



Iranian Military: Introduction/Historical Overview

U.S. ARMY

(U) This infographic provides an Introduction/Historical Overview of Iran. Before 1935, Persia, known as Iran, was a prominent empire in the ancient world with a military history spanning over 2,500 years. The Islamic Republic of Iran was established in 1979 following the Islamic Revolution. Iran is a theocratic republic with a supreme leader appointed for life as the head of state. This supreme leader holds the highest political, military, and religious authority under the principle of velayat-e faqih (rule of the Islamic jurist), a philosophy in Shia Islam that was reinterpreted by Iran's first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who advocated for clerical oversight of elected institutions.

1921–1979: The Shah's Army

- The modern Iranian military, known as the Artesh, has a history dating back to the 1920s.
- Reza Khan's rise to power led to modernization, including the military.
- By the mid-1970s, the military became one of the most capable in the region, but still relied on extensive U.S. training and support for its advanced equipment.
- A revolution in 1979 led to the rise to power of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, effectively ending the revolution as the Artesh declared neutrality.



Iranian Army in the 1930 or early 1940x



Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returns to Iran from exile on 1 February 1979.

1979–Present: The Guardians of the Revolution

- The Iran-Iraq War started in 1980 and lasted eight years, resulting in over 200,000 Iranian casualties.
- The war solidified support for Khomeini's regime and shaped Iran's military and security policies.
- Iran invested in asymmetric capabilities and established the IRGC Quds Force.
- It pursued ballistic missiles and a nuclear weapons program
- Iran adapted its military doctrine to counter technologically advanced Western forces.
- Iran became involved in regional conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.
- In 2015, Iran agreed to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which limited its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. However, expected economic benefits did not fully materialize.
- After the U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 and reimposed sanctions, Iran responded with maritime provocations and unconventional attacks against U.S. allies and interests.



Iran-Iraq War Montage (Image courtesy of Wikipedia)



Iranian soldiers march during a military parade in 2018. (Image courtesy of Farzad Menati*)

An Ideological Army

In establishing and equipping the defense forces of the country, it shall be taken into consideration that faith and ideology are the basis and criterion. Therefore, the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Revolutionary Guards Corps will be formed in conformity with the above objective, and will be responsible not only for protecting and safeguarding the frontiers but also for the ideological mission, that is, Jihad, for God's sake and struggle for promoting the rule of God's law in the world ("And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy).

-The Iranian Constitution, Preamble