

Constrained Shield: Iran's Artesh After the 12-Day War and Operation Epic Fury

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Key Points

- **While sometimes coordinated, Iranian military activity is not unitary.** Artesh activities generally signal territorial defense and regime resilience, while Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) activity is the more likely signal of coercion or deliberate escalation.
- **The recent wars degraded Iran's conventional shield more than its asymmetric strike capacity.** Two campaigns in thirteen months fell heavily on Artesh air defenses, warships, and airfields, leaving Iran's residual ability to impose costs concentrated in survivable, IRGC-controlled missiles, drones, and unconventional maritime forces.
- **Post-Khamenei succession dynamics reinforce IRGC influence, not Artesh autonomy.** The loss of the arbiter who balanced the system has pushed decision-making toward security-military bodies, leaving the institution the regime trusts least no better positioned despite its conventional indispensability.
- **CENTCOM can exploit the Artesh-IRGC distinction.** Understanding which institution is acting, sharpens attribution, deterrence messaging, and can provide early warning of regime stress.

Introduction

Outside analysis routinely treats Iran's regular military, the Artesh, as a secondary feature of Iranian power. The IRGC dominates attention through missiles, drones, proxy networks, and internal repression, and the shorthand is understandable. It is also misleading. Iran maintains two military institutions with distinct histories, missions, and degrees of regime trust. The Artesh is the larger establishment and remains central to defending Iranian territory, airspace, and waters, yet the regime's most politically valued and strategically consequential capabilities sit with the IRGC.

The Islamic Republic has long kept the Artesh capable enough to defend the state but constrained enough to limit its independent political weight, reflecting managed subordination rather than neglect. The events of 2025 and 2026 tested that arrangement under fire and, on balance, reinforced it. Two short, intense wars, the June 2025 conflict with Israel and the 2026 U.S.-Israeli campaign, disproportionately degraded the conventional capabilities the Artesh exists to provide, while the regime's residual leverage shifted toward dispersed, survivable, IRGC-held systems. The death of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei during the opening hours of the 2026 campaign removed the figure who had balanced the system's factions and accelerated a drift toward security-military dominance.

This paper assesses the Artesh as it now stands: its composition, its relationship to the IRGC, the regime's treatment of it, and the consequences of the recent wars for its capabilities and its place in the system. For CENTCOM, the

central point is that Iranian military power is not unitary. The Artesh is the instrument of homeland defense; the IRGC is the instrument of cost imposition and escalation. Distinguishing the two bears directly on reading Iranian behavior, calibrating deterrence, and assessing the effects of force.

Historical Context: From Revolutionary Suspicion to Managed Integration

The Artesh predates the Islamic Republic, inherited from the Shah's imperial military. After 1979, the clerical regime viewed the old officer corps with deep suspicion; revolutionary purges removed thousands of officers and degraded readiness just as Iraq invaded in 1980.¹ The war that followed forced the regime to preserve and employ the Artesh, but it also accelerated the rise of the IRGC as a parallel force loyal to the revolution rather than to the pre-revolutionary state. Iran's constitution formalized the resulting duality: Article 143 charges the Army with guarding the country's independence and territorial integrity, while Article 150 preserves the IRGC to guard the revolution and its achievements.² The distinction is foundational. Both answer ultimately to the Supreme Leader, who holds command authority over the armed forces and appoints senior commanders.³

Rather than abolish the Artesh, the regime Islamized and supervised it. An Ideological-Political Organization embeds religious education and political monitoring within units, reducing coup fears without erasing the regime's preference for the IRGC on sensitive missions.⁴ The result is the system's defining feature, and the premise on which the rest of this paper builds: the Artesh is necessary but subordinate, while the IRGC is trusted and privileged, selective trust rather than equal standing.

Composition of the Artesh

Open-source estimates commonly place the Artesh at roughly 420,000 personnel across four services: Ground Force, Navy, Air Force, and Air Defense Force.⁵ These figures are approximate but useful for scale. The Artesh exceeds the IRGC in uniformed personnel, yet it does not control Iran's most strategically relevant tools as ballistic missiles, the Quds Force, and the Basij all sit elsewhere. The graphic below summarizes the four services and their condition; the wars of 2025 and 2026, addressed in Section 6, have since altered several of these baselines materially.

