

Iran's Evolving Urban Warfare Doctrine

By
Tom Leydorf

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*Urban Warfare
Analysis Center*

Shawnee, OK
(405) 273-3035

Summary

Iran's urban warfare doctrine is evolving rapidly as its military leaders absorb the lessons of insurgent activities in Iraq and last year's war between Hezbollah and Israel in southern Lebanon. In addition, Iran's devastating war with Iraq in the 1980s continues to have a profound effect on the military, pushing efforts at readiness and adaptation. Overall, Iran is becoming a modern day "hybrid force" combining advanced missile technology with traditional asymmetric strategies. In particular, Iran's small unit tactics could prove especially difficult to counter.

Lessons Learned from the Iran-Iraq War

The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) was one of the longest and costliest wars of the twentieth century. It left approximately one million Iranians dead or wounded and cost the Iranian economy \$350 billion.¹ Its military and psychological effects continue to have a profound influence on Iranian society.

Saddam Hussein sought to exploit Iran's military weakness after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Iraq invaded in September 1980 and advanced quickly against disorganized Iranian forces. Iran's successful counter-offensive recaptured most of its lost territory by May 1982, and Iranian troops subsequently pushed into Iraqi territory. A cease-fire was announced in August 1988 that codified the stalemate with no change to previous borders.²

The following "lessons learned" are based on the writings of multiple experts on the war. There is no proof these are the lessons that Iranian military commanders have learned or introduced into their training and strategy. Nonetheless, the compelling nature of these observations suggest Iranian commanders probably are significantly influenced by them.

- 1) Force ratios are an uncertain measure of military strength. Iran was less vulnerable than the size and readiness of its military suggested. This was especially true in crowded urban areas where maneuver by Iraqi forces was limited.
- 2) Military discipline is critical to success on the battlefield. Revolutionary fervor and human wave attacks were not enough to turn back the initial Iraqi offensive. After a reckless cavalry charge, it took a second major counteroffensive with reorganized Iranian troops to gain the advantage.³
- 3) Iranians with diverse faiths and ethnicities will unite against external enemies. There was immense popular support for the war, and most Iranian Sunnis -- including those living along the border with Iraq in Khuzestan Province -- sided with Iran instead of their Arab "brothers" in Iraq.⁴

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- 4) Surprise by small units is an important force multiplier. As the war progressed, surprise and infiltration by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) helped push Iraqi troops back across the border. Small squads with a sniper, two-man RPG team, and multiple four-man fire teams seemed most effective.⁵
- 5) It is possible to hold urban ground even when outmanned and outgunned. Iranian troops defended Abadan and Khorramshahr against heavy odds early in the war. Iraq eventually captured both cities, but at heavy costs. Iraqi troops never took any other key cities.⁶
- 6) Tactical gains and losses are less important than achieving strategic advantage. The absence of an effective grand strategy rendered pointless the extraordinary sacrifice of millions of Iranians.
- 7) There is no need to fear superior technology or weaponry. Iraq had both, supplied by the United States and others, and Iran still repulsed the invasion. Iranian military officials have stressed this point through the years.⁷

Lessons Learned from the Hezbollah-Israeli War of 2006

The conflict between Hezbollah and Israel in the summer of 2006 was the first time the Israeli Defense Force was unable to quickly dominate a Muslim armed group with offensive operations. It also displayed the considerable military prowess of a nonstate actor. As a result, other militias and fighting groups are likely to learn from Hezbollah and employ similar tactics in the future.⁸ Indeed, Iran's joint intelligence shop with Hezbollah and Syria during the war ensures that Hezbollah's tactics will be studied and adopted by Iranian military officials.⁹

- The lessons learned below do not attempt to capture all the many important aspects of the conflict, just the ones deemed most relevant to Iran's emerging doctrine on urban warfare.

1) Small, decentralized teams can be used to big effect.

Hezbollah operated as a “distributed network” in small units of 7-10 people that acted with considerable autonomy.¹⁰ In contrast to Muslim armed groups in the past, Hezbollah's decentralized approach encouraged initiative and allowed for diverse responses.¹¹

- Hezbollah fighters used hit-and-move tactics to limit the effectiveness of superior IDF firepower, in part by providing fewer fixed targets.¹²

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2) External support can transform a resistance movement into a potent fighting force.

Hezbollah has no ability to produce arms locally, yet it amassed an impressive display of fire power. Iranian and Syrian support is well known, but the extent of the arms build up took the IDF by surprise. Neither Israeli nor American surveillance activities were able to assess the scale of deliveries of missiles and firing systems or the extent of training.¹³

3) Clear military victory is not necessary to win the larger political war.

