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MILITARY STANDOFF BETWEEN THE U.S. AND IRAN: THE PARTIES' MILITARY POTENTIALS AND HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIOS OF CONFLICT DEVELOPMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes the physical and geographical conditions of the Iranian theater of operations, the combat capabilities of the Iranian armed forces and Iran's military doctrine. It notes the growing combat potential of the Iranian Army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Law Enforcement Force.

The article provides an analysis of combat capabilities and the forecast of the likely scenarios of U.S. and Israeli military operations against Iran. It assesses the parties' probable losses in the military operation. It emphasizes the fact that, despite the overwhelming American military power, Iran's armed forces can repel aggression using the "hybrid war" assets and methods and an asymmetric response to the enemy. There are also shortcomings in the work of the American expert community in analyzing

and forecasting the development of the military and political situation around Iran, which can lead to grave consequences for the United States.

KEYWORDS: *Iran, military power, hybrid war, military situation, Iran-U.S. confrontation, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).*

Introduction

The Iran-U.S. confrontation, which began after the 1979 revolution in Iran and received a new impetus after the assassination of the IRGC General Qasem Soleimani, deserves close attention and a detailed assessment of the parties' military potentials.

While it is possible to assess the combat capabilities of the armed forces of the U.S. and Israel, its strategic ally in the Middle East, it poses a difficulty in the case of Iran, which is one of the most non-transparent countries in the world. It explains the limited number of systems analysis studies of the military policy and military power of Iran, which immediately become important sources of information.

This work aims to examine the combat potential of the Iranian armed forces, as well as the doctrinal views of the Iranian leadership on the use of armed forces (AF), analyze the scenarios and provide forecasts of the regional military and political situation in the deteriorating situation around the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Combat Use and Potential of Iran's Armed Forces in Countering Potential Aggression

Iran takes the statements made by U.S. political and military leaders regarding a military operation against Iran with utmost seriousness. Such an operation would aim to overthrow the country's political regime and hinder the subsequent development of nuclear and missile technologies, which, according to the West, can turn Iran into a nuclear power. In response to these threats, Iran, being under the burden of sanctions and the strong military, diplomatic and economic pressure of Western countries, is preparing its armed forces to repel aggression.

First of all, the Iranian leadership relies on the country's unique military, geographical and climate characteristics. The terrain and climatic conditions, with a humid subtropical climate on the Caspian coast, which alternates with mountains with a sharply continental climate, and vast anhydrous deserts with an arid climate, and a small number of plains with swampy areas in the southwestern regions, will adversely affect the nature of hostilities and the methods and forms utilized by the parties' armed forces.[1]

[1] See: T.A. Ganiev, S.M. Zadonsky, V.V. Karyakin, *Voennaia moshch Islamskoy Respubliki Iran: voennaia politika i vooruzhennye sily strany*, Vol. 1, Institute of Oriental Studies, Moscow, 2019, pp. 24-33.

Iran's mountain ranges go in different directions and act as natural barriers that military and transport vehicles can only pass via mountain passes. Thus, under these conditions, military operations can only be conducted within narrow sections of the front that determine the direction of the main attacks. This will lead to a discrete nature of fighting, reminiscent of a "patchwork" of alternating zones of the parties' military control, which are being supplied by air or armed convoys.

The underdeveloped communications and the absence of routes to bypass the enemy complicate the utilization of large military units and their material and technical support. Fighting can be conducted only along the lines of communication with the aim of capturing and retaining settlements, dominant heights, mountain crossings and mountain passes using a limited number of airmobile units and special operations forces. The use of heavy armored vehicles will be limited. The importance of mobile tactical groups, i.e., infantry, airborne, artillery and engineering units supported by army and tactical aircraft, acquires great importance under mountainous terrain conditions.

Heavy snowfalls in winter and stormy spring floods during snowmelt complicate military operations in the mountains. Water bodies (rivers, canals, lakes, reservoirs) will also impede any actions taken by the troops. The plains in the southern section of the western theater of war offer the most favorable warfare conditions. However, continuous flooding zones can also form here during rainy season, a factor that will have a decisive influence on the planning and course of hostilities. Troops will be unable to build traditional engineering structures in these areas due to the presence of marshland. Therefore, defenses can be engineered by building shielded resistance nodes, personnel shelters and equipment storage, creating very tall and steep anti-tank ramparts, rather than by constructing dugouts and trenches. A large number of armored excavators and special soil-transporting vehicles are required for the technical outfitting of wetland positions.

There are areas with dense gravel and pebble soils in the desert regions of the country, where personnel can move on wheeled vehicles. The complexity of desert warfare in a specific area is determined by the presence of minimum conditions for camouflage and the threat of significant damage to troops if weapons of mass destruction are used.

Water scarcity and high temperatures are the two critical factors that affect the use of troops in the desert. Specific water and temperature conditions in the desert can lead to the onset of infectious diseases and epidemics among personnel. Supplying troops with perishable products will present serious difficulties. Therefore, the command must pay close attention to creating reserves of drinking and technical water.

