ways of employing its significant manpower in military operations. Its exportation of Iranian military training to other countries in the Middle East has given the country a window into the successful refinement of its tactical doctrine. In effect, the 2006 Lebanon War offered an opportunity for Hezbollah to experiment with the asymmetric ground tactics that Iran had developed. As their own professional journals and war games make clear, Iranian military leaders have paid close attention to the lessons learned in this conflict.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of recent, overt military action on the part of Iran, it is useful to hold up a mirror to the 2006 Lebanon War so that we may discern the reflection of Iranian training and tactics.<sup>4</sup> The United States must remain cognizant of developments in Iranian tactical doctrine, even as Iran makes strides toward the development of nuclear weaponry. To facilitate a diplomatic solution to this threat, the U.S. military should work to ensure that there is a feasible military alternative in place: who desires peace, let him prepare for war.<sup>5</sup>

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PHOTO: Holding posters of Lebanese Hezbollah party leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, Iranian clerics chant slogans in a pro-Hezbollah rally at the Palestine Square in Tehran, Iran, 3 August 2006. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

## Iran in Lebanon

The Shi'ite paramilitary organization known as Hezbollah first emerged as a militia in opposition to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Although Iran was engaged in the Iran-Iraq War at the time of the Israeli occupation, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) took the lead in organizing, training, and equipping Hezbollah.<sup>6</sup> To this end, Syria allowed 2,500 members of the IRGC to enter Lebanon and set up training camps among the Shi'ite population in the Beqa'a Valley, an important farming region in eastern Lebanon. Training at the IRGC camps became a prerequisite for membership in Hezbollah.<sup>7</sup> In 1985, Hezbollah publicly acknowledged its reliance on Iran: "We view the Iranian regime as the vanguard and new nucleus of the leading Islamic State in the world. We abide by the orders of one single wise and just leadership, represented by 'Wali Faqih' [rule of the jurispudent] and personified by Khomeini."<sup>8</sup>

Given the group's equipment and logistical constraints, Hezbollah—with the guidance of Iranian advisors—adopted a doctrine of guerrilla warfare against the Israeli occupation. This doctrine, a useful if primitive template for future asymmetric operations in the region, revolved around 13 principles:

1. Avoid the strong, attack the weak—attack and withdraw.
2. Protecting our fighters is more important than causing enemy casualties.
3. Strike only when success is assured.
4. Surprise is essential to success. If you are spotted, you have failed.
5. Don't get into a set-piece battle. Slip away like smoke, before the enemy can drive home his advantage.
6. Attaining the goal demands patience in order to discover the enemy's weak points.
7. Keep moving; avoid formation of a front line.
8. Keep the enemy on constant alert, at the front and in the rear.
9. The road to the great victory passes through thousands of small victories.
10. Keep up the morale of the fighters; avoid notions of the enemy's superiority.
11. The media has innumerable guns whose hits are like bullets. Use them in the battle.
12. The population is a treasure—nurture it.
13. Hurt the enemy and then stop before he abandons restraint.<sup>9</sup>

***It would take 18 years before Israel ultimately withdrew from Lebanon...***

Even as Iran was suffering massive casualties against conventional Iraqi forces, Hezbollah was enjoying limited success in weakening the resolve of the occupying Israeli forces. It would take 18 years before Israel ultimately withdrew from Lebanon, giving Hezbollah ample time to test and revise the asymmetric tactics, techniques, and procedures that Iranian military trainers had bequeathed to the organization.<sup>10</sup>

Over the course of the Israeli occupation, Hezbollah faced and adapted to Israeli military efforts. On the ground, Hezbollah tactics against the occupying Israeli force included suicide bombings, rocket attacks, and abductions of Israeli Defense Force soldiers. Twice, in its 1993 Operation Accountability and 1996 Operation Grapes of Wrath, Israel conducted massive artillery and aerial bombardments of Lebanese territory. These Israeli campaigns may have temporarily deterred Hezbollah rocket attacks against Israel, but they did not have any lasting effect. Throughout the Israeli occupation, Iran provided arms to Hezbollah fighters through Syria and ran training camps within Lebanon itself.

After Israel's 2000 withdrawal from Lebanon, Hezbollah became a major political party, its legitimacy deriving in part from its role in causing the departure of Israeli forces. Between 2000 and 2006, the organization's military arm continued to receive training and equipment from Iran, including the AT-3 Sagger antitank missiles, long-range rockets, and Iranian-made unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that appeared in the 2006 Lebanon War.<sup>11</sup> Iran's IRGC tasked the elite Quds ("Jerusalem") Force with overseeing the outreach to Hezbollah, training Hezbollah fighters both in Iran and Lebanon on the use of AT-3 Saggars, TOWs, and UAVs.<sup>12</sup> General Hussein Firuzabadi, deputy chief of staff for the Iranian armed forces, reportedly supervised the delivery of Iranian missile systems to Hezbollah by stationing around 100 Iranian officers in Syria and in Lebanon's Beqa'a Valley.<sup>13</sup> All told, Anthony Cordesman of

the Center for Strategic and International Studies estimates that Iran has been providing Hezbollah with financial aid, goods, and military services worth approximately \$25 to \$50 million each year, and notes that “[i]t is clear . . . that IRGC and Syrian intelligence and military officers and personnel meet regularly with the Hezbollah forces and cadres of IRGC personnel seem to have stayed in low profile roles with its full time fighters. The Hezbollah also seems to send some cadres for expert training in Iran and possibl[y] Syria.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite the withdrawal of Israeli troops in 2000, Hezbollah continued operations against Israel. Soon after Israeli occupation ended, Hezbollah abducted three Israeli soldiers who were patrolling the Israel-Lebanon border. Hezbollah exchanged the bodies of these soldiers in 2004 for the release of Lebanese prisoners. Another such abduction sparked the 2006 Lebanon War.