Artesh Force Composition Snapshot

Iran's regular military remains the backbone of territorial defense, but its services are unevenly modernized, politically supervised, and increasingly strained after recent conflict.

Estimated Artesh Strength: ~420,000 personnel across four services



Ground Force ~350,000
(~83%)



Air Force ~37,000
(~9%)



Navy ~18,000
(~4%)



Air Defense ~15,000
(~4%)

Figures are approximate open-source estimates.

1 Ground Force — NEZAJA



Approx. Personnel: ~350,000

Primary Role:

Territorial defense; first line against invasion; support to regime resilience

Core Capabilities

- Infantry, mechanized, armored, airborne, and special operations brigades
- Most of Iran's tanks and helicopters
- Concentrated along western and eastern borders
- Mobile assault brigades and decentralized command concepts

Principal Limitation

- Large but uneven readiness
- Heavy conscript component
- Modernization remains limited

Mass and geography — but uneven readiness

2 Navy — NEDAJA / IRIN



Approx. Personnel: ~18,000

Primary Role:

Gulf of Oman, Caspian Sea, submarine force, and out-of-area conventional presence

Core Capabilities

- Larger surface combatants
- Submarine force
- Conventional maritime diplomacy
- Distant deployments outside the Persian Gulf

Principal Limitation

- Aging platforms
- Maintenance constraints
- Severe attrition during recent conflict

Conventional naval presence — but heavily attrited

3 Air Force — NHAJA



Approx. Personnel: ~37,000

Primary Role:

Limited strike, transport, air defense support, and homeland-defense missions

Core Capabilities

- Legacy U.S., Russian, Chinese, and Iraqi-origin aircraft
- Notable maintenance skill under sanctions
- Tactical aviation and transport support
- Airbase infrastructure supporting homeland defense

Principal Limitation

- Legacy fleet
- Sanctions-constrained modernization
- Unable to contest air superiority against modern adversaries
- Airbases repeatedly struck or suppressed

Maintenance skill persists — modern airpower does not

4 Air Defense Force — Khatam al-Anbiya



Approx. Personnel: ~15,000

Primary Role:

National air defense and coordination of Iran's integrated air-defense network

Core Capabilities

- Russian S-300 systems
- Indigenous Bavar-373 and Khordad-15 systems
- Chinese and domestic air-defense components
- Central to denial and survivability strategy

Principal Limitation

- Poor integration
- Weak target discrimination
- Heavy losses in recent wars
- Reconstitution may restore numbers faster than quality

Central to defense — exposed by modern air campaigns

Figure 1: Composition of Artesh Forces. Created using ChatGPT.

The Ground Force is the largest component and remains oriented toward border defense and regime survival. Since the early 2010s, Iranian leaders have sought to make it less stationary by standing up independent, mobile assault brigades capable of faster response to simultaneous internal or border crises.⁶ This does not make the Artesh an expeditionary equal of the Quds Force; it reflects a regime interest in a more usable regular army that is still kept clear of the most sensitive missions.

The two navies illustrate the division of labor. A 2007 reorganization gave the IRGC Navy lead responsibility for the Persian Gulf, while the Artesh Navy retained the Gulf of Oman and Caspian Sea, with shared concern for the Strait of Hormuz.⁷ The arrangement hands the IRGC the most politically sensitive littoral confrontation space against U.S. and Gulf forces and leaves the Artesh Navy the conventional presence, submarine, logistics, and distant-deployment roles.

The Air Force and Air Defense Force are likewise telling. The former depends on legacy airframes and cannot contest the skies against modern Western or Israeli aircraft; the latter has absorbed more investment precisely because the regime's strategy rests on homeland defense, denial, and survivability rather than air superiority.⁸

How the Artesh Differs from the IRGC

The decisive difference is mission. The Artesh is a national conventional force built for territorial defense and the defense of sovereignty. The IRGC is a political-military institution built to protect the revolution, preserve the

regime, project influence abroad, and deter adversaries through asymmetric and hybrid means. This is not merely an organizational chart; it expresses the regime's hierarchy of trust.

The IRGC controls the system's most valuable coercive instruments. Open-source assessments consistently identify the IRGC Aerospace Force as the custodian of Iran's ballistic missile force and the Quds Force as the lead for unconventional operations, proxy support, and external networks.⁹ The Basij, subordinate to the IRGC, provides mass for internal security and mobilization. The Artesh, by contrast, offers conventional mass and technical competence but far less political access and few instruments for revolutionary power projection.