When planning combat operations, the absence of an extensive network of roads and railways, especially in the Western, Southern and Southeastern operational directions of the Iranian theater of war must be taken into account. The underdeveloped transport network complicates the regrouping of troops and delivery of supplies. Under these conditions, the main burden will be borne by road transport and military transport aircraft. Helicopters and pack animals have to be used for these purposes in mountainous areas.

The deployment of troops and reserves in the three above-mentioned operational directions present certain difficulties for the Iranian command. All but a few settlements in the zone of the second echelon, reserve and the rear defense zone of the Iranian troops, are small. The deployment of large military contingents there is impossible due to the limited number of suitable buildings, their unsanitary condition and exposure to enemy aircraft and artillery.

The lack of vegetation in practically all operational directions will make camouflage difficult. High temperatures, rocky and sandy soils in these areas will lead to increased amortization of the running gear of military equipment and weapons.[2]

[2] See: Ibid., pp. 34-53.

Military Doctrine Views of the Iranian Military Command on Engaging Iran's Armed Forces

Ground troops. In 2005, the IRGC leadership announced the implementation of the doctrine of the country's flexible layered defense, which was called "mosaic defense." The author of this concept was General Mohammad Jafari, head of the IRGC Center for Strategy, who was subsequently appointed commander of the IRGC.

As part of the defense program, a plan was drawn up to create a management system comprising 31 commands: one for Tehran and 30 for Iranian provinces. This plan's main objective was to improve local-level command and control and endow commanders with the ability to deter threats. This plan was based on an analysis of US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A layered defense plan allows the Iranian military command to use the strategic depth and difficult geographical conditions of the country for both the armed forces, guerillas and special forces acting against an enemy. Most Iranian settlements and main communications are located inside mountain ranges, which serve as natural barriers for enemy troops. Since during the battles the enemy's rear support lines stretch into Iran's internal regions, they will be helpless against special operations forces and previously conspired groups—"sleeping cells" of guerillas and saboteurs.[3]

Army units reinforced with armored and mechanized divisions will become the first line of defense in repelling an enemy attack.

The IRGC troops will occupy the second line of defense, covering the most important operational directions by moving in from the interior, delivering counterattacks and exhausting the enemy. Support for the Army and the IRGC will also be provided by the core of popular resistance, the bulk of which is formed by Basij and other paramilitary guerilla forces. In the event of a heightened military threat, the IRGC developed a wartime mobilization plan for the Basij, according to which Basij fighters will replenish the regular IRGC units in the event of an enemy invasion.

At the exercises, the IRGC and Basij constantly practice conducting ambushes and raids on enemy military convoys. Please note that most of the exercises are carried out in urban conditions, which suggests that Iran intends to draw the enemy into combat in urban areas, where the adversary will be deprived of mobility and direct air support.[4]

Along with the use of troops, Iran's military command pays attention to passive protection measures, i.e. increasing troops' survival rate on the battlefield, including disguises and misinformation of the enemy.

Naval operations. Recently, the country's military leadership has attached the same importance to maritime operations as to ground operations. The use of Iranian naval forces is aimed at confronting the technologically superior enemy, namely, the U.S. Navy. The foundations of this doctrine were developed during the tanker war (1984-1988), when Iran used aircraft, speed boats, sea mines and land-based cruise anti-ship missiles to attack civilian tankers carrying oil in the Persian Gulf.

After the American frigate *Samuel B. Roberts* was damaged by an Iranian mine, the U.S. Navy retaliated with Operation Praying Mantis (1988), destroying two Iranian oil platforms and sinking several Iranian surface ships, including a corvette, a patrol boat and gunboats.

Following Operation Praying Mantis, the military leadership of Iran concluded that its naval forces would not be sufficiently effective in a naval conflict with an adversary like the United States.

[3] See: Ibid., pp. 303-328.
[4] See: Ibid., pp. 434-513.

Based on the lessons learned from the tanker war, the Iranian Navy has developed an asymmetric strategy based on the prevention of direct confrontations at sea. The adopted plan provided for unexpected attacks, ambushes and raids. Instead of inflicting a decisive defeat, Iran's naval forces will attempt to damage the enemy, so that the price of victory becomes unacceptable.

Iran's naval doctrine is based on layered defense and building up firepower by combining naval, land and air weapons to crush or intimidate the enemy. The Iranians put into service a large variety of naval equipment designed to conduct asymmetric warfare in order to implement this doctrine. These weapons include naval mines, which can be secretly installed using small boats or commercial vessels; land and sea anti-ship cruise missiles; small high-speed boats that can participate in swarm operations and suicide attacks, as well as submarines produced domestically and in North Korea, used in the shallow areas of the gulf.

Hydrography is a key element in Iranian naval planning. The limited space of the gulf, which is under 100 nautical miles wide in some places, makes maneuvering difficult for large ships, such as aircraft carriers. This creates favorable conditions for the Iranian naval forces. The northern gulf coast is dotted with rocky inlets, ideal for basing and camouflaging small boats and anti-ship missiles. For this purpose, the Iranians have fortified numerous islands in the Persian Gulf, which are located on the main sea routes and are in the defense frontline.