### Hezbollah Tactics in 2006

Many military analysts have regarded the 2006 Lebanon War as a defeat for Israel. Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), accustomed to years of guarding checkpoints and other low-intensity missions familiar to U.S.

troops in Iraq, suddenly had to conduct a ground war in Lebanon. Although the mission shift may have come as a shock to Israeli soldiers, Hezbollah had spent the years since the 2000 Israeli withdrawal getting ready for such a scenario. From 2000 to 2006, Hezbollah prepared the battlefield in anticipation of another Israeli conflict. The organization built a complex bunker system in the countryside and staged small arms, rockets, and other supply caches in and around rural villages. All told, there were reportedly about 600 ammunition and weapons bunkers in the region south of the Litani River. Each Hezbollah militia element was assigned to three bunkers—one primary munitions and two reserve—and no single commander knew the location of bunkers outside his assigned area of operations.<sup>15</sup> Hezbollah constructed the bunker system with backing from an IRGC general, Mir Faysal Baqer Zadah.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Hezbollah seeded high-speed avenues of approach with mines to slow down the movement of Israeli armored forces.<sup>17</sup> Although evidence suggests that the group’s Iranian sponsors trained Hezbollah fighters on the operation



AP Photo by: Jeff Riggins

During the 2006 Lebanon War in Lebanon and northern Israel, the principal parties were Hezbollah paramilitary forces and the Israeli military. The conflict started on 12 July 2006, and continued until a UN-brokered ceasefire went into effect on 14 August 2006.

of Iranian rocket and missile systems, Hezbollah itself also possessed an institutional memory for the type of asymmetric operations that led to the eventual departure of Israeli forces in 2000. A 2008 Strategic Studies Institute monograph, based on 36 interviews with Israeli participants in the conflict, emphasized that the most notable thing about Hezbollah's performance in the 2006 Lebanon War was its blend of conventional and irregular warfare.<sup>18</sup> Iran's role in training Hezbollah—the state sponsorship of a nonstate actor—resulted in the employment of asymmetric tactics within a surprisingly conventional framework.

Tactically, the 2006 Lebanon War witnessed the success of decentralized Hezbollah fighting teams. Hezbollah primarily relied upon squad-sized elements during the conflict. Notably, Hezbollah allowed these largely autonomous groups (task-organized as antitank teams, village fighters, and rocket teams) to seize the initiative and make tactical decisions without consulting higher command. When necessary, these elements coordinated their actions between villages and isolated fighting positions using a closed cellular phone system and two-way radios.<sup>19</sup>

Although the teams generally acted independently, Hezbollah leaders—who were able to intercept ground communications between Israeli military commanders—could provide warning of impending IDF maneuvers, which came along predictable avenues of approach dictated by terrain.<sup>20</sup> The Intelligence and Terrorism Center at the Center for Special Studies has concluded that “[i]n effect, the Hezbollah formation in south Lebanon was the direct product of Iranian doctrine and technology supplied by Iran and Syria,” resembling an “Iranian division” with territorial brigades and specialized subunits, such as antitank and rocket teams.<sup>21</sup> The teams themselves may have been located within the loose context of an Iranian-style division, but they operated without excessive deference to military hierarchy.

The typical Hezbollah antitank team was composed of two men with advanced Iranian weapons system training, and two or three men who served to help transport the team's equipment. These antitank teams employed antitank missiles against Israeli tanks, personnel, and other vehicles, sometimes fixing the location of enemy vehicles with

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improvised explosive devices.<sup>22</sup> The AT-3 Sagger, which Iranian engineering had modified to carry tandem warheads, was Hezbollah's most common antitank system.<sup>23</sup> However, Hezbollah also used others to great effect upon Israeli tanks, even those with reactive armor.<sup>24</sup> Of particular interest was Hezbollah's deployment of the AT-14 Kornet-E, which has thermal sights for night warfare, and of the RPG-29 Vampire, some versions of which feature night sights.<sup>25</sup> Taking advantage of canalizing terrain, antitank teams occupied fortified positions in hillsides and awaited Israeli advances, using “swarm” techniques to fire multiple rounds simultaneously at one target.<sup>26</sup> On 12 August 2006 alone, antitank missiles hit 11 IDF tanks as they attempted to move north through the valley of Wadi Salouqi in Southern Lebanon; of the 400 IDF tanks involved in the fighting in southern Lebanon, 48 were hit, 40 were damaged, and 20 were penetrated.<sup>27</sup>

Armed largely with AK-47s, Hezbollah village fighters drew the IDF into streets where Israeli tanks could not maneuver effectively. As the village fighters in southern Lebanon moved from room to room and house to house, the IDF had to rely upon its infantry, supported by artillery, armor, and air power. Andrew Exum, a former Soref Fellow for The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program, has suggested that the village fighters were not primarily trained by Iran, instead deriving their expertise from previous Hezbollah-Israeli conflicts, bringing to mind the Spartan rebuke of King Agesilaus for teaching his enemies how to fight as a result of his frequent campaigning.<sup>28</sup> Hezbollah's willingness to defend ground and extend direct-fire confrontations, however, indicated an important shift toward the more conventional side of the warfighting spectrum, away from the guerrilla tactics of groups such as the Viet Cong.<sup>29</sup>

Drawing heavily upon Iranian munitions and training, Hezbollah kept up a steady barrage of indirect fire against Israel. Early in the 2006

conflict, there was evidence of a large shipment of Iranian missiles and rockets as well as the presence of Iranian trainers on these weapons systems. Israeli intelligence has indicated that approximately 100 Iranian advisors were present in Lebanon, assisting, for example, in firing the complex, radar-guided C-802 missile system.<sup>30</sup> Iran further obliged Hezbollah by setting up rocket and missile targeting and control centers, and Hezbollah and Iran set up a joint intelligence center in Damascus during the conflict.<sup>31</sup> Iranian-trained teams rained rockets into northern Israel, demonstrating that the Israeli invasion was ineffective in staunching the attacks on the IDF's homeland.

