

Iran's Mosaic Defence and Its Implications for Future Warfare: A Secondary Qualitative Study

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Abstract

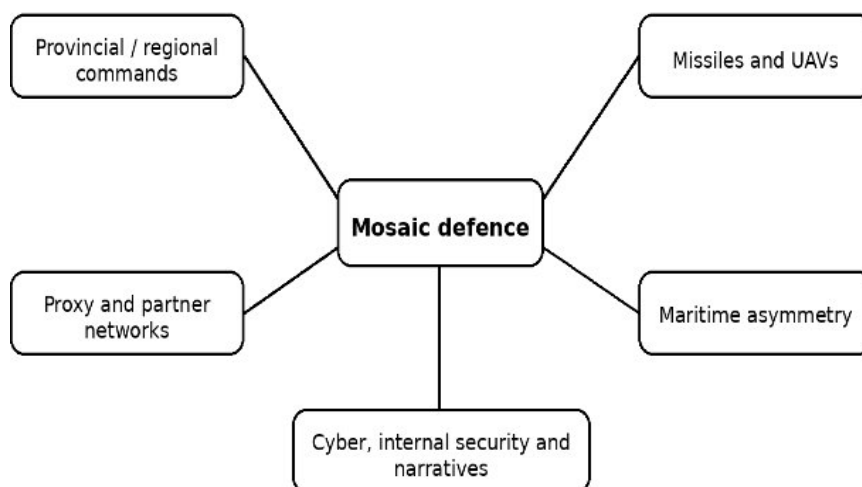
This article discusses the Iranian mosaic defence as a survival doctrine, a deterrence doctrine, and an operational continuity doctrine. It claims that mosaic defence is not a single weapons programme but a distributed security architecture that integrates provincial command, missile and drone capabilities, proxy partnerships, maritime disruption and political resilience. The article uses a secondary qualitative model and analyses academic sources, defence reports and assessments, policy reports and open-source security studies. Initially, the article provides a review of prior literature on Iranian strategic culture, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, asymmetric deterrence and the memory of the Iran-Iraq War. Then this article presents findings from another source corpus, so that the evidence used in the thematic analysis is not the same as that used in the literature review. The findings show that mosaic defence makes it challenging to establish conventional military superiority by depreciating the strategic worth of decapitating leadership, raising the cost-quality ratio of air and missile defence, expanding the conflict because of friend networks, and making maritime chokepoints politically influential. A compare-and-contrast debate illustrates that previous scholarly work is right in its explanation of Iran's insecurity and institutional behaviour, but that more recent evidence requires a more networked, multi-domain view. The paper concludes that more and more future wars will reward those actors who disperse, delegate, accept punishment, live with ambiguity and impose costs without necessarily having to win decisive battles.

Keywords: Iran; mosaic defence; asymmetric deterrence; distributed warfare; proxy warfare; drones; missiles; future warfare

Introduction

The mosaic defence practiced by Iran is best described as a decentralised doctrine in response to strategic paralysis in the event of an invasion, the decapitation of leadership, cyber disruption or internal destabilisation. The doctrine spreads power, capability and the mobilisation of politics across territorial commands and tiers of security institutions rather than to central headquarters and large conventional platforms. In this article, 'mosaic' refers to a security architecture composed of many dispersed command, strike, partner, and political nodes that can be recombined to create resilience and impose multiple dilemmas for an adversary (Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency, 2017; Clark et al., 2020). It is representative of an overall trend in Iranian policy: the state attempts to render coercion both expensive, slow, and politically uncertain, rather than striving to counteract more technologically advanced opponents, system-to-system (Eisenstadt, 2011; McInnis, 2017; Tabatabai, 2020). The doctrine is also cultivated from a particular regional memory. The swift failure of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003 had shown the vulnerability of the centralised system of command to U.S. airpower, surveillance and special operations. For Iran, it was not merely that the conventional power held by Americans was greater, but that it understood that a weak state should refuse an aggressor a single decisive target. Mosaic defence thus transforms weakness into a technique: the admission of Iranian weaknesses in airpower, tones and modern naval armour is compensated by redundancy, the mobilisation of its ideology, missiles, drones, proxies and small-unit persistence (Ward, 2009; Wehrey et al., 2009; McInnis, 2017).