In order to repel enemy attacks, Iran has developed a strategy that makes it difficult for enemy navies to access the Persian Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz. This strategically important stretch is 29 nautical miles wide in its narrowest part. Iranian officials claimed they could shut down the strait during the conflict, thereby halting the transportation of up to 30 percent of global oil supplies.

Use of Iranian air force and air defense equipment. The doctrine of the Air Force and Air Defense of Iran is aimed at protecting the country's airspace, repelling military aggression and striking at an advancing enemy. Land-to-air missiles and interceptor aircraft play a crucial role in solving these problems. Iranian pilots are the best in the region. They continue to use the knowledge and tactics obtained during the U.S.-Iranian military cooperation during the Shah's rule, integrating them with modern air combat methods. However, the outdated combat aircraft are not able to withstand an attack by modern enemy air forces, while the Iranian fleet of modern aircraft is still small.

The Air Force and Air Defense are separate commands within the Army. The two main problems in protecting the Iranian airspace are the outdated aircraft fleet, and geographical conditions. The size of Iran and its mountainous terrain create difficulties in forming a continuous radar field. This leads to the emphasis on protecting Tehran, nuclear infrastructure facilities and command and control posts. Tactics utilized by the air defense include on-ground camouflage and ambush for detecting enemy aircraft, avoiding its premature detection by radio-electronic means. The sustainability of air defense positions is ensured by camouflage and dispersal of forces, the use of advanced detection tools, and the establishment of fortified shelters and hidden missile positions.

Use of missile forces. The Iranian ballistic missile program began in the mid-1980s, during the Iran-Iraq war. For Tehran, Iraq's use of ballistic missiles against Iran's strategic targets highlighted the critical vulnerability of Iran's defense and had a demoralizing effect on civilians. To prevent any subsequent attacks on its facilities, Iran began developing its own ballistic missiles, starting with the initial supply of Scud missiles from Libya. By the end of the war, Iran had fired more than 100 ballistic missiles at Iraqi targets as part of the so-called "urban warfare."

Iran's missile forces are a major factor in its deterrence strategy. Iran currently has the largest stockpile of ballistic missiles in the Middle East. The IRGC, which directly controls Iran's missile forces, continues to develop, modernize, increase its range and improve the performance of its missiles, some of which are capable of reaching Israel, the Persian Gulf countries and U.S. military bases in the Middle East. However, their limited accuracy suggests that they can be effectively used

to strike at large-area targets such as cities, oil production and refining facilities, ports, desalination plants, and the accumulation of troops and warships at ports and naval bases.

Military Capabilities of Iran's Armed Forces

The leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran does not exclude the possibility of the United States and Israel launching missile and bomb strikes against their country and pays close attention to the development of a strategy for effectively countering possible aggression. The concept of asymmetric warfare and retaliation aimed at forcing the enemy to halt the armed invasion is at the core of this strategy.

An analysis of the statements made by a number of top statesmen and military leaders of the United States and Israel, who are concerned about the growing nuclear missile threat from Tehran, allows to predict the three most likely options for the United States' and Israel's actions against Iran:[5]

1. Limited air and missile strikes to disable the essential Iranian nuclear facilities. In this case, Israel can carry out a unilateral air strike. Israeli military aviation has applicable experience in the destruction of nuclear facilities in the Middle East. For instance, in 1981, the Israeli Air Force destroyed the Iraqi nuclear reactor in Osirak.

   When evaluating the effectiveness of an air strike against Iran, it is important to remember that Israel does not have cruise missiles. Thus, it will have to employ American-made fighter-bombers: F-35I Adir,[6] F-16, and F-15.

   It must be presumed that there are three possible routes for Israeli aviation if an independent air strike at Iran's nuclear facilities is launched by the Israeli command.[7]

   - The first one is from the north, through Turkish airspace along the Syrian border. The range to the targets is 1,000-1,200 km. The main obstacle is that it requires Ankara's consent, however, even with American mediation in resolving this issue, it does not seem feasible at the moment.
   - The second route is over the territory of Jordan and Iraq. The distance is short (700-800 km), but it has to be traversed secretly without notice, at a low altitude, hoping that the Israeli aircraft are not detected by these countries' air defense systems.
   - The third route is over Jordan and Saudi Arabia from the Persian Gulf. This would certainly be the worst option for the military leadership of Iran, but the main question is whether Tel Aviv will be able to reach an agreement with Riyadh. In addition, it should be noted that this route is the longest (1,300-1,500 km).

Nevertheless, in order to get approval for the flight of aircraft over Saudi Arabia or Turkey, Israel will in any case require U.S. mediation and support.

A complicating factor in the attacks on Iran is the need to refuel Israeli aircraft in the Turkish, Iraqi or Saudi Arabian airspace. If this proves impossible, it will lead to Israel being unable to participate in the operation.