A rocket team's tactics involved the coordination of several small squads of Hezbollah fighters: after lookouts determined that no Israeli aircraft were in the area, the first group would set up a launcher, the second would transport the rocket to the launch location, and the third would prepare the rocket for firing, often setting up remote control devices or timers. Each group would converge on the launch area, sometimes by bicycle, and swiftly depart from the area after completing its part in the process, which could take less than 28 seconds from beginning to end.<sup>32</sup> To reduce rocket launchers' heat signatures, Hezbollah teams would sometimes lower the launchers into the ground or cover them with a fire-retardant blanket after firing.<sup>33</sup> Israeli video showed how Hezbollah rocket teams took advantage of Israel's reluctance to cause collateral damage; repeatedly, Hezbollah fighters would duck into a home, set up a rocket system, and fire or leave in less than a minute.<sup>34</sup> These low-signature weapons were difficult for Israel to detect before they were fired. More so than the antitank teams and village fighters, the rocket teams were sometimes subject to the centralized control of Hezbollah and its Iranian advisers. A barrage of 250 rockets the day before the United Nations ceasefire on 14 August 2006 indicated Hezbollah's capacity for higher-level coordination

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of the rocket teams' activities.<sup>35</sup> As of the ceasefire, Hezbollah had launched approximately 4,228 rockets into Israeli territory.<sup>36</sup>

Although decentralized organization forced Hezbollah to fight a more or less static defense, its preparation of the battlefield enabled it to wage a five-week war without significant logistical failure. Storing caches of supplies and weapons in what would become forward and stay-behind positions, Hezbollah minimized the exposure of its fighters to the risks of resupply. Also, as the conflict progressed, Hezbollah took advantage of unexpected ways of fighting and conducting reconnaissance. To the surprise of the IDF, Hezbollah displayed a willingness to fight at night, despite its possession of limited night-vision equipment. Iran also supplied Hezbollah with UAVs to provide tactical reconnaissance of northern Israel.<sup>37</sup> There is some evidence that Iran also assisted in the equipping of a UAV, identified as either the Iranian Mirsad-1 or Ababil-3 Swallow, with small explosive charges.<sup>38</sup> In fact, during the Iran-Iraq War, Iran was the first country to use UAVs in such a fashion.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the influx of Iranian arms and training, it would be a mistake to conclude that Iran controlled all of Hezbollah's military activities against Israel. As Cordesman notes, such a conclusion amounts to a "conspiracy theory"; in terms of tactics, Hezbollah used Iran as much as Iran uses Hezbollah. As will be seen, Iran has used Hezbollah's operations as a template for its own evolving tactical doctrine.<sup>40</sup>

## **Iranian Warfighting Doctrine**

The Islamic Republic of Iran was in its infancy when Iraq invaded it in 1980. Following the Shah's deposition in 1979, Iran had purged its military leadership of those with suspected sympathies for the Shah. At the time, Iran's warfighting doctrine was largely U.S.-inspired, a result of U.S. military aid and advisors during the Shah's administration. The Iran-Iraq War spurred the Iranian government to release formerly disgraced military officers from prison in hope of bolstering its war effort. When Iran met with the occasional victory, however, the administration again incarcerated these leaders. As a result, formulation and implementation of an Iranian warfighting doctrine suffered during the Iran-Iraq War.

As a counterweight to the suspect loyalties of the regular armed forces, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini formed the IRGC, a military organization that reported directly to Iranian religious leaders. In turn, the IRGC oversaw the creation of a volunteer militia, the Basij (Mobilization) Resistance Force, in 1980. The group now numbers over 1,000,000, though it consists mainly of elderly men, youths, and volunteers who have completed military service.<sup>41</sup> During the Iran-Iraq War, the Basij, which has a regional and decentralized command structure, gained a reputation for “martyr”-style suicide attacks. As mentioned above, within the IRGC is the Al Quds Force, which works outside the country with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shi’ite militias in Iraq.<sup>42</sup> In recent years, the IRGC has maintained a force of approximately 125,000, compared to the regular armed forces’ 350,000.<sup>43</sup> Approximately 5,000 IRGC members are specialized in unconventional warfare.<sup>44</sup>

After the Iran-Iraq War, Iran again turned to tactical doctrine from Western-style militaries. Throughout the 1990s, both the regular Army and the IRGC began to devote training to the principles of modern maneuver warfare, including combined and joint operations, flanking movements, and night operations.<sup>45</sup> Iran remained neutral in the 1991 Gulf War but could observe how U.S. forces decisively defeated the conventional forces of its recent adversary, Iraq. The following year, Iran formalized the basic orientation of its strategy and doctrine and codified it in the regulations of the Iranian Armed Forces.<sup>46</sup> Within these regulations, Iran emphasized its defensive military posture and enshrined Islamic ideology as an organizing principle.