Hezbollah's objective in the war was the creation of a new definition of power and victory that cannot be measured in traditional military terms, according to Amal Saad-Ghorayeb of the Lebanese American University in Beirut.¹⁴ Hezbollah's ability to expose weaknesses in the IDF shattered the myth of Israeli invincibility. It also elevated Hezbollah both politically and militarily in the eyes of its Middle East audience -- despite losing most tactical battles.¹⁵

4) Simple weaponry used effectively can offset the technological advantages of a superior foe.

Hezbollah ultimately forced the IDF to fight on Hezbollah's terms despite the IDF's technological superiority, reinforcing a lesson learned from the Iran-Iraq war. While Hezbollah used some sophisticated missile systems (with Iran's help), its main success on the battlefield came with anti-tank weaponry and maneuver tactics rather than high technology systems. Moreover, many missiles today have become easier to use even as they have increased in lethality, range, and sophistication.

5) Winning hearts and minds is more important than military battles.

Some members of the Israeli Government expected the local population to turn against Hezbollah for bringing destruction on southern Lebanon, but the opposite happened. Hezbollah's long-time practice of providing basic services to people in areas it controls had already generated considerable support. It solidified that support -- even after fighting destroyed whole villages -- by responding quickly to peoples' needs after the war.

6) Air bombardment is insufficient to significantly weaken a prepared enemy.

Israel had complete control of the airspace over Lebanon and launched a heavy bombing campaign designed to greatly reduce, if not eliminate, Hezbollah's missile capability. Nonetheless, weeks of bombing failed to halt Hezbollah rocket attacks. Hezbollah's deep bunkers and tunnels, where many missiles were stored, proved resistant to Israel's aerial bombardment.¹⁶

7) Use of the media and psychological warfare are often more important than military success.

Hezbollah could not defeat the IDF militarily, nor did it try. Instead, it used classic guerrilla strategy to win the information war, which proved far more significant in the long run.¹⁷ In testimony to the Winograd Commission, created by the Israeli Government to investigate Israel's handling of the war, Vice Premier Shimon Peres and Major Gen (ret) Malka stated that Hezbollah leader Nasrallah did a brilliant job as spokesman and public relations manager. Peres also declared that the war was a "big psychological defeat" for Israel.¹⁸

8) Highly motivated fighters willing to die are difficult to defeat.

Hezbollah soldiers fought hard and aggressively, showing a commitment to the war that exceeded that of Israel's invading force. Nasrallah's ability to depict the war as a showdown with both Israel and the United States, combined with his convincing rhetoric that the Israeli military can be defeated, helped motivate his soldiers to fight for something larger than themselves. In addition to the perceived benefits in heaven of a martyr's death, Hezbollah fighters also had reassurances that their families would receive financial assistance and their children educated if they died in battle.¹⁹

9) Fighting on home turf in civilian areas provides a huge advantage.

Hezbollah made effective use of fighting in areas it knew well.²⁰ It also had the support of the local population, which allowed its fighters to fade back into society and reappear at will. For example, one town had twice as many Hezbollah fighters as expected, which resulted in IDF troops getting pinned down.²¹ Nearly the entire Shiite population in southern Lebanon served as the "eyes and ears" of the fighters, and villages served as de facto logistics bases for supplies and weapons.²²

Learning from Insurgents in Iraq

Iraq has proven to be an effective testing ground for urban tactics Iranian troops would likely use against enemies elsewhere. In fact, Iranian leaders have publicly acknowledged that they are studying US weaknesses in Iraq. For example, IRGC commander Yahya Safavi in November 2006 remarked on Iranian television, "The Americans have many weaknesses...in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan they clearly displayed (them)...we have planned our strategy precisely."²³

- Such learning has been ongoing for years. A retired Iranian army general in 2004 said, "Iranian military command has watched closely the conduct of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and have acquired lessons on how to face a possible attack by the powerful U.S. forces."²⁴

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Information about the extent of Iranian involvement in Iraq suggests a widespread and concerted effort by Tehran to actively support militant factions there. Proof of Iranian involvement was lacking throughout 2004 and 2005, but General Abizaid in September 2006 publicly blamed Iran for supplying weapons to Iraqi insurgents.²⁵

- He mentioned two top concerns – shoulder fired RPGs against armored vehicles and explosively formed projectiles (EFPs) triggered by motion sensors. Both were used by Hezbollah against Israel in 2006, which suggests Iran is adapting lessons learned there to Iraq.
- Abizaid also said he was surprised to find in Iraq the same deep-strike missiles used by Hezbollah, including some Chinese-made rockets that he believed came from Iran.

A long-awaited briefing by US military officials in February 2007 provided the first comprehensive presentation on Iranian involvement in Iraq.²⁶ At that briefing, officials presented evidence of Iranian-supplied weapons that included EFPs, TNT blocks with blasting caps, 81mm and 60mm mortar rounds, RPGs, and man-portable air defense missiles. The materiel allegedly was smuggled to Iraq by the elite Quds force, although US officials offered no proof.