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[5] See: D. Grafov, "V Tel-Avive prizyvaiut udarit po Iranu," available at [http://www.odnako.org/blogs/v-tel-avive-prizivayut-udarit-po-iranu], 16 December, 2019.

[6] In mid-2019, there were 16 F-351 planes in the Israeli Air Force. Plans are in place to form two full squadrons by 2024, 25 planes in each.

[7] See: T.A. Ganiev, S.M. Zadonsky, V.V. Karyakin, op. cit., Vol. 2, pp. 215-243.

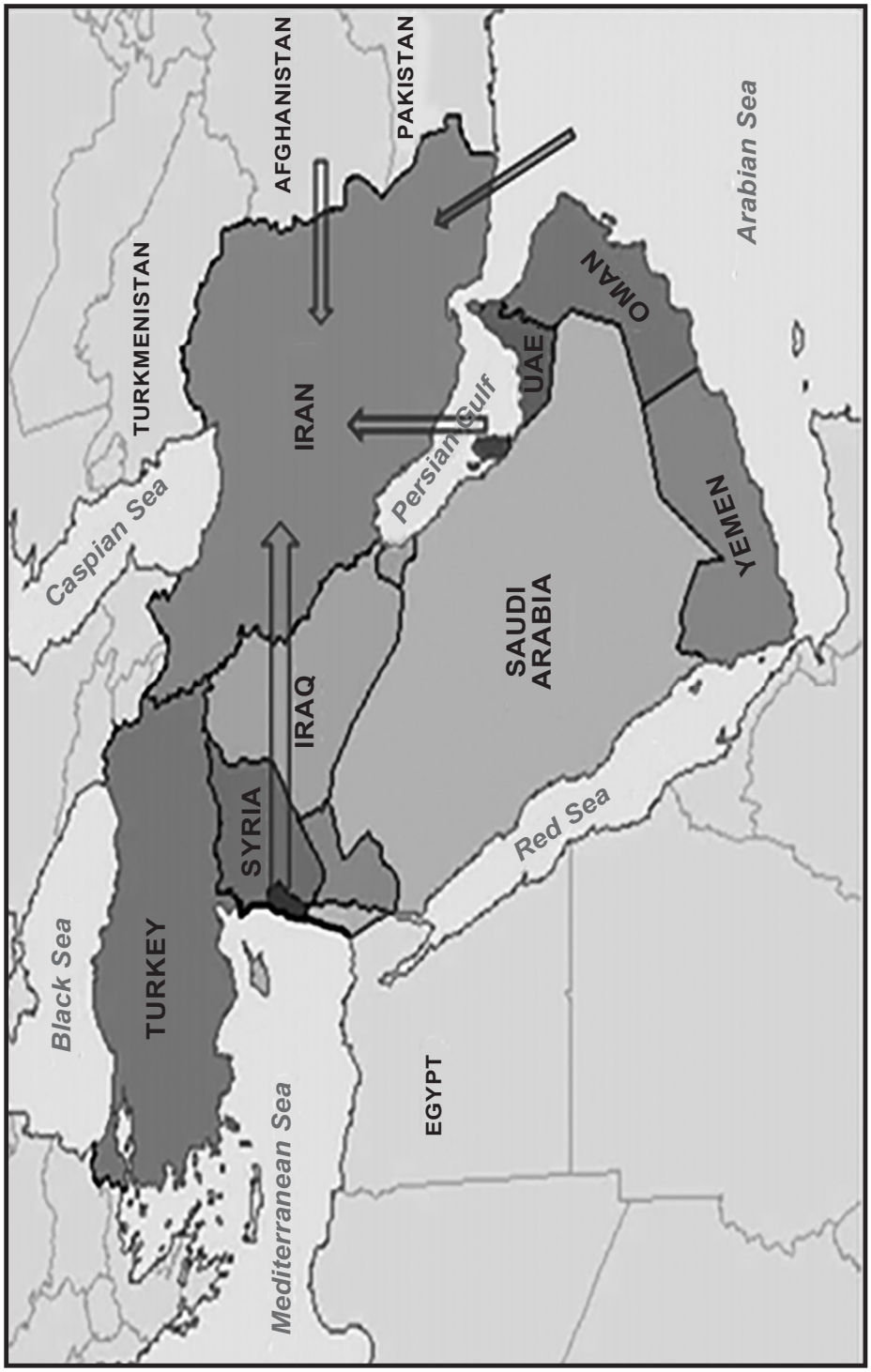
Figure 1

Iran's Nuclear Facilities

Source: IISSmaps.

Figure 2

Possible Directions of Military Strikes



There is also a fourth route over Syrian territory, but Israeli pilots must utilize their top flight and routing skills, accounting for the terrain and the fact that the airspace is controlled by the Russian S-400 and S-300 air defense systems.[8] Thus, the chance of this route being used successfully is rather low.

However, as noted by foreign sources, the Israeli Air Force is, in fact, capable of flying undetected over the Syrian and Iraqi territory.