Mosaic defence as a distributed security architecture



Distributed capability, redundancy and political endurance

Figure 1. Mosaic defence as a distributed security architecture (author-created secondary synthesis based on Eisenstadt, 2011; McInnis, 2017; Tabatabai, 2020)

The overarching theme of the article is that mosaic defence is a transition from platform-based warfare toward network-based survival warfare. It is not merely a self-defence slogan. It is a model in which political institutions, military organisations and partner forces are designed to continue imposing costs even when they are seriously damaged operationally. This causes the doctrine to also apply outside of Iran, as warfare at the time of writing is becoming more about decentralized leadership, throwaway infrastructure, grey-zone compulsions, proxy relationships and the need to maintain political intent amid attrition (Alfoneh, 2013; Ostovar, 2016; Tabatabai, 2020). This study relies on a secondary qualitative design, detailed in the Methodology section below.

Research Problem

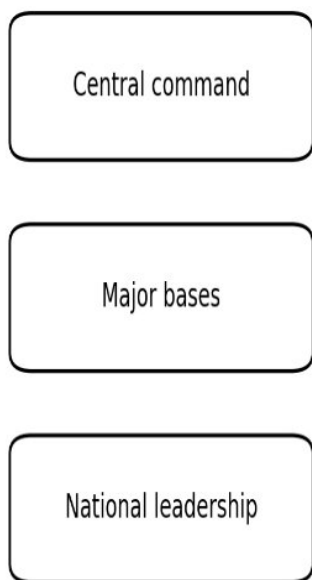
The research problem concerns the evolving nature of military superiority. One of the assumptions of classical coercive planning is that the destruction of command centres, strategic infrastructure, air bases, naval platforms and national leadership will soften an adversary. The mosaic defence by Iran disputes that notion by decentralising the locus of opposition through geographic, institutional, arsenical and relational dispersion. It is not just about how to wreak havoc or how to strike down a system whose power lies in fragmentation, redundancy and endurance; that is the problem for future planners (Eisenstadt, 2011; Ward, 2009; Wehrey et al., 2009). This issue is operational and political in nature. Operationally, a dispersed network is more difficult to map and kill than a centralised hierarchy. Politically, a survival-based doctrine might be able to assert success, even though it will take a beating, so long as it still retaliates or disrupts.

Past research on Iranian strategy also repeatedly indicates that Tehran's insecurity, its revolutionary legitimacy, the instillation of fear of regime changes and punishment through increased costs on its enemies, and its security behaviours are shaped (Alfoneh, 2013; Ostovar, 2016; Tabatabai, 2020).

The study has four objectives. First, it examines the historical and strategic foundations of Iran's mosaic defence. Second, it analyses the relationship between mosaic defence, asymmetric warfare, missile and drone forces, partner networks and internal security. Third, it assesses how the doctrine complicates conventional superiority. Fourth, it evaluates implications for future warfare, particularly distributed command, hybrid conflict, deterrence, escalation control and cost-exchange competition (McInnis, 2017; Tabatabai, 2020; Wehrey et al., 2009).

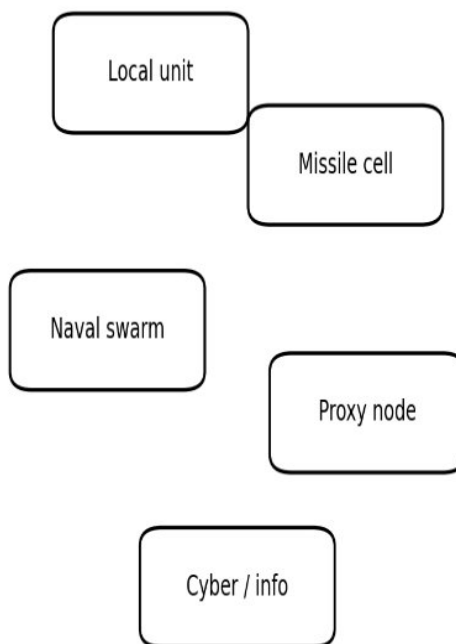
The guiding research question is: How does Iran's mosaic defence doctrine influence the future character of warfare? The question is framed comparatively because the article does not treat Iranian doctrine as an isolated national case. Instead, it uses Iran to examine a broader pattern in which weaker actors use dispersion, delegation, low-cost precision systems and political ambiguity to offset stronger adversaries (Eisenstadt, 2011; Ward, 2009).