- Significantly, EFPs were first introduced in 2004. Their widespread use at present appears to be a direct result of their effectiveness against armored vehicles. Successful countermeasures remain elusive, suggesting their use against US forces will continue.

IRGC leader General Yahya Rahim-Safavi (date unknown)



Iran as Asymmetric Threat

Iran has learned from its combat experience over the past three decades and has adopted an asymmetric strategy to fighting superior enemies like the United States. Given its developed missile systems, Iran is now a new type of hybrid fighting force combining hit-and-run guerrilla tactics with sophisticated weaponry.

- An IRGC official in 2006 said, “We accept that the enemy (United States) is superior to us in certain areas such as air power and electronic warfare. However, we have also chosen a certain strategy called 'asymmetric defense and asymmetric warfare'. In this, we have considered all the enemy's strengths, and we have designed operations accordingly.”²⁷

Iran has oriented its training around asymmetric warfare, conducting many exercises over the past five years. Much of the training has focused on urban areas. Some exercises involve the civilian “Basij” forces, which probably result in more propaganda than military training. Still, other exercises include sophisticated IRGC forces.

- As early as 2002, approximately 30,000 IRGC forces participated in a four-day exercise specializing in asymmetric tactics.²⁸
- Iran's military literature suggests that Iranian officials have carefully studied asymmetric warfare and opportunities, according to military expert Anthony Cordesman. In addition, some Iranian forces are highly effective at such warfare.²⁹

The analysis below assumes an attack on Iran by a superior armed force (mostly the United States), not Iran invading another country. The activities of Iran's military and reaction of the population probably would be different if Iran launched a preemptive attack on one of its neighbors compared to a war of “self defense” against the United States.

- Without defining an elaborate military scenario, the analysis below assumes US missile strikes of limited duration followed by the deployment of special operations forces to urban areas.
- American military planners agree that it would be almost impossible to destroy -- and verify the destruction -- of every nuclear facility in Iran, suggesting at least some ground forces would be necessary if the purpose of the US attack was to disrupt Iran's nuclear program.³⁰
- US military experts also believe that a full-scale ground invasion would be difficult, considering the terrain, geographic distances, and nationalist fervor of Iran.³¹ Indeed, a Pentagon war game back in 2004 concluded that a limited strike is much preferable to a large ground invasion.³²

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Basij soldiers at training (date unknown)



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Photo : Mohammad Akhlaghi

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Four Main Themes to Iranian Asymmetric Urban Warfare

Iran's emerging asymmetric doctrine clusters around four main themes. These themes include both strategic goals and tactical maneuvers. The themes below do not imply that Iran would refrain from other tactics and strategies. Rather, they highlight what appears to be emerging trends in Iranian military doctrine.

1) Fighting effectiveness is directly linked to popular support for the war.

If the United States attacked Iran, the Iranian people would respond with nationalistic fervor. Displeasure over poor economic conditions and other domestic concerns would quickly become subordinate to defending national honor, resulting in widespread support for Iranian troops in urban areas.

- Iranians are a proud people with keen awareness of their country's prominent role in history. A professor at Tehran University expects that a US attack on Iran would be viewed as "Iran's 9/11," uniting the country against the attackers.³³ Previously, the country's non-Persian ethnic minorities fought hard against Iraq in the 1980s war, despite Saddam's expectation that many Arabs would help Iraq.
- Hardliners, vindicated and likely strengthened by the attack, would stoke latent anti-American feelings among many Iranians.³⁴ A poll in 2006 revealed that approximately half of Iranians view the United States as controlling and confrontational.³⁵
- The number of bombing raids required to inflict serious damage on key sites also would fan animosities. Many facilities are in civilian areas, and experts estimate that a minimum of 300 to 400 aim points are needed for nuclear sites alone.³⁶ Attacks on terrorist training camps, chemical facilities, missile sites, and military bases would require additional bombing.

Iranian Army Parade



Photo : Ali Mohammadi
21 April 2007

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2) Iran's military response would rely heavily on small unit tactics.

Iran has a large supply of long-range missiles and would not hesitate to use them, but the main thrust of its long-term counterattack would come from small units conducting asymmetric warfare, often in urban areas. Iranian soldiers have trained for it, and they have seen it work in Lebanon and Iraq. Moreover, Iranian officials probably realize that missiles alone will not protect the homeland nor significantly limit the actions of invading US forces.

- An Iranian military commander said recently, “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.”³⁷

3) Iran would seek external sources of materiel support.