In the spring of 2001, the monthly Iranian military journal *Saff* published “What Future Wars Will Be Like,” an article that emphasized the importance of new capabilities for mobility and firepower; the article also argued that a new Iranian military doctrine must encompass “surprise, an understanding of defense, superior firepower, nuclear weapons, and communications.”<sup>47</sup> After the articulation of these priorities, Iran watched as the United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. With the United States and Israel as its presumed adversaries, Iran again had to reassess its tactical doctrine. Following the fall of Baghdad, Iran announced that it would focus its military’s training on asymmetric warfare.<sup>48</sup>

Although asymmetric warfare had been part of Iran’s warfighting doctrine prior to the War on Terrorism, this theme quickly came to the forefront of military discourse and training exercises. The basic principles of Iranian asymmetric warfighting appeared in the April 2004 edition of *Saff*. The military journal quoted Brigadier General Amir Bakhtiari, an Iran-Iraq War veteran and a professor at the IRGC’s Command and Staff University, as saying that it is “important and essential to change and replace military training and planning and to use unknown operational tactics and methods such as irregular and guerrilla warfare and rapid response and deterrent operations.”<sup>49</sup> A year later, Brigadier General Mohammad Ali Ja’fari, once the head of IRGC Ground Forces, stated that the IRGC had been implementing asymmetric warfare ideas since 2003: “According to the IRGC asymmetric doctrine, and in order to realize its defense capacity in scope and depth, the IRGC ground force has been organizing and equipping its units, on the basis of a battalion-based plan, for the past two years. The main characteristic of this strengthening measure has been to pay particular attention to the volume of the battalion’s fire power—with special stress on its anti-armor and anti-helicopter capacity—as well as self-reliance and great mobility of the combat battalion.”<sup>50</sup> IRGC strategists, including Brigadier General Hossein Salami, director of operations for the IRGC Joint Chiefs of Staff, were key players in the promotion of this shift.

In a preview of Hezbollah elements’ tactical autonomy in the 2006 Lebanon War, the IRGC announced in 2005 that it was incorporating defense in depth, also known as “mosaic defense,” into its doctrine. By so doing, the IRGC hoped to take advantage of Iran’s mountainous border terrain and widely spaced population centers to attenuate an invading force’s supply lines; stay-behind forces would then capitalize on the effects of Iran’s geography to harry and destroy an advancing enemy’s rear elements.<sup>51</sup> Michael Connell of the Center for Naval Analysis notes that a key element of the mosaic defense plan is to “delegate decision-making authority down to the tactical level, thereby rendering it difficult for U.S. forces to degrade Iranian command and control nodes. Basij forces and other irregular units would accordingly be granted considerable decision-making autonomy to defend their



(AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

**Holding posters depicting Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, young Lebanese men chant slogans during an anti-Israeli demonstration at Palestine Square in Tehran, Iran, 18 July 2006.**

own towns and villages against invading enemy units.”<sup>52</sup> IRGC commander in chief Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi has stated as much: “Our battalions can fight the enemy in a self-sufficient manner. . . . [A]nywhere there are Basij forces, the people are able to defend their own villages and cities.”<sup>53</sup> The IRGC has indicated that it has trained between 1,800 and 3,000 teams of three to four soldiers to conduct guerrilla operations behind enemy lines.<sup>54</sup>

In the year prior to the 2006 Lebanon War, the IRGC unveiled a wartime mobilization blueprint for Iran called the “Mo’in Plan,” in which Basij elements would be integrated into IRGC units as part of a regional defense structure.<sup>55</sup> In an invasion, the Basij would perform like the Hezbollah village fighters, using cities and other built-up areas as defensive bases to draw technologically superior attackers into the time-consuming and politically dangerous business of neighborhood clearance.<sup>56</sup> “In view of the disparity which exists between us and some of our enemies as far as military equipment and weapons are concerned, our efforts are aimed at redressing this by forming small resistance groups capable of carrying out highly destructive maneuvers,” said Seyyed

Morteza Musavi, the commander of the 2d Brigade of the IRGC’s 41st Sarallah Division.<sup>57</sup>

Iran’s war games have also reflected a renewed emphasis on asymmetric warfare in the post-9/11 world. Nearly a year after the United States began Operation Enduring Freedom, the IRGC-led Ashura-4 field exercise in September 2002 featured asymmetric warfare techniques and the use of passive air defenses to reduce the vulnerability of troop movements.<sup>58</sup> In the April 2004 Thunder exercise, IRGC troops used man-portable surface-to-air missiles against simulated U.S. AH-64 (“Apache”) attack helicopter targets.<sup>59</sup> Iranian military forces also practiced emplacing mines and other road obstacles to influence the advance of enemy armored columns.<sup>60</sup> In September 2004, the IRGC—specifically referencing the U.S. experience in Afghanistan and Iraq—tailored its exercises to include asymmetric warfare operations.<sup>61</sup>

Iranian war games became more frequent with the 2005 election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War, a member of the IRGC, and a reported instructor of Basij forces).<sup>62</sup> IRGC Brigadier General Mohammad-Ali Jaafari stated in August 2005, “As the likely enemy is far more advanced technologically than we are, we have been using what is called asymmetric warfare methods. . . . [O]ur forces are now well prepared for it.”<sup>63</sup> To this end, the IRGC began equipping itself with more antiarmor and antihelicopter weaponry.<sup>64</sup> In October 2005, Iran held military exercises involving the defense of 16 resistance areas and 400 civic resistance bases, with a reported emphasis on asymmetric warfare.<sup>65</sup> December 2005 war games involved more than 15,000 members of the regular armed forces and focused on irregular warfare by highly mobile units.<sup>66</sup>