Centralised decapitation logic



Strike the centre -> expect paralysis

Distributed mosaic logic



Damage one node -> network keeps imposing costs

Figure 2. Centralised decapitation logic contrasted with distributed mosaic resilience (author-created secondary synthesis based on Ward, 2009; Wehrey et al., 2009; Tabatabai, 2020).

Methodology

The research design is a secondary qualitative design since the object of analysis is doctrinal and interpretive. Secondary qualitative research presupposes that existing texts, reports, and studies can be considered evidence when it is impossible or unsuitable to contact the field. The sources of interest in this scenario are academic books, scholarly articles, official defence evaluations, think-tank reports, open-source information, and United Nations reports (Bowen, 2009; Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003).

The analytical process consisted of three steps. To begin with, an existing corpus of debate literature was employed to develop an earlier discussion of Iranian strategic culture, the IRGC, asymmetric deterrence, and war memory. Second, a different corpus of findings was coded thematically to reveal modern trends in command, missiles, drones, proxies, and maritime pressure and escalation. Third, both corpora were compared and contrasted to reveal the points at which the new evidence confirms, develops or contradicts the former studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; Snyder, 2019).

The source-separation rule is the focus of the article's internal validity. In the thematic findings section, there are no citations to the studies mentioned in the literature review. This will avoid repeating prior academic research and ensure that the comparison and contrast discussion is meaningful. The rule further enhances transparency, as it provides the reader with an indication of when the article is revising existing knowledge, when it is offering a new secondary synthesis, and when both stages occur simultaneously (Tranfield et al., 2003; Nowell et al., 2017).

The reason thematic coding was applied is that it can be used to identify common patterns in diverse qualitative data. The research question was used deductively to generate codes, and the inductive method involved repeated examination of the documents. Lastly, the themes were decentralised command, missile-drone saturation, proxy and partner warfare, maritime asymmetry, ambiguity on escalation, and vulnerability to doctrine. It also used methodological critique due to the various limitations associated with different types of sources: official reports can be biased toward state threat framing, think-tank reports can be policy-oriented, and open-source technical

studies can be biased toward observable hardware and underrepresent political decision-making (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bowen, 2009; Nowell et al., 2017).

Table 1. Research design and safeguards for article quality (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Snyder, 2019)

Design element	Application in this article	Quality safeguard
Secondary qualitative design	Uses published academic, policy, defence and open-source materials.	Appropriate where direct access to classified or sensitive doctrine is unavailable (Bowen, 2009; Snyder, 2019).
Thematic analysis	Code evidence into command, missile-drone, proxy, maritime and escalation themes.	Themes are reported with source-type limitations rather than as unqualified facts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).
Corpus separation	Literature review studies are excluded from the findings section.	Prevents circular argument and allows a stronger compare-and-contrast discussion (Tranfield et al., 2003).
Critical synthesis	Findings are compared with previous research after the thematic stage.	Distinguishes confirmation, extension and contradiction rather than simply agreeing with the literature (Snyder, 2019).

Literature Review

Insecurity and historical memory usually take precedence over the literature on Iranian strategy. Eisenstadt claims that Iran has a strategic culture of being cautious, opportunistic, ambiguous and imposing costs, since the Islamic Republic perceives itself as being in the midst of antagonistic powers. The same applies to Tabatabai, who claims that Iranian national security is a struggle not for conquest or defeat, but for perseverance in the face of pressure. Such sources are useful because they clarify why Iran may find it more comfortable pursuing a deterrence-by-punishment and stratagem-ambiguity strategy rather than standard parity (Eisenstadt, 2011; Tabatabai, 2020).