The asymmetry is also economic. The IRGC enjoys privileged procurement, sanctions-resilient revenue, control of construction and infrastructure entities, and political patronage. The Artesh depends more on formal defense channels and legacy equipment. Even when Iran raises overall defense spending, the distribution of benefit remains uneven, and regime priorities favor missiles, drones, air defense, and proxy support over balanced modernization of the regular force.¹⁰

Operational culture follows. The Artesh is more conventional, professional, and state-defense oriented. The IRGC is more ideological, politically connected, risk-tolerant, and comfortable in the ambiguous space below the threshold of conventional war. That disposition suits Tehran's preferred way of fighting: deterring stronger adversaries, avoiding decisive conventional defeat, and applying pressure through missiles, drones, proxies, cyber operations, and maritime coercion.¹¹ One further distinction has grown more salient under stress, and it recurs throughout the analysis that follows. Because the Artesh draws broadly from the population and is markedly less ideological than the Guard, the regime has historically hesitated to commit it against domestic unrest, and analysts judge its conscript-based ranks more susceptible to defection in a genuine crisis of regime survival.¹²

The 12-Day War and Operation Epic Fury: Attrition and Its Consequences

Two wars in the past year reshaped the conventional force this paper describes. In June 2025, Israel opened a twelve-day air campaign, later joined by U.S. strikes, against Iran's nuclear, missile, and air-defense infrastructure. Israeli aircraft, including F-35s, operated over Iran with little effective resistance and destroyed on the order of 120 air-defense systems, roughly a third of the pre-war total, including Russian-supplied S-300s and indigenous Bavar-373 batteries. Analysts attributed the collapse less to any single platform than to a fragmented mix of Russian, Chinese, and domestic systems that were poorly integrated and weak at target discrimination.¹⁶ The campaign also killed senior commanders, most prominently IRGC chief Hossein Salami.¹⁷ Within weeks, the Artesh Air Defense Force claimed to have replaced damaged systems from pre-positioned domestic stocks; independent reporting suggested Iran was substituting indigenous batteries rather than receiving new Russian deliveries, leaving the network reconstituted in numbers but not in quality.¹⁸

The 2026 campaign was far more severe. Beginning 28 February 2026, the U.S.-led Operation Epic Fury, paired with the Israeli Operation Roaring Lion, struck Iranian leadership, nuclear sites, ballistic-missile infrastructure, integrated air defenses, naval forces, and military command and communications.¹⁹ The opening strikes killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei along with dozens of senior military and government figures.²⁰ Over the following weeks, with intermittent pauses, the campaign destroyed or disabled another large tranche of air-defense systems, and U.S. officials claimed broad air dominance early.²¹ The Artesh bore a substantial share of the conventional damage. Iran's regular navy (IRIN) lost numerous surface combatants, with frigates and corvettes of the Bayandor, Alvand, and Moudge classes among vessels struck or sunk in the opening days, within a larger combined toll across both the IRIN and the IRGC Navy.²² Coalition strikes also cratered Artesh airbases, including tactical airfields near Esfahan, to extend air dominance and suppress the air-defense network, and reportedly hit at least one Artesh ground-force division in the southwest.²³

The wars therefore degraded Iran's conventional shield disproportionately while leaving the regime with survivable, IRGC-controlled missile, drone, maritime, and proxy options. Thus leaving the capacity to impose costs concentrated

in the instruments the regime had always trusted most. For the Artesh, the implication is sobering. It emerged from the wars materially weaker in exactly its core competencies, while the institution that emerged relatively stronger and more politically ascendant is the one the regime already trusted with escalation.

Assessment and Implications for CENTCOM

The Artesh provides mass, personnel, geographic distribution, and ground formations that complicate any attempt to seize territory, and conventional legitimacy as the state's regular military, presentable at home as defending Iran rather than a faction. It provides technical sustainment, the demonstrated ability to keep aging aircraft, ships, and air-defense systems running under sanctions, a skill now in greater demand than ever. And it provides redundancy: if IRGC formations are degraded, the Artesh remains an organized institution for homeland defense. The planning consequence is that Artesh activity, air-defense alerts, naval movement, ground mobilization, generally indicates defensive effort and regime resilience rather than an intent to escalate.

