

The military buildup continues and could produce a nuclear weapon around the turn of the century.

Iran's Regional Powerhouse

By Bill Gertz

IRAN has embarked on a major modernization and buildup of its military force, one that includes selective purchases of new advanced weapons and an ominous nuclear weapons program.

US officials contend that the Shiite Muslim regime will be in a position to construct a crude but workable nuclear device at the turn of the century. The development of a "Persian bomb" is Iran's top priority, and Tehran receives technology and aid from both Russia and China, according to Pentagon officials.

"We're talking about something the size of a boxcar," explained one Defense Department expert, "but with the Iranians, a truck or a merchant ship can be a weapon-delivery system."

In the field of conventional power, Iranian military planners are taking steps to bolster their naval forces, in particular with purchases of Chinese advanced cruise missiles. Moreover, Tehran has purchased new and upgraded surface warships, including five new "Houdong" Chinese fast-attack craft delivered in March to the port at Bandar Abbas.

The ships and cruise missiles, along with other recent deployments

of missiles on tiny islands in the Strait of Hormuz, form the outline of a developing challenge to US interests in the region.

The objective of the naval buildup, said one American military official who tracks it, is "to develop the capability to choke us off, at least temporarily, at the Strait of Hormuz, or if they can't choke us off, at least make it very difficult for us to get in." Many of the oil-producing sheikdoms in the Persian Gulf region rely on American military protection to resist Iranian pressure and influence.

Ninety percent of Japan's oil and sixty percent of Europe's oil pass through the strategic region.

High-Quality Warplanes

The Iranian Air Force is relatively small but has improved its arsenal of warplanes with Soviet-made MiG-29 "Fulcrums" and Su-24 "Fencers" as its primary combat aircraft. With a newly installed in-flight refueling capability, Iran's MiG-29s have been given greater range. The Fencers, Iran's main strike aircraft, could be used to deliver nuclear weapons if Iran ever acquires one of appropriate size and weight.

With such modern fighters as the MiG-29 (opposite), Iran is beginning to pose a new threat in the dangerous Persian Gulf region. Now outfitted with in-flight refueling capability, the MiG-29s can project Iranian power around the Gulf.



Iran also is now building its own Soviet-designed Scud B and Scud C missiles, weapons having ranges of about 300 kilometers and 500 kilometers, respectively. In addition to possessing some 200 to 300 Scuds, Iran also has expressed interest in purchasing No Dong medium-range ballistic missiles from North Korea, once the No Dong is ready for sale.

"With the Scud Bs and Cs, they can bring every capital in the [Gulf Cooperation Council] within range," one Pentagon official said. "They can bring debarkation ports within range, and, if they do not already have a chemical warhead, they will probably have one very soon."

Iran's ballistic missile manufacturing program lacks the capability to produce some parts that are essential for the total production of some types of systems. Iran hopes to eventually have complete manufacturing capabilities for its Scuds. Iran also produces short-range missiles similar to the Soviet FROG-7.

Iran's military buildup has been tempered somewhat by its economic woes, which include a US embargo, a cash shortage because of low oil prices worldwide, rapid population growth,

and an external debt estimated at \$35 billion. The latter problem has made it difficult for Tehran to gain the international credit needed to finance weapons procurement. In 1996 and 1997, Iran is expected to spend roughly \$3.4 billion on weapons.

Iran's plan for its conventional forces evidently calls for creating units that are more maneuverable and have more advanced weapons for Tehran's specific purposes—war against forward-deployed US forces, Iraq, or other Persian Gulf nations.

"I think they see their most immediate threat as a conflict with us," said the Pentagon official.

Priorities

The DoD official added, "Iran's priorities [are related to] weapons of mass destruction—their nuclear program, their chemical program, which is pretty well advanced, their biological program, and their missile program, which also is pretty well advanced."

The current military buildup began in 1989, not long after the conclusion of the 1980–88 war with Iraq. Iran, with a Gross Domestic Product of only about \$80 billion in 1990,

spent \$3.1 billion on its military that same year. The next year, the defense budget rose to \$3.8 billion.

Washington officials and non-government analysts report that Tehran has been active on the arms procurement front. During the period 1989–95, Iran acquired 184 new battle tanks, eighty infantry fighting vehicles, 106 artillery pieces, fifty-seven combat aircraft, and twelve warships. The purchases have expanded its current arsenal to about 1,200 tanks, 1,000 armored personnel carriers, 2,000 artillery pieces, 265 aircraft, and twenty-eight warships.