A second strand concerns the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Ostovar demonstrates that the IRGC is not merely a military institution; it is a revolutionary institution with ideological, political, security, and economic power as well. Alfoneh also highlights how the Guard was expanding its institutions and its impact on the balance between the normal military and the revolutionary security organizations. Such literature is paramount to comprehending mosaic defence, since a far-flung doctrine demands commanding generality across localities and security networks embedded in policy (Alfoneh, 2013; Ostovar, 2016).

A third strand explains why the Iranian military changed due to the war with Iraq and the subsequent regional order. The history of the armed forces in Iran, as presented in Ward's military history, reveals that they were molded by invasion, attrition, and the struggle to rebuild following the disruption of the revolution. The point made by Wehrey and colleagues is that Iran's power is threatening but not absolute, and that Tehran can disrupt and prevent, yet still faces severe restrictions. A combination of these studies warns against both overestimating and underestimating Iran's military strength (Ward, 2009; Wehrey et al., 2009). The fourth strand is more concerned with doctrine. According to McInnis, Iran's military posture is based on deterrence, strategic depth, asymmetric operations, and the application of the IRGC to address conventional deficiencies.

This body of literature can be used to link past insecurity to the current force design. It recommends that mosaic defence be decoded not as an act of guerrilla thought but as an institutionalised bid to achieve an outcome that renders military pressure politically and operationally inconclusive (McInnis, 2017). The literature thus offers a logical base: the doctrine of Iran is influenced by insecurity, revolutionary institutions, war memory and asymmetric adjustment. However, it has its gaps as well. A good part of the existing older literature was authored before the full operational importance of drones and missiles was recognized, before learning from partner forces became a reality, and before the recent upsurge in the region became a reality. The findings section resolves this gap by relying on a different set of contemporary reports and open-source research to determine whether mosaic defence is more networked, technical and multi-domain than suggested by previous research (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003). The wider asymmetric-conflict literature also warns that weaker actors may convert asymmetry into political endurance rather than battlefield superiority (Mack, 1975; Arreguin-Toft, 2001).

Table 2. Literature review corpus and contribution to the article (Alfoneh, 2013; Eisenstadt, 2011; McInnis, 2017; Ostovar, 2016)

Literature cluster	Key studies	Contribution and Limitation
Strategic culture and insecurity	Eisenstadt (2011); Tabatabai (2020)	Explains caution, ambiguity and endurance, but may understate recent technology-driven operational change.
IRGC institutional power	Alfoneh (2013); Ostovar (2016)	Shows why decentralised defence is politically embedded, but focuses less on technical cost-exchange dynamics.
War memory and asymmetric adaptation	Ward (2009); Wehrey et al. (2009)	Provides historical grounding, but some evidence predates the current proliferation of drones and missiles.
Military doctrine	McInnis (2017)	Connects deterrence, strategic depth and asymmetry, but requires updating through newer findings.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework employs three related terms: asymmetric deterrence, distributed warfare and hybrid warfare. Asymmetric deterrence is demonstrated by the attempt of a weaker party to deter a stronger party by threatening it with unacceptable costs as opposed to matching capabilities. Such an idea applies to Iran, since the literature indicates that Tehran seeks to render the attack risky and politically costly and does not pursue conventional symmetry (Eisenstadt, 2011; McInnis, 2017; Tabatabai, 2020).

Distributed warfare is characterised by the decentralization of military power and capabilities across numerous units, spaces and actors. In a centralised system, the destruction of headquarters can bring about paralysis. In a distributed system, the failure of one node does not always bring down the others. Mosaic defence is resilience, thus making distribution a resilience mechanism. It makes sense in light of earlier narratives of Iranian retaliation, but it requires that newer technical and organisational facts be taken into consideration (Ward, 2009; Wehrey et al., 2009).

Hybrid warfare is the use of conventional forces combined with unconventional forces, possessing missiles, drones, cyber activity, information narratives and partner organisations. It is a word subject to abuse, though it can be very helpful when used with caution against Iran since the Islamic Republic does not distinguish between military pressure, political influence and ideological legitimacy. The institutional nature of the IRGC renders this amalgamation particularly relevant: it connects the defence of the territory, the security of the regime, and the impact on the external environment in such a manner that the boundaries between war and competition supported by coercion are difficult to discern (Alfoneh, 2013; Ostovar, 2016; McInnis, 2017).