The limitations, already significant before 2025, are now starker, and they point the other way. The Artesh lacks modern combined-arms depth, modern tactical airpower, and meaningful power-projection capacity, and it operates without the political access the IRGC enjoys. The recent wars exposed its air-defense network as fragile against a capable adversary and showed that its surface fleet can be neutralized quickly. Reconstitution will be slow, will depend heavily on domestic production and any assistance from Russia or China. The regime will also likely prioritize air defense over the fleet or the legacy air force.¹⁶ Iran's conventional weakness does not, however, render it harmless. CENTCOM should read the Artesh as Iran's defensive backbone and the IRGC as the more probable instrument of coercive escalation.

Parallel structures generate ambiguity: an IRGC maritime provocation, proxy attack, or missile launch may register externally as generic "Iranian military action," but the responsible actor and command channel matter for calibrating a response. Deliberate attribution, public and private, can isolate the regime's escalation managers without treating every Iranian uniformed actor as identical. The distinction also refines the assessment of effects: degrading an Artesh air-defense node, naval facility, or logistics hub touches homeland defense and regime resilience, while degrading an IRGC missile, drone, or Quds Force capability touches coercive reach and escalation control, a difference that bears on deterrence, proportionality, and post-strike signaling.

The seam between the forces itself is a potential source of friction. Overlapping missions and parallel chains of command can produce competition for resources and prestige, slower decisions, and inconsistent messaging in high-tempo operations, pressures that may push Tehran toward preplanned, IRGC-trusted escalation options that are faster to execute.⁷ The Artesh's deepening but reluctant involvement in internal security widens that seam, and its conspicuous loyalty statements during the recent unrest are as much an indicator of regime anxiety as of Artesh enthusiasm. The force thus doubles as a barometer of regime stress: unusual internal-security deployments, demonstrative loyalty messaging, or shifts in senior command can signal concern about internal stability, external attack, or trust within the security apparatus.

The distinction is especially consequential for CENTCOM's partner-facing mission, because the command operates through regional access, basing, maritime security, and partner air and missile defense. Iran's response to Operation Epic Fury concentrated not on symmetrical military exchanges but on IRGC-controlled asymmetric and indirect attacks against economic targets, Gulf shipping, Strait of Hormuz traffic, and energy infrastructure, with all six Gulf Cooperation Council states struck and, by several accounts, more casualties inflicted in the Gulf than in Israel.²⁴ That pattern is the maritime and partner-defense expression of this paper's thesis: the threat to Gulf states, U.S. bases, and Hormuz traffic now comes predominantly from the surviving IRGC asymmetric toolkit rather than from the degraded conventional Artesh. It also imposes a cost-exchange problem, low-cost Iranian drones against high-cost interceptors, that bears directly on partner air-defense sustainability and magazine depth.²⁵

Conclusion

The Artesh remains indispensable to Iran's defense, but it is not the regime's instrument of strategic initiative. It is the conventional shield, large, nationally rooted, and necessary for territorial defense, now visibly battered after two wars that stripped away much of its air defense, sank a significant portion of its fleet, and suppressed its airfields. The IRGC holds what survived comparatively better: the missiles, drones, asymmetric naval forces, proxies, and internal-security networks that remain the regime's usable instruments. The Islamic Republic has not abandoned the Artesh; it has contained it within a supervised, defensive, and politically subordinate role, and the recent wars and the death of Khamenei have deepened rather than disturbed that arrangement.^{26, 27}

For CENTCOM, **the takeaway is that Iranian military power is not unitary, and it is now more lopsided than before.** The command should treat the distinction as an operating practice, not merely an observation: separate Artesh and IRGC indicators in intelligence assessment and warning; tailor attribution so responses target the regime's escalation managers rather than the conventional force; weigh the effects of striking conventional versus asymmetric targets; and watch the regime's treatment of a weakened Artesh, its reconstitution priorities, internal-security taskings, and command reshuffles, as a barometer of stress and intent. Read this way, the Artesh is not a secondary order-of-battle force but a key to distinguishing Iranian defensive behavior from Iranian escalation, and to anticipating how the Islamic Republic now balances conventional vulnerability, regime survival, and regional coercion.

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