It should be noted that the range of combat loaded Israeli aircraft F-35I equals 1,100 km, F-16—1,300-1,500 km, and F-15—1,900 km. If confrontation with Iranian fighters becomes inevitable, the Israelis may not have enough fuel for the return trip. Depending on the situation, you can land in an airfield controlled by the United States in Afghanistan, or in Azerbaijan or Georgia. If landing in another country is not possible, then assistance will be required from American tanker aircraft.

A massive attack on Iran will require about 100 fighter bombers. They will cover the Iranian air defense, ballistic missiles and nuclear infrastructure facilities.

The operation can achieve more significant targets with a joint U.S.-Israeli air strike. At the same time, the U.S. will use F-22, B-2 combat aircraft, and Tomahawk sea and air-based cruise missiles.

2. A large-scale air operation of the Israeli and U.S. Air Forces that lasts between several weeks and several months, aimed to completely destroy the nuclear complex, damage Iran's economic entities, state and military command and control posts, civil and industrial infrastructure, that is, all of the country's critical facilities.

   U.S. ground forces and special operations forces may be engaged in this operation, as they were in Syria.

3. Full-scale warfare with the use of the air force, naval and ground forces, aiming to defeat the armed forces of Iran, occupy its territory and establish a pro-American regime.

   When planning a full-scale war against Iran, the United States will need to deploy more strike aviation forces in addition to the aircraft carrier-based grouping of forces for an aerial offensive operation:

   — in Saudi Arabia and the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf—for operations in the western and southern regions of Iran;

   — in Turkey—for operations in the northern and northwestern regions of Iran (the Turkish participation factor is currently completely excluded);

   — in Pakistan and Afghanistan—for operations in the eastern and southeastern regions of Iran;

   — it is also possible to use air bases (mostly for emergency landing of combat aircraft) in Transcaucasia.[9]

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[8] In March 2018, according to a Kuwaiti publication *Al-Jarida*, two Israeli Air Force F-35 aircraft allegedly conducted an intelligence operation over Iran, undetected by Iranian and several other countries, including Russia. According to the source, the fighters flew over the Syrian and Iraqi airspace, and then crossed the Iranian border, completing reconnaissance missions in the vicinity of Bandar Abbas, Isfahan and Shiraz, flying at high altitude above nuclear facilities.

[9] A number of media outlets and expert assessments have noted that Iran can be attacked from the territory of Azerbaijan in the event of a military solution to the Iranian problem. At the same time, the United States may try to use Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani factor as the so-called new version of the Afghan "Northern Alliance," this time in northern Iran. Moreover, if major border alterations occur and new states are created in the region (Kurdistan, etc.), vast parts of Iranian Azerbaijan may be promised to Azerbaijan. However, this raises a number of questions. First of all, Iranian Azerbaijan is much larger than the Republic of Azerbaijan. Secondly, many Iranians live there alongside ethnic Azerbaijanis. Both of these factors mean that southerners will dominate in the socio-political setting in this hypothetical "United Azerbaijan." They are both socially and psychologically different from northern Azerbaijanis, which, in turn, may mean serious problems for the present-day

In all variants of the military operation cruise missile strikes will be delivered from the northern part of the Arabian Sea and the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea. Given the relatively high potential of Iran's air defense system, the air operation participants will strive to achieve their goals as quickly as possible – within one to two months, as was the case in Iraq and Yugoslavia.

The specific implementation of the military strike by the United States and its likely allies in Iran will likely consist of three stages.

- As part of the first stage, Iran's radar stations and air defense system are suppressed, and its critical facilities are put out of commission.
- During the second stage, massive air strikes are carried out against Iran's vital state, military and industrial facilities in order to reduce the country's military and economic potential and suppress the Iranians' will to resist. These include air defense facilities, airfields, naval bases, weapons depots and missile launchers.
- During the third stage, as the air defense system weakens, the emphasis will be shifted to nuclear facilities, transport infrastructure, and industrial facilities. Everything capable of counterattacking, working, supplying and transporting will be subject to massive bombing.

If the operation is successful, perhaps by the end of the second or third week of active U.S. and ally aviation strikes, the following situation will develop: the air defense and aviation of the Iranian Army and the IRGC will be suppressed or weakened to an extent that they can no longer actively counteract the U.S. plans for the second phase of the military operation.

At the same time, the air offensive operations will aim to gain complete air supremacy over Iranian territory. The total duration of hostilities can range from two to six months, depending on Iran's determination and ability to counter the aggressor, as well as the reaction of the international community, primarily China and Russia. Meanwhile, the United States and its allies will have to ensure the overwhelming superiority of its aviation group in quantity and quality over Iranian air defense and air forces. An aviation grouping with a total number of at least 2,000-2,500 aircraft, including up to 400 aircraft carrier planes and up to 500 strategic bombers, will need to be created. Besides, between 1,500 and 2,500 cruise missiles may have to be added.