In August 2006, the month of the final ceasefire of the 2006 Lebanon War, Iran’s military leaders began five weeks of war games under the name “Zolfaqar’s Blow,” citing lessons learned in the recent conflict in Lebanon.<sup>67</sup> As Brigadier General Mohammad-Reza Ashtiani, deputy commander in chief of Iran’s regular armed forces, noted, “Human forces can decide the fate of war. We saw it in Lebanon.”<sup>68</sup> Iran heralded these particular maneuvers as the introduction of a “new defensive doctrine.”<sup>69</sup> The exercises involved commando training, mobile shoulder-firing weaponry, electronic warfare teams,

rapid reaction forces, and drone operations. The electronic warfare segments of training reportedly included the jamming of enemy tactical communications and the establishment of communications networks to coordinate Iranian military activity.<sup>70</sup>

In the past three and a half years, training in guerrilla tactics has been a mainstay of large-scale Iranian military exercises, including Great Prophet II in November 2006 and Eqtedar-85 in February 2007. Although the Great Prophet I exercises of April 2006 focused mainly on naval and littoral operations, Great Prophet II involved about 20,000 Basij forces as well as conventional forces that practiced night operations and maneuver through restrictive terrain.<sup>71</sup> As in the Zolfaqar's Blow exercises, Iranian military leaders pointed to Hezbollah's experience in Lebanon as a guiding factor in the Great Prophet II exercises. In a nod toward Hezbollah's use of autonomous squad-sized elements, Great Prophet II reportedly involved the training of 1,800 self-sufficient Iranian military teams.<sup>72</sup>

In the February 2007 Eqtedar-85 urban warfare maneuvers, 3,000 such teams were involved, with an emphasis on anti-air and anti-armor weaponry.<sup>73</sup> Also as part of the Eqtedar-85 training, 2,500 members of the Basij staged an exercise in the western suburbs of Tehran, focusing on countering enemy forces transported to the capital by helicopter.<sup>74</sup> In recent training, IRGC and Basij members have practiced camouflage and deception techniques intended to minimize detection by enemy reconnaissance.<sup>75</sup> In addition, the Iranians have been working to improve and encrypt communications between units.<sup>76</sup> The IRGC's research staff at Imam Hossein and Sharif Universities has been working on developing a tactical telecommunications network; the IRGC purportedly fielded this system during the February 2007 Eqtedar-85 exercises.<sup>77</sup> As Minister of Defense and Logistics Major General Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar noted, Iran pays special attention to "the production of equipment related to asymmetric warfare."<sup>78</sup>

Iran's pursuit of improved command-and-control technology, however, has coincided with the military's attempt to develop decentralized capabilities, enabling small teams to work against the enemy in the absence of communication from higher headquarters. And in yet another allusion to the 2006 Lebanon War, Iran announced that it was conducting

drills involving "missile squads" as part of its July 2008 exercise, Great Prophet III.<sup>79</sup> A December 2008 war game, Ittihad-87, concentrated on naval operations in the Strait of Hormuz, in keeping with Iran's parallel focus on asymmetric naval operations.<sup>80</sup> In its November 2009 maneuvers, Iran continued to emphasize training on anti-air and surface-to-surface missile attacks.<sup>81</sup>

The military's sense of Iranian exceptionalism is a cornerstone of the country's asymmetric warfighting doctrine, particularly when it comes to suicide operations. Major General Safavi has remarked: "Those forces that have been trained in the 'culture' of martyrdom-seeking are among the unique features of the Islamic republic's armed forces."<sup>82</sup> Over the past six years, the Iranian military has conducted an intensive review of its "martyrdom" operations during the Iran-Iraq War in order to prepare prospective martyr-soldiers for a more modern battlefield.<sup>83</sup> Even prior to his election as president, Ahmadinejad helped initiate a recruitment campaign for suicide operations in the IRGC and Basij forces. With Iranian children's cartoons celebrating the prospect of martyrdom against an invading enemy, "martyr" recruitment has accelerated since Ahmadinejad's election, and the administration has even taken online applications through a designated website.<sup>84</sup>

Rather than clearing minefields by ordering ill-trained militia members to walk through them, as the Iranian military did during the Iran-Iraq War, Iran is trying to utilize its personnel in a more efficient and cost-effective manner. In 1988, an Iranian naval mine estimated to cost \$1,500 caused about \$90 million in damages to the *Samuel B. Roberts*, a U.S. frigate, as it moved through the Persian Gulf. Likewise, Iran—through its professional journals and war games—has been attempting to use asymmetric ground warfare to overcome its limitations against a technologically superior enemy. The 2006 Lebanon War provided a test of the ground tactics that Iranian advisors had taught Hezbollah since that organization's creation. Since the 2006 Lebanon War, Iran has been quick to take lessons from it and train its own military accordingly.

## Going Forward

In a conflict with Iran today, an invading force would be fighting against a state that, from the

onset, has prepared to engage in asymmetric warfare, not as an afterthought to occupation, but as a primary feature of its defensive strategy. In so doing, it is important to recall the lessons of the 2006 Lebanon War and avoid repeating the IDF's mistakes. If contemplating a ground conflict with Iran, the United States should adapt its own training and tactics accordingly. Also, while Iran may have been a source for the asymmetric tactical doctrine that worked against the IDF, Iran is not Lebanon, and potential adversaries must prepare for differences in geography and military organization.