With a population of about 64 million, Iran maintains an armed force totaling about 513,000 active troops—including its most elite force, the 120,000-strong Revolutionary Guard Corps. Another 350,000 are reservists. Most of the Guards are ground forces.

Nuclear arms. According to Defense Department officials and specialists outside government, Iran seeks nuclear arms to become a regional power and counter the threats posed by the surrounding nuclear and nuclear-threshold states: Israel, Russia, Pakistan, and India.

"The nuclear route may be the only way for Iran to become a regional power without destroying its economy," said Michael Eisenstadt, senior fellow and specialist on the Iranian military for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "While building a bomb could cost billions, rebuilding its conventional military would cost tens of billions."

Iran's procurement activities represent clear evidence of a drive to build nuclear arms. The acquisitions include:

- Research reactors from Argentina, India, China, and Russia.
- Argentine reprocessing technology for separating plutonium from used reactor fuel.
- Nuclear powerplants from Russia and China.
- Gas centrifuge components from Switzerland, Germany, and Russia.

On at least one occasion since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Iran approached the government of a successor state (Kazakhstan) and sought—unsuccessfully—to make a direct purchase of enriched uranium suitable for bomb-making.

The nuclear program "is still in the research and development phase," a Pentagon official said, "but they have a vast acquisition network, and they are getting what they need. Expense is no object. It is a high-priority program."

Chemical and biological weapons. Iran's chemical weapons pro-

gram is believed to be the largest in the Middle East and includes the production of several types of blistering, choking, and nerve agents. Mr. Eisenstadt believes the Iranians have produced 2,000 tons of chemical agents to date and can produce several hundred tons of agent a year.

Iran produces bomb and artillery shells with chemical agents and probably has deployed missile warheads with deadly poisons.

Meanwhile, Iran's deadly biological weapons include such agents as anthrax and botulinum toxins [see "Horror Weapons," January 1996, p. 44].

"Tehran's biological warfare program provides Iran with a true mass-destruction capability for which the United States . . . currently lacks an effective counter," Mr. Eisenstadt said.

Air forces. The Iranian Air Force, with 30,000 personnel, has an aircraft inventory that includes not only Soviet-designed systems but also Chinese F-4s, F-5s, F-7s, and US-made F-14s. The US systems, though aging and difficult to repair, are still a key part of the forces.

Reports have indicated that the Iranians are negotiating to buy Su-27 Flankers from Russia. The Iranians already have twenty-five MiG-29s. They can be refueled by a fleet of KC-707 and KC-747 tankers, bought long ago by the Shah's government.

These fighters plus some twelve Su-24 Fencers provide Iran's principal air projection capabilities. The Su-24s have extended range, making them capable of reaching targets throughout the Persian Gulf region, according to the Pentagon.

Air defense. Efforts to increase Iran's air defense capability also have been stepped up. Its tradition of aircraft-to-aircraft air defense, largely the result of the US-trained air force that developed before the 1978-79 revolution, is giving way to a ground-based air defense.

The Iranians have been unable to build a nationwide, integrated air defense network. As a result, the Iranian military relies on point defense of key locations using surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries.

The Iranians have small numbers of Chinese model SA-2s and Russian SA-5 and SA-6 SAMs. Iran reportedly may purchase the highly capable SA-10 missile system that the Russians have been aggressively marketing as the S-300.

Key SAM-defended areas include Tehran and centers involved in development or production of weapons of mass destruction—nuclear research, chemical weapons production and manufacturing, and biological arms work. One key facility defended with the anti-aircraft weapons is the nuclear complex at Bashir. Air defense forces include about 18,000 military personnel.

Surface naval forces. The Iranian naval buildup has been closely watched by US Central Command, whose area of operations includes the Persian Gulf. Vice Adm. John S. Redd, commander of US Navy forces in the region, highlighted the threat posed by Iran's newly acquired Chinese C-802 sea-launched antiship cruise missiles in January.

Admiral Redd said he believes the test firing of C-802s in January showed that Iran has increased its ability to threaten shipping throughout the region. He called the C-802 a "new dimension" to the Iranian threat.

C-802s can travel up to seventy-five miles and carry a warhead weighing about 150 to 165 kilograms. The actual number of C-802s bought by the Iranians is not known.