This grouping's intensive military operations will require the creation of appropriate material and technical reserves. The total volume of goods that must be delivered to the region, as the experience of military operations against Iraq demonstrated, may exceed 3 million tons. The total cost of such an operation will amount to over a trillion dollars.

However, it will be impossible to completely disrupt the Iranian nuclear program by air operations alone, since its most important facilities are located in rocky sheltered areas, which none of the existing, even the most powerful, conventional ammunition can reach. The use of nuclear weapons may be required, which would be unacceptable for political reasons.

During a land operation, a puppet government will likely be created in the area under the control of American troops. Agreements will be concluded with this government on the development and export of Iranian oil, the lease of land for military bases, and the lease or annexation of islands in the Strait of Hormuz. In addition, CIA operations will be conducted according to the scheme previously used in Iraq, i.e. an attempt to outbid the enemy's high command, promising money and evacuation to Western countries.

Azerbaijan. And if Iran is not defeated, then the regional U.S. ally may face numerous problems. However, the official Baku is trying to develop an adequate policy in the complicated military and political context around Iran, so as not to find themselves in a situation with unpredictable consequences.

Figure 3

Correlation between Combat Potentials of the Armed Forces of the U.S. and Iran

In response to the high-tech U.S. warfare, the Iranian side will use an asymmetric "hybrid" strategy, combining the use of advanced military technologies, special operations forces and guerrilla warfare methods.[10]

The Iranian armed forces command is contemplating the launch of missile strikes at control centers, U.S. naval and air bases located in the Arabian Gulf states. In addition, missile strikes will be carried out against the residential areas of Tel Aviv and Haifa and vital economic infrastructure facilities in Israel and other anti-Iranian coalition countries. These include water and energy supply systems, airports and transportation hubs, the destruction of which will paralyze the life of the countries that are undertaking the aggressive actions.

IRGC Aerospace Force (AF) missile brigades have a sufficient number of missile weapons to execute this part of the retaliation. In particular, the IRGC AF has about 150 medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) for attacking Israeli territory, such as Shehab-3 and Shehab-3M, with cluster warheads, with a launch range of about 26000 km.

Strikes against U.S. bases in Qatar, Bahrain, Iraqб and Afghanistan will be carried out by short-range Shehab-1 missile complexes, with a launch range of up to 330 km, and Shehab-2 missile complexes with a launch range of up to 700 km, as well as various modifications of the Nazeat and Zelzal tactical missiles with a launch range of 80 to 300 km.

Clearly, massive strikes will be delivered simultaneously from Iran's territory and from the territories directly bordering Israel, including Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. For these purposes, there is a plan in place that entails the use of Hezbollah's Lebanese combat wing and the Palestinian Hamas, which have tactical missiles in their arsenal. At the same time, despite the current military and political situation in Syria, an attack on Israeli military facilities and state infrastructure is also expected from the Syrian side, where, according to available information, Iran is deploying Zelzal tactical missiles with a launch range of up to 300 km. It is impossible to exclude the possibility of direct strikes against Israel by the Syrian armed forces, which possesses various modifications of Scud complexes. According to the Iranians, such tactics will significantly reduce the effectiveness of Israeli air defense and missile defense.

In addition to the air strikes, the command of the Iranian Armed Forces assigns a significant role in its retaliation plans to inflicting significant damage to Israeli and American military personnel by using suicide bombers. In particular, there are three main areas for conducting such operations: Israel (by Hamas and Hezbollah), Iraq (by the Al-Mahdi army) and Afghanistan (by suicide bombers trained in Iran).

Moreover, where suicide bombers are active, in addition to the physical elimination of government officials and military personnel of the U.S. and Israeli armies, plans are also in place to abduct them and hold them hostage in order to exert psychological pressure on the leadership of these countries.

A series of large-scale terrorist attacks against embassies and other U.S. and Israeli institutions in Middle Eastern countries cannot be ruled out.

Special groups can use portable air defense missile systems to shoot down American planes flying through presumably friendly airspace, as well as during takeoff and landing. They can also use anti-ship cruise missiles, anti-ship mines and improvised explosive devices to strike against ships and vessels in the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, and the discharge ports in the Persian Gulf.

A special role in retaliating in the waters of the Persian and Oman Gulfs is assigned to units and formations of the Navy and the IRGC. At the same time, the Iranian command particularly emphasizes the use of a large number of small and high-speed missile boats, whose crews are tasked with

[10] See: V. Vasiliev, "Smozhet li Iran asimmetrichno otvetit SShA na ubiystvo Suleymani?" 4 January, 2020, available at [https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2823069.html/], 16 December, 2019.

an order to "at any cost, even if not to destroy, but to cause substantial harm" to enemy warships. So, the Navy and the IRGC currently have about 2,000 small boats and about 150 high-speed boats equipped with Kowsar-3 anti-ship missiles with a launch range of up to 25 km, and Nur with a range of up to 190 km at their disposal.