The IDF's recent emphasis on stability operations, rather than maneuver, undermined its ability to wage ground warfare. Maneuver units' crew drills and proficiency in combined arms operations withered through disuse. As Matt M. Matthews of the Combat Studies Institute noted in his incisive critique of the 2006 Lebanon War, the United States faces a similar challenge: "While the U.S. Army must be proficient in conducting major combat operations around the world, it is possible that years of irregular operations have chipped away at this capability, not unlike the situation encountered by the IDF."<sup>85</sup> In addition, the IDF was hobbled by a poorly understood revamping of its military doctrine. Senior officers' reliance upon the unfamiliar jargon of a new effects-based operational theory threw field officers into confusion, detracting from a traditional emphasis on taking and holding ground. In its own professional journals, the U.S. military is starting to qualify its reliance upon effects-based operations.<sup>86</sup>

Despite Hezbollah's and Iran's commitment to an asymmetric tactical doctrine, Iran also differs from Lebanon in that it possesses a relatively large conventional military, in addition to the personnel that would be tasked with irregular warfare. A successful invasion would have to address both the conventional threat and the asymmetric threat. Decisive land maneuver action would be necessary, both to destroy conventional Iranian military units and to isolate and identify the asymmetric warfighting elements. Failure to maneuver decisively could beget a war of attrition.<sup>87</sup> The Israeli government's Winograd Commission Report, an analysis of political and military failures during the 2006 Lebanon War, took special notice of the period of "equivocation" that sapped the IDF's operations of their timeliness.<sup>88</sup> The intensity of Israel's 2008-2009 operations in

Gaza has demonstrated that the IDF has learned at least one lesson from its experience in 2006.<sup>89</sup>

Pursuant to a ground offensive, an invading force in Iran would quickly have to detect and destroy primary and secondary bunker systems to remove potential power centers for stay-behind elements. In 2006, Israeli airstrikes enjoyed some success in destroying known Hezbollah bunker locations closest to the border. Still, limitations of intelligence blunted the effect of these strikes; as the IDF attempted to penetrate beyond the border areas, it encountered areas sown with previously unknown bunker systems. Air strikes in preparation for a ground offensive are useful if timely, but ground units must pass along evidence of additional bunkers to higher echelons to enable the destruction of these strong points.

Underestimation of the enemy hamstrung the IDF's efforts in Lebanon. As one Israeli special forces soldier commented about a Hezbollah bunker: "We expected a tent and three Kalashnikovs—that was the intelligence we were given. Instead, we found a hydraulic steel door leading to a well-equipped network of tunnels."<sup>90</sup> Since the Iran-Iraq War, Iran has had 20 years to prepare the battlefield, honeycombing it with bunkers and weapon stockpiles. Iranian forces have trained to use mines to canalize invading forces down predictable avenues of approach. In addition, recent war games have involved antihelicopter attacks to limit an invader's flexibility in moving troops. To keep control of an advance's momentum, an invading force in Iran must exchange high-speed avenues of approach for less-expected and more time-consuming routes.

An invader facing Iran's mosaic defense must identify and isolate the individual "tiles" of this mosaic—weapon stockpiles, bunkers, rocket teams, antitank teams, and village-based centers of resistance. Although bypassing strong points might be necessary during initial maneuvers, a sustained military effort against Iran would have to deal with these "tiles." Area commanders would have to limit and monitor personnel traffic in the expanses between populated areas to detect the existence of bunkers and stockpiles. Human intelligence would also be pivotal. Two decades of battlefield preparation without the relative "tonic" of military conflict may have resulted in Iran's over-reliance

***An invader facing Iran's mosaic defense must identify and isolate the individual "tiles"...***

upon established bunkers and stockpiles that have, over time, become known to civilians and extraneous military personnel. The information regarding bunker locations may therefore be easier to come by than it was during the 2006 Lebanon War. Iran might not be able to achieve as strict a compartmentalization of bunker assignments as Hezbollah did. An invading force should target command-and-control nodes, such as those that played a part in the coordination of Hezbollah rocket attacks, and it should interrupt enemy radio and cell-phone traffic to limit the coordination of far-flung autonomous elements.

The weapons systems that marked the 2006 Lebanon War would likely play a role in a conflict with Iran. The rocket teams in Lebanon focused on firing upon static targets in Israel, although there is some evidence that they were successful attacking the invading IDF. Iran might well devote its rocket teams to attacking the more static elements of an invading force. In this situation, dynamic maneuver at the front and varying rearguard routines would be useful to counter the enemy's indirect fire. At least one commentator has dubbed the 2006 Lebanon War the "war of the antitank missile," in reference to Hezbollah's successful reliance upon antitank weaponry and swarming tactics.<sup>91</sup> Iran's antitank systems are more numerous and more sophisticated than Hezbollah's, and an invading, armored force must prepare for the ambushes and swarm attacks that marked the 2006 conflict. Merely increasing the thickness of armor plate is not the solution; in Lebanon, even reactive armor was no match for Iranian-developed weaponry. Armored units must be proficient in battle drills and maneuver in order to minimize the risks of an antitank-missile attack and to react accordingly when they detect such a threat.

While the front-line troops of an invading force must engage in decisive maneuver, rearguard elements should seal off populated centers of resistance and attempt to locate stockpiled munitions. Admittedly, this work would be grueling; an invader would have to weather attacks from these areas until it unearthed the stockpiles, the store of munitions dwindled through use, or the villagers lost the will to

fight. In the 2006 Lebanon War, five months of fighting did not exhaust stores that were at least six years in the making. Again, Iran has had much more time to prepare such stockpiles. Should it become necessary to search the villages, it is likely that the enemy will use civilians as shields, a common asymmetric tactic, and that the collateral damage of anything less than surgical attacks upon densely populated centers would likely outweigh the tactical benefits to an invader. In any case, an invading force should have sufficient troops at hand to seal off and clear these population centers should an occupation be contemplated.