It is safe to assume that Iran has learned from recent wars regarding military supplies. In the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq had far more imports of weapons and ammunition, which put Iran at a disadvantage and resulted in disproportionate losses. More recently, Hezbollah fought effectively against Israel in 2006 largely because Israel could not cut off war support from Syria and Iran. Similarly, Iranian support to insurgents in Iraq is possible because coalition forces have not closed the border between the two countries.

- In November 2006, Russia began deliveries of TOR-M1 air defense missile systems as part of a \$700 million contract. Russia claimed the sale of such high-precision military weaponry did not violate UN sanctions, but US officials strongly disagreed.³⁸
- Iran and Syria, already with close military ties, signed a mutual defense pact in June 2006.³⁹ In March 2007 during a visit to Syria, Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad-Najjar said he would like Iran's close defense relationship with Syria to serve as a model for Iranian defense ties with other countries in the region.
- The United States has called on China to curtail its supply of unnamed military weaponry to Iran, according to congressional testimony.⁴⁰

4) Iran would put strategic emphasis on information warfare.

Hezbollah's ability to inflict “psychological defeat” on Israel in 2006 despite losing many tactical battles will encourage Iranian officials to pursue similar information operations if attacked. The Iranian government's control of media outlets will give it a big advantage in this regard.

- Iran would be quick to portray any US invasion as an attack against Islam, hoping to generate widespread condemnation of the United States throughout the Muslim world. Like Hezbollah, it would organize visits to bomb sites for journalists to give the impression of disproportionate violence against innocent civilians. Damage to historical or cultural sites would receive extra coverage.
- Iran also would replicate the fast support for reconstruction that it provided to Hezbollah after its fighting with Israel, expecting to portray itself as the force for good against evil. Bomb sites likely would portray posters similar to those in southern Lebanon which read, “Zionists Destroy, Iran Builds.”

Characteristics of Iranian Small Unit Tactics

Iran has many asymmetric options, especially in urban areas, when it comes to using small units against the United States. The variety of options and diversity of targets make it difficult to predict when, how, and where Iran will strike.

The small unit tactics below are just some of the activities Iranian military officers likely will implement. The list is focused on Iranian troops and thus does not include possible actions by Iran's proxies (Hezbollah among others), anti-US extremists, Iraqi insurgents, and Muslim terrorists, all of whom would further complicate the battlefield.

1) Exploiting soft targets. In addition to US military sites and personnel, Iran will target US diplomatic or commercial entities that appear vulnerable. In February 2007, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned that Iran would strike back “around the world” if the United States attacked.⁴¹

- General Abizaid predicted in 2006 that Iran would counter a US attack by hitting nonmilitary targets and vulnerable lines of communication.⁴² Other targets likely would include oil facilities throughout the Gulf and the assassination or kidnapping of American citizens in Iraq and elsewhere.⁴³

2) Continued use of IEDs. The successful use of IEDs in Iraq and the inability of the United States to develop effective countermeasures ensure the frequent use of that weapon in any future battle with Iran. Most notably, Iran would use IEDs liberally in Iraq, where it already has personnel in place.

- Constant adaptations of IED methods, including better concealment and detonation techniques, would complicate counter-IED efforts, especially for other countries seeking to protect US citizens.

3) Enhanced mobilization of suicide bombers. IRGC leader Safavi boasted in February 2007 that Iran has “thousands” of suicide bombers who have undergone training and stand ready to strike.⁴⁴ The exact number of Iranians willing to participate in suicide attacks is unknown. However, Iran's tradition of suicide bombings and the likely strong anti-US sentiment following an attack would ensure their deployment.

- Iran has approximately 700 small, undeclared port facilities along its Persian Gulf coast. The ports provide excellent clandestine launching points for small boats on suicide attacks in the Gulf.⁴⁵

4) Expanded use of snipers. Snipers in Iraq previously had little impact on the fighting but now represent a critical aspect of insurgent tactics. They often mix with civilians knowing that US soldiers will not return fire into a crowd.⁴⁶ They also target medics, chaplains, and radio operators to demoralize coalition troops and cutoff

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communications.⁴⁷ Iranian officials have learned from Iraqi insurgents and upgraded Iran's own sniper capabilities.

- Iran last year acquired 2,000 armor-piercing sniper rifles. "The weapons were tested ... and will now widely be given to the forces," an IRGC general told Iranian radio last year.⁴⁸

5) Tactical use of tunnels. Military planners throughout the Middle East have made extensive use of tunnels for tactical benefit. Saddam built tunnels to stave off missile attacks, and Hezbollah used tunnels to ferry weapons and soldiers in its battles against Israel.

- Iran has built tunnels to protect its nuclear sites, many of which are located in cities, and probably would use them to protect soldiers and launch surprise attacks in urban fighting.

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End Notes

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