In addition, the IRGC Navy guided missile brigades (GMB), which are currently equipped with S-801 and S-802 anti-ship missiles (ASMs) (launch ranges of 45 and 120 km, respectively), as well as NU-1 and NU-2 (launch ranges 85 and 95 km, respectively), began to acquire Iran-manufactured Raad anti-ship missiles. For the first time, this weapon was demonstrated during the Payambar-e Azam-3 military exercises in 2008. The missile has a launch range of about 300 km, which allows the IRGC Navy to hit surface targets throughout the entire Persian Gulf. In order to prevent the destruction of the IRGC Navy missile units, 26th and 36th GMB units of the IRGC Navy (Bandar Abbas and Bushehr, respectively) were withdrawn from their permanent deployment points. Missile divisions, armed with self-propelled and towed anti-ship missile launchers, are constantly changing their firing positions on the coast of the Persian and Oman gulfs and in the Strait of Hormuz. Along with this, work is underway to transfer stationary anti-ship missile launchers to a mobile base.

Special operations forces of the Navy of the Armed Forces and the IRGC are supposed to be engaged in the destruction of the Persian Gulf coastal infrastructure facilities of the U.S. naval bases (there are 1,500 combat-ready groups, with 5-18 people in each).

Iran's hybrid naval strategy provides for the use of surprise attack tactics using guided missiles in the limited and crowded space of the Strait of Hormuz, and possibly in the Gulf of Oman. Iran can use such attacks in combination with the firing anti-ship cruise missiles and mass launches of unmanned aerial vehicles, which can be conducted either from the Iranian coast or from the islands at the entrance to the Persian Gulf.

In his speeches, the IRGC Commander had announced the plans to use the "Hormuz factor" if the United States or Israel attempt to carry out aggression against Iran. According to him, the Iranian Armed Forces will make every effort to disrupt navigation in the waters of the strait. At the same time, the extensive Iranian coastline along the Strait of Hormuz, the presence of dominant heights and modern weapons with a firing range greater than the width of the strait, make it possible to establish a long-term positional defense section on this site. Other methods of blocking the Strait of Hormuz include mining and disruption of the fairway by sinking large tankers there. Americans are currently reporting the continuous presence of several outdated Iranian tankers near the Larak island, south of Bandar Abbas.[11]

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz will cause a spike in oil prices. If oil supplies are cut off for even a few weeks, the global economy will begin to decline. This will be the very high price that Western countries will have to pay for aggression against Iran. This development should become a sobering factor for the American leadership.

If the situation at sea develops favorably for Iran, enemy losses in the maritime zone between 100-150 km and in the zone up to 300 km can be very significant. The failure of one aircraft carrier and several surface ships will significantly reduce the combat capabilities of the enemy fleet. However, the losses of the Iranian Navy will also be very substantial and can reach 60-70% of the initial combat strength.[12]

In developing retaliation plans, the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran proceeds from the fact that the ground operations are unlikely to be a part of the U.S.-Israeli aggression, or they will take

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[11] See: S.M. Zadonsky, "Iran gotovitsia k voyne s Izrailem i SshA," Information-News System Raketnaia Tekhnika, available at [http://rbase.new-factoria.ru/news/iran-gotovitsya-k-vojne-s-izrailem-i-ssha/], 22 December, 2019.

[12] See: K. Sivkov, "Ot udara po Iranu SShA uzhe ne opraviatsia. Za boevymi poteriami posleduiut ekonomicheskiy krizis i sotsialnyi vzryv," *Voenno-promyshlennyi kurier*, No. 22 (785), 11 June, 2019, available at [https://vpk-news.ru/articles/50767], 12 October, 2019.

place on a limited scale. Therefore, to repel the bombing attacks, special attention will be paid to the organization of air defense of nuclear facilities in Natanz, Arak, Isfahan, the nuclear plant in Bushehr and the Ford plant.

The Iranian air defense system is organized by zone/facility and includes three lines assigned, respectively, to the IRGC, the Army and the Law Enforcement Force (LEF). The engagement of LEF units in solving air defense tasks should be noted as a new trend. For these purposes, several air defense groups were formed in the LEF structure, armed with anti-aircraft artillery guns and man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS). According to the Iranians, this air defense structure will minimize damage to protected facilities under conditions of massive use of aircraft and cruise missiles by the enemy.

If air strikes by the United States and its allies at nuclear facilities, large airfields, and industrial enterprises occur, Russian Tor-M1 air defense systems can create problems for the attackers. In combination with the Russian S-300 complexes, these short-range systems make it possible to create a stable defense system that can protect both the guarded facilities and long-range missile systems. The leading role in this tandem will belong to the "long arm"—the S-300, which is capable of hitting targets at a significant distance, and the Tor complexes will destroy air targets within a distance of 12 km. This should provide reliable defense from cruise missiles and enemy aircraft for protected facilities.[13]

If these measures are taken, the total damage from Iran's air defense actions may exceed the 3% threshold for aviation losses that is acceptable for the U.S. and its allies' Air Force. This fact will disrupt the air offensive operation that involves about 300-350 aircraft and 500 cruise missiles. At the same time, the anticipated losses of the Iranian air defense system and air force will not exceed critical values, and are expected to maintain combat effectiveness, while the losses of the aggressor may reach 15% of the engaged aviation group.