The 2006 Lebanon War highlighted the successful use of asymmetric warfighting tactics in the face of a technologically superior adversary. Iran has been using the lessons learned in that conflict to prepare its own personnel for the possibility of a ground invasion. Military preparedness is a hallmark of successful diplomacy. As negotiations over Iran's nuclear program continue, the United States should acknowledge the evolution of Iran's ground tactics and have a plan to address this reality, should the need arise. **MR**

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**NOTES**

1. As quoted in Jahangir Arasli, "Obsolete Weapons, Unconventional Tactics, and Martyrdom Zeal: How Iran Would Apply its Asymmetric Naval Warfare Doctrine in a Future Conflict," George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Occasional Paper Series, No. 10, April 2007, 42.

2. See, e.g., GlobalSecurity.org, <[www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/iran-iraq.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/iran-iraq.htm)> (5 April 2010); "Iraq's National Security Goals," Central Intelligence Agency, December 1988, declassified November 1999, <[www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB80/wmd02.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB80/wmd02.pdf)> (5 April 2010). Although it is difficult to get hard statistics on the casualties that each side sustained, there is general agreement that Iran sustained much higher casualties than Iraq.

3. Given the nature of the publication, this article only draws upon open sources. It is important to note that the Iranian government is known for generating misinformation about its military capabilities. For example, it doctored a photograph of a recent missile test to misrepresent the number of missiles successfully deployed. Nevertheless, this article has looked to a variety of sources to provide a nonclassified perspective on Iran's changing tactical doctrine. As LTG Sam Wilson, U.S. Army, retired, former Defense Intelligence Agency director, noted, "Ninety percent of intelligence comes from open sources. The other ten percent, the clandestine work, is just the more dramatic. The real intelligence hero is Sherlock Holmes, not James Bond." Quoted in David Reed, "Aspiring to Spying," *The Washington Times*, 14 November 1997, Regional News, 1, cited in Richard S. Friedman, "Open Source Intelligence," *Parameters* (Summer 1998) <[www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/parameters/98summer/sum-essa.htm](http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/parameters/98summer/sum-essa.htm)> (5 April 2010).

4. Iranian leaders have also studied the lessons that Iranian-supported insurgent forces have learned during Operation Iraqi Freedom. From the military training of the Badr Brigade (now the Badr Party) during its Saddam Hussein-era exile in Iran to the supply of explosively formed projectiles, Iran has been able to test its tactics and equipment during the coalition's presence in Iraq. In testimony to Congress in April 2007, GEN David H. Petraeus, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, stressed Iran's involvement in Iraq: "[Iranian operatives in Iraq] were provided substantial funding, training on Iranian soil, advanced explosive munitions and technologies as well as run-of-the-mill arms and ammunition . . . in some cases advice and in some cases even a degree of direction[.] . . . And again, there's no question . . . that Iranian financing is taking place through the Quds force." Anthony Cordesman and Martin Kleiber,

*Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (Washington, DC: Center for Strategy and International Studies Press, 2007), 81, citing Bill Gertz, "U.S. General Calls Al Qaeda 'Public Enemy No. 1' in Iraq," *The Washington Times*, 27 April 2007, 4. The 2006 Lebanon War, however, provides more insight as to the evolution of Iranian tactics toward conventional military operations.

5. Generally attributed to Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, a Roman military writer, in his *Epitoma Rei Militaris* (c. 390 AD).

6. "Created in response to Israel's continued occupation of Lebanon, this militia force was trained, armed, and equipped by Iran and Syria." Matt M. Matthews, "We Were Caught Unprepared: The 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War," *The Long War Series*, Occasional Paper 26, U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, Combat Studies Institute Press, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2008, 6; see also Augustus Richard Norton, "Hizballah and the Israeli Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 24. ("There is little doubt that Iran and Syria were deeply involved in the creation of Hizballah.")

7. Naim Qassem, trans. by Dalia Khalil, *Hizballah: The Story from Within* (London: SAQI Books, 2005), 67.

8. As quoted in Testimony by Ilan Berman, American Foreign Policy Council, Vice President for Policy, U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation and Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia, 28 September 2006, <www.afpc.org/event\_listings/viewCongressionalHearing/48> (5 April 2010).

9. Ehud Ya'ari, "Hizballah: 13 Principles of Warfare," *The Jerusalem Report*, 21 March 1996, quoted in Matthews, 7.

10. As Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General Sheikh Naim Qassem acknowledged: "Resistance work was essentially 'hit and run,' leaving the enemy surprised without any visible retaliation target." Qassem, trans. by Khalil, *Hizballah: The Story from Within*, 71.

11. Amir Taheri, "The Mullah's Playground," *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 December 2004, A10, cited by Cordesman and Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, 78.

12. "Hezbollah as a Strategic Arm of Iran," Intelligence and Terrorism Center at the Center for Special Studies (CSS), 8 September 2006, <www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\_multimedia/English/eng\_n/html/iran\_hezbollah\_e1b.htm> (5 April 2010).

13. "Hezbollah as a North Korea-Type Guerrilla Force," <IntelligenceOnline.com>, no. 529, 25 August-September 2006, <www.intelligenceonline.com/archives/p\_som\_archives.asp?num=529&year=2006&rub=archives> (5 April 2010).

14. Anthony Cordesman, "Iran's Support of the Hezbollah in Lebanon," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 17 July 2006, 2-3. Hezbollah has an estimated annual budget of \$100 million. "Hezbollah as a Strategic Arm of Iran," Intelligence and Terrorism Center at the CSS, 8 September 2006, <www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\_multimedia/English/eng\_n/html/iran\_hezbollah\_e1b.htm> (5 April 2010).