Iran has acquired another effective antiship missile: the Ukrainian-produced "Sunburn," a hypersonic weapon.



Before the Shah's downfall, Iran's armed forces had a decidedly Western accent, as these F-14 Tomcats demonstrate. They also have British and French weapons, which are difficult to support in the face of a continuing arms embargo.

Moreover, the Admiral reported, five Chinese Houdong patrol boats were delivered to Iran in mid-March. The vessels represent a qualitative increase in Iran's naval capabilities. The Iranian Navy has "five more platforms that can be mounted with cruise missiles," he said.

"It used to be we just had to worry about landbased cruise missiles," the Admiral continued. "Now they have the potential to have [cruise missiles] throughout the Gulf, mounted on ships."

Admiral Redd said deployments of Iranian surface-to-surface missiles, like the C-802, and surface-to-air weapons have tripled since September 1994. Many are located in areas that can threaten shipping or US carrier-based aircraft.

"What we have seen over that period is a slow and steady increase in capabilities of the Iranian military, particularly in the naval and maritime capabilities," he said. The new missiles are "obviously something we pay attention to" because of the presence of US aircraft carriers in the region.

The new cruise missiles, the Admiral noted, are not the most advanced. But, he added, "a cruise missile is a cruise missile, and you've got to stop it or knock it down. We take it all seriously."

Central Command is not alarmed by the Iranian buildup. "We can handle the threat," Admiral Redd said. However, he emphasized that the US military presence in the region is aimed at keeping stability. "We're not here to threaten anybody," he noted. "We're here to ensure freedom of navigation and to make sure there's a free flow of oil . . . to ensure stability and security."

Iran's ten French Combatant II ships at one time were armed with French-made Exocets and US Harpoons, but no Harpoon firings have been detected since the 1980s. Two of the Combatant IIs, however, were modified by Chinese weapons technicians last year to fire C-802s.

Iran's ten new Houdong missile boats are equipped to fire C-802s.

Submarines. Iranian naval power was greatly expanded by deployment



Iran has upped the naval stakes considerably with the purchase of three Kilo-class submarines from Russia. Though virtually useless in the shallow waters of the Persian Gulf, they should be effective in the Gulf of Oman and elsewhere.

of two Soviet-designed *Kilo*-class diesel submarines that Tehran bought from Russia. The submarines are in operation and will be joined by another *Kilo*-class boat this year.

The *Kilos* are armed with high-technology, wake-homing torpedoes, which, according to the Pentagon, are effective against all types of ships.

Because its waters are so shallow, the Persian Gulf is a poor location for submarine operations; the US Navy, for example, would have little difficulty spotting them, tracking them, and destroying them. The *Kilos* operate mostly in the blue water of the Gulf of Oman. Currently stationed at Bandar Abbas, they eventually will be based at Chah Bahar.

"We think they'll get another *Kilo* submarine this year, and that should be the end of it for a while," a Pentagon official said. "They need to absorb that, and [*Kilos* are] very expensive."

Sea mines. From China, Iran is acquiring new underwater mines. These can be deployed from a submarine and can cause havoc in shipping lanes, whether target vessels are commercial or military. These new Chinese mines would upgrade Iran's World War II-era mines, weapons it currently manufactures.

US officers said that the Chinese advanced mines include special mines that lie on the bottom in the mud and are propelled upward after sensing a ship passing above. The mines are difficult to detect and are deadly.

Ground forces. Iranian ground-force development has been relatively modest. Still, Iran has purchased in the past several years Soviet-designed T-72 tanks outfitted with antitank guided missiles in addition to the main guns. "It's a capable system," said a Defense Department analyst.

The ground forces—divided between the elite, well-equipped Revolutionary Guard divisions and the less-capable regular divisions—are currently armed with M48s, British-built Chieftains, and other types of tanks left over from the Shah's days.

A key to future planning is developing the capability to produce T-72s indigenously, as the Iranians see self-sufficiency in weapons and parts as a key goal. T-72s will probably become standard for the ground troops.

Most of the ground troops are deployed along the Iraqi border, and Iran views Baghdad as the principal regional threat. The Iranians believe their ground forces, combined with nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, and missiles, are the primary means of carrying out another war with Iraq, or with US forces, if it should ever come to blows in the Gulf. ■

Bill Gertz covers national security affairs for the Washington Times. His most recent Air Force Magazine article, "RED HORSE of the Balkans," appeared in the April 1996 issue.