A "suicide pilot" detachment was formed in the Air Force of the IRGC for the purpose of combatting enemy ships in the Persian Gulf and destroying coastal infrastructure facilities. For this purpose, the existing Iraqi aircraft that flew to Iran during the U.S. military Operation Desert Storm will be engaged. Iranian aviation industry experts repaired these planes and prepared them to resolve these tasks. All equipment was removed from them, except for what is required for piloting and navigation.

Conclusion

All in all, it should be noted that the combat and numerical strength of the Iranian armed forces, their weapons and equipment are capable of withstanding modern threats and will provide a powerful response to potential aggression using asymmetric warfare methods.

Iran's ground troops, together with the IRGC units and Law Enforcement Force, will manage to repel large-scale attacks by enemy troops in defensive operations, even if they are the troops of the leading military powers of the world, such as the U.S., Israel, Great Britain and France, operating with the support of their Arab allies. The armed forces of Iran are capable of defeating an enemy grouping of about 200,000-250,000 people and conducting long-term military operations against an enemy grouping of up to 350,000.

At the same time, it should be noted that the fixation of the American political elite on their country's global superiority and the overwhelming power of their own armed forces do not allow for

[13] See: "Rossiyskimi S-300 Iran prikroet zavody po proizvodstvu raket," *Vzgliad. Delovaia gazeta*, available at [https://vz.ru/world/2016/5/10/809779.html], 12 October, 2019.

an objective assessment of the consequences of drawing the United States into a regional conflict, based on the following factors:

1. According to available information, there is no expert U.S. assessment of the situation developing around Israel in terms of its value to Washington on the Middle Eastern chessboard. The American side should answer the question of whether Israel is a strategic ally of the United States that requires protection, or whether it is destined to play the role of a sacrificial pawn in the game of American politicians in the event of a large-scale military conflict that spins out of U.S. control in the Middle East?

2. Judging by D. Trump's statements, Iraq must pay the U.S. for the construction of military bases before they leave. Washington may need to soberly and accurately assess the situation and understand that 60 percent of the Iraqi population are Shi'ites, for whom General Soleimani became an icon of a martyr. Apparently, they do not fully understand that the United States has no prospects of remaining in Iraq, which will irrevocably become a part of Iran's zone of influence. Iran has won after the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was overthrown by U.S. forces and the field was cleared to establish Shi'ite influence in the country.[14]

3. Apparently, there is no understanding in the American expert community of the danger of Iran's blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, which will lead to a crisis in the Western economy that American shale oil will not be able to prevent, while giving Russia and China serious economic advantages.

4. If the United States and its allies decide to conduct a military operation against Iran, will they be able to realistically assess the capabilities of the air defense, anti-missile, anti-ship and anti-submarine groupings of their troops in repelling massive attacks by Iranian ballistic missiles, by numerous swarms of unmanned aerial vehicles, flocks of missile boats and small submarines operated by martyrs, as well as vigorous actions against the United States by at least a 100,000-strong group of pro-Iranian forces in the Middle East?

5. It is also surprising that the American establishment does not take seriously the growing influence of the so-called "Shi'ite triangle," which allows Tehran not only to set its own rules of the game in the regional arena, but also to become the Heartland of civilization, which may give rise to a new regional and world order.[15]

6. Nevertheless, we do not believe that the U.S.-Iranian confrontation will develop into a regional conflict or into a conflict that could be called the Third World War. An active military campaign with the use of armed forces in this theater of operations will be avoided for now. Iran adequately assesses the combat, operational, strategic and economic capabilities of its opponents, and it will not risk being drawn into a full-scale military conflict with the United States and its allies.

At the same time, a large-scale conflict is also undesirable for the current political leadership of the United States. In the presidential election year, the American leadership needs a media propaganda campaign in the wake of the upcoming re-election of Donald Trump. Therefore, the conflict is likely to develop as part of an informational and psychological operation, although incidents such as the downing of a Ukrainian Boeing near Tehran or Iran's rocket launches at U.S. bases in Iraq are not

[14] See: I. Yunusov, "Velikiy Tramp v posudnoy lavke," available at [http://actualcomment.ru/velikiy-tramp-v-posudnoy-lavke-2001081255.html?utm_source=politobzor.net], 22 January, 2019.

[15] See: V. Karyakin, "Geopolitical Regionalistics: The Greater Middle East as the 'Heartland' of the 21st-Century World-System," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 23, Issue 1, 2020.

ruled out. Everyone will wait for the outcome of the U.S. presidential election. If Trump remains in the White House for a second term, the crisis may be exacerbated again, and if Democrats come to the White House, it may be possible to reset relations and conclude agreements, including those beneficial for the U.S. However, the risks that something might go wrong remain in place.