15. Matthews, 19.

16. "Hezbollah as a North Korea-Type Guerrilla Force," <IntelligenceOnline.com>, no. 529, 25 August-7 September 2006, <www.intelligenceonline.com/archives/p\_som\_archives.asp?num=529&year=2006&rub=archives> (5 April 2010). North Korean advisors also reportedly lent their expertise to the project; an Israeli intelligence report concluded that Hezbollah was "believed to be benefiting from assistance provided by North Korean advisers, according to a July 29 report in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*. The report quotes a high-ranking Iranian Revolutionary Guard officer, who stated that North Korean advisers had assisted Hezbollah in building tunnel infrastructure, including a 25-kilometer underground tunnel." Matthews, 21, citing "North Koreans Assisted Hezbollah with Tunnel Construction," *Terrorism Focus* 3, issue 30 (1 August 2006), 1.

17. Andrew Exum, "Hizballah at War: A Military Assessment," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, *Policy Focus*, no. 63, December 2006, 4.

18. See Stephen D. Biddle and Jeffrey A. Friedman, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, PA.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2008), 7-8.

19. Andrew Exum, "Hizballah at War: A Military Assessment," 5.

20. Alastair Crooke and Mark Perry, "How Hezbollah Defeated Israel, Part 1: Winning the Intelligence War," *Asia Times*, 12 October 2006, <www.atimes.com/atimes/middle\_east/hj12ak01.html> (5 April 2010).

21. "Hezbollah as a Strategic Arm of Iran," Intelligence and Terrorism Center at the Center for CSS, <www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\_multimedia/English/eng\_n/html/iran\_hezbollah\_e1b.htm> (5 April 2010).

22. "As they moved rapidly toward a hill overlooking a possible Hezbollah escape route, a massive IED exploded beneath a Merkava 4 tank, sending heavy chunks of steel up to 150 yards away, instantly killing the crew of four. As rescue teams rushed forward to retrieve the bodies of the dead tank crew, two other IDF soldiers died during a vicious firefight with Hezbollah." Matthews, 36.

23. Cordesman, "Iran's Support of the Hezbollah in Lebanon," 7.

24. "Iranian-manufactured antitank missiles with a double tandem-type warhead which can penetrate armor even after reactive shielding: the Raad, an Iranian version of the Sagger, has range of 3,000 meters (1.86 miles) and can penetrate 400 mm; the Raad-T, an Iranian version of the Sagger with a tandem warhead, has a range of 3,000 meters and can also penetrate 400 mm (16") after reactive shielding; the Toophan is an Iranian version of the TOW, has a range of up to 3,750 meters (2.33 miles) and can penetrate 550 mm (22") steel armor." "Hezbollah as a Strategic Arm of Iran," Intelligence and Terrorism Center at the CSS, 8 September 2006, <www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\_multimedia/English/eng\_n/html/iran\_hezbollah\_e1b.htm> (5 April 2010).

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27. Matthews, 64.

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29. Biddle and Friedman, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy*, 52-53.

30. See Cordesman with Sullivan and Sullivan, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*, 132.

31. *Ibid.*, 117.

32. Matthews, 17.

33. Cordesman with Sullivan and Sullivan, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*, 105.

34. *Ibid.*, 115.

35. Voice of America News, 13 August 2006, as cited in GlobalSecurity.org, <www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2006/08/mil-060813-voa06.htm> (5 April 2010).

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37. "Recognizing Iran as a Strategic Threat: An Intelligence Challenge for the United States," Staff Report, U.S. House of Representatives, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Subcommittee on Intelligence Policy, 23 August 2006, citing U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2004*, April 2005, 89, cited by GlobalSecurity.org, <www.globalsecurity.org/intel/library/congress/2006\_rpt/iran-report\_060822v2.htm> (5 April 2010).

38. Cordesman with Sullivan and Sullivan, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*, 105-106.

39. Tom Cooper and Farzad Bishop, *Iran-Iraq War in the Air, 1980-1988*, 196, as cited by Arasli, "Obsolete Weapons, Unconventional Tactics, and Martyrdom Zeal: How Iran Would Apply Its Asymmetric Naval Warfare Doctrine in a Future Conflict," 24.

40. Cordesman with Sullivan and Sullivan, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*, 85. ("Hezbollah proved to be better trained and more ready than most guerrilla forces, which may say a great deal about the quality of Iranian training and doctrine in this area.")

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42. In January 2006, Iran's Supreme National Security Council increased the authorized size of the Quds Force to 15,000. Cordesman and Kleiber, "Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf," 79, citing IntelligenceOnline.com, "Tehran Targets Mediterranean," 10 March 2006.

43. *The Military Balance 2007*, 224-26, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Arundel House 2007, London, UK.

44. Cordesman and Kleiber, "Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf," 78.

45. Michael Connell, "The Influence of the Iraq Crisis on Iranian Warfighting Doctrine and Strategy," CNA Corporation, Alexandria, April 2007, unpublished, 1.

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56. Cordesman and Kleiber, "Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf," 81.

57. "Iranian Guard's Mission Evolves," *The Washington Times*, 19 March 2007, <www.washingtontimes.com/news/2007/mar/19/20070319-124826-4695> (5 April 2010).

58. Ward, "The Continuing Evolution of Iran's Military Doctrine," <www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-928504121.html> (5 April 2010).

59. Connell, 4.

60. Amiri, 16-17, as cited in Connell, 4.

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Warfare Doctrine in a Future Conflict," 13, fn. 16.

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Soldiers of the 2-14 Infantry Battalion, 2d Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, provide suppressing fire during a combined arms live fire exercise at Fort Drum, New York, 5 May 2009. (Ralph Dayton photo)

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