Thematic Analysis and Findings

This section reports the results of a separate contemporary secondary corpus. It deliberately avoids repeating the studies used in the literature review. The corpus consists of official evaluations, congressional reports, United Nations content, think-tank research, open-source analysis of affairs, and policy trackers. The sources were coded into five themes, including, but not limited to,

decentralised continuity, missile-drone cost-imposition, proxy and partner reach, maritime chokepoint pressure, and limits of the doctrine (Defence Intelligence Agency, 2019; International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2021; Congressional Research Service, 2024; United Nations Security Council, 2024).

Table 3. Findings corpus: 22 secondary studies/reports and critique of their methods (Defence Intelligence Agency, 2019; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021; United Nations Security Council, 2024)

Study/report	Finding used in thematic analysis	Methodological critique
DIA (2019)	Identifies missiles, naval forces, partners and internal security as pillars of Iranian deterrence.	Official intelligence synthesis; strong on structure and doctrine, but shaped by U.S. threat assessment priorities.
IISS (2021)	Explains missiles and UAVs as compensatory tools for Iran because of its weak modern airpower.	Open-source technical analysis, detailed on hardware, is less able to confirm political command autonomy.
CSIS Missile Defence Project (2024)	Maps Iranian missile families and regional reach relevant to saturation and deterrence.	Technical database: useful for capability comparison, but not a direct measure of wartime effectiveness.
CRS (2024)	Links Iranian security behaviour to regional policy, sanctions pressure and U.S. strategic concerns.	Policy briefing; balanced but designed for legislative users rather than theory building.
CRS (2025)	Summarises missile and drone programmes and their implications for regional security.	Current policy synthesis: concise, but dependent on

		publicly available official information.
ODNI (2024)	Frames Iran's support for armed partners as part of regional threat activity.	Government assessment: strong on threat framing, but limited methodological transparency.
UNSC (2024)	Documents weapons flows and Houthi-related material evidence.	Evidence-based monitoring; strong on inspected material, but geographically focused on Yemen.
Haghshenass (2008)	Analyses small boats, mines and anti-ship tactics in Iranian naval asymmetry.	Older but specialised; requires updating in light of developments in drones and missiles.
Nadimi (2020)	Shows the continuing relevance of the IRGC Navy and asymmetric maritime posture.	Expert policy analysis; strong regional knowledge, but not a systematic dataset.
Ben Taleblu (2023)	Assesses ballistic missile development as a strategic deterrent and coercive tool.	Advocacy-adjacent policy research; technically rich but may emphasise threat severity.
Mouton (2024)	Highlights the proliferation and battlefield relevance of Iranian drones.	Policy article; useful for trend identification, but less detailed on internal Iranian doctrine.
United Against Nuclear Iran (2023).	Compiles examples of Iranian drone development and transfers.	Advocacy organisation dataset; broad coverage,

		but source selection needs caution.
Foundation for Strategic Research (2024)	Examines the IRGC's naval strategy as long-term asymmetric pressure.	Strategic analysis: strong on maritime context, but limited by open-source access.
Iran Watch (2024)	Describes Iran's use of conventional capabilities to level the field asymmetrically.	Monitoring source; helpful for cross-checking, but not peer-reviewed scholarship.
Chatham House (2025).	Analyses adaptation and strain within the axis of resistance.	Policy analysis; nuanced on politics, but regionally broad rather than Iran-only.
The Century Foundation (2025)	Argues that partner networks remain weakened but not eliminated.	Interpretive policy essay; useful for contrast, but dependent on current-event judgment.
Washington Institute (2024).	Maps Iranian external operations and partner-linked coercion.	Open-source mapping is useful for patterns, but attribution can be uncertain.
JINSA (2024)	Tracks Iranian projectiles and regional attacks over time.	The tracker method provides visibility into events, but incident coding may omit hidden or failed activity.
Conflict Armament Research (2024)	Uses material tracing to link weapon components and transfers.	Strong forensic method; limited to recovered items and accessible theatres.

International Crisis Group (2024)	Assesses escalation risks after regional war shocks.	Conflict analysis; strong political context, but less technical on force design.
Institute for the Study of War (2024)	Provides frequent updates on Iranian-linked regional operations.	Timely open-source reporting; valuable for chronology, but rapid updates require later verification.
U.S. Treasury (2024).	Identifies procurement and finance networks supporting missiles and UAVs.	Sanctions evidence; strong on networks named by the government, but not a full academic sample.

Theme 1: Decentralised command and operational continuity

The data reveal that Iranian defence planning is structured and organised around survivability rather than conventional symmetry. Official and policy evaluations indicate that missiles, naval forces, partners, and internal security are alternative tools to maintaining deterrence in the face of a threat to central assets. The methodological warning is that authorities may conveniently present Iran as more unified than it actually is. Still, the overlap of the judgment about resilience, as it is used by the defence and is assessed by both Congress and the open-source, provides sufficient evidence to argue that resilience is not a slogan but a design principle (Defence Intelligence Agency, 2019; Congressional Research Service, 2024; International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2021).

Theme 2: Missile and drone saturation as cost-imposition

The analysis reveals that Iran manipulates the economics of defence using missiles and UAVs. The availability of low-cost systems may drive opponents to use expensive interceptors to secure two or more locations and maintain constant vigilance. Technical research attests to widely developed missiles and UAVs, whereas policy research indicates that drones and missiles have been a core

constituent in Iranian and partner force pressure. The significant point is that these sources can gauge ranges, families and incidents more easily than accuracy, dependability or command discipline; therefore, the finding should be interpreted as evidence of coercive potential, rather than a certain victory in the battlefield (International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2021; Centre for Strategic and International Studies Missile Defence Project, 2024; Ben Taleblu, 2023; Mouton, 2024; United Against Nuclear Iran, 2023).

Theme 3: Proxy and partner networks as delegated deterrence

This supports the belief that Iran can act internationally through armed allies, but it also demonstrates the dangers of treating partners as mere tools. Government reports, sanctions documents, United Nations reports and policy studies all suggest that Iran supports armed forces in the region. However, there are also the incentives of partner groups, the local legitimacy issue and the calculation of escalation. This implies that mosaic defence is not a controlled machine but a negotiated network where Tehran has the advantage of reach but pays agency costs and faces ambiguity of attribution (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2024; United Nations Security Council, 2024; Chatham House, 2025; The Century Foundation, 2025; Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2024).

Theme 4: Maritime asymmetry and chokepoint pressure

The findings indicate that the maritime dimension plays a critical role, as Iran does not need to achieve strategic impact by defeating a superior navy. Small vessels, mines, anti-ship missiles, drones and harassment devices can increase insurance premiums, disrupt the psychology of shipping and compel rivals to break the naval protection spread. The evidence, however, also indicates a methodological issue: maritime capability is simpler to describe than to evaluate during wartime, since most of it is still exercise- or crisis-based. There is greater pressure and uncertainty as a result of maritime asymmetry, rather than assurance of control over the Strait of Hormuz (Haghshenass, 2008; Nadimi, 2020; Foundation for Strategic Research, 2024; Iran Watch, 2024).

Theme 5: Vulnerabilities and limits

The air forces of missiles and drones are vulnerable to damage; politics hinder partnership networks; pressure on the sea may provoke retaliation; and the decentralisation of command poses a threat of escalation. Forensic weapons reports and conflict analysis performed by event trackers indicate that the Iranian model can cause disruption but fails to ensure strategic success. The doctrine itself is thus a weakness as well: fragmentation enhances the ability to survive, but also the ability to control, making it hard to signal but also to end war (International Crisis Group, 2024; Institute for the Study of War, 2024a; U.S. Treasury, 2024).

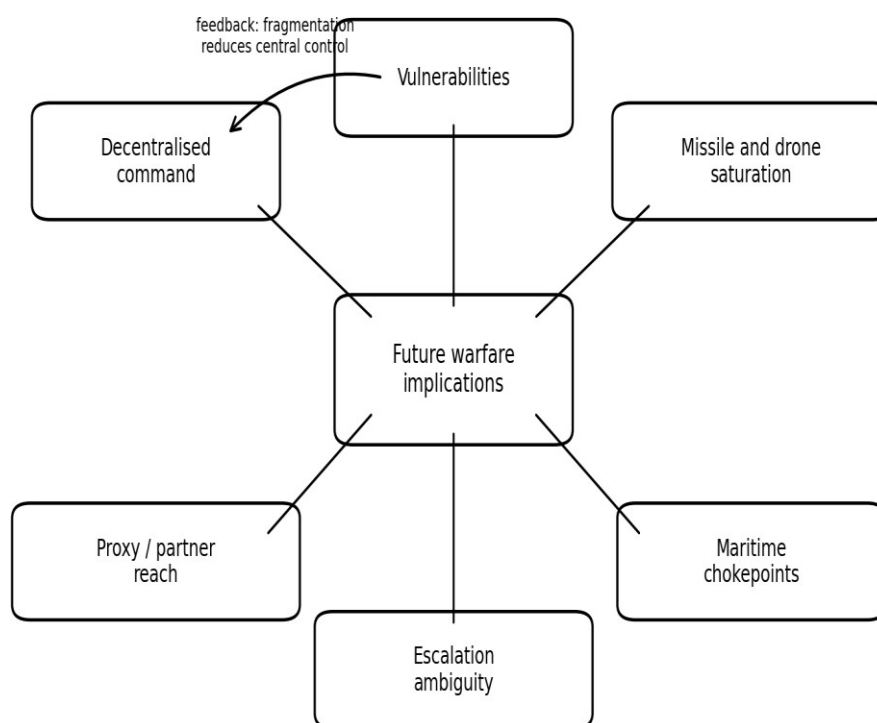


Figure 3. Thematic map of mosaic defence and future warfare implications, including the vulnerability feedback loop (author-created synthesis from the findings corpus: Defence Intelligence Agency, 2019; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021)

Discussion

The results generally concur with earlier investigations that contextualize Iranian strategy as one of survival, insecurity, and deterrence through cost imposition. The findings corpus confirms Eisenstadt's description of ambiguity and endurance, since official and technical reports reveal a force posture necessary to keep the pressure alive, at least when Iran is not able to control escalation through conventional means. However, the results have a continuation of the argument by Eisenstadt: the aspect of ambiguity now plays its role not just using political signaling but also using missiles, drones, network of partners and maritime pressure that complicate attribution and response (Eisenstadt, 2011; Defence Intelligence Agency, 2019; International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2021; Centre for Strategic and International Studies Missile Defence Project, 2024).

The idea of Iranian security as endurance rather than conquest, as put forth by Tabatabai, is also well justified. The results indicate that missile-drone saturation, partner networks, and disruption at sea are not, in the first place, aimed at conquering territory. These are constructed in a manner that cracks down on enemies through clean, coercive successes. The difference is that, as a strategic-historical perspective, Tabatabai should be complemented with the more focused description of low-cost warfare, since recent data indicate that low-cost structures and expendable platforms have taken centre stage in the production of endurance (Tabatabai, 2020; Ben Taleblu, 2023; Mouton, 2024; United Against Nuclear Iran, 2023).

This is verified but also made more complex in the literature on the IRGC by Ostovar and Alfoneh. The results affirm their argument that the Guard plays the core role in Iranian security power, particularly since the missiles, drones, partner relations, and maritime units are associated with the revolutionary security institutions. However, the results make it rather hard to read the IRGC's power as purely hierarchical. The partner-network evidence proposes the model of a powerful yet uncontrollable structure. Partners provide Iran with access, though it shares the risk that other regional actors may get out of hand, divide or pursue personal political interests (Alfoneh, 2013; Ostovar, 2016; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2024; United Nations Security

Council, 2024; Chatham House, 2025). Ward and Wehrey et al. (2009) describe military development in Iran as a result of weakness and threat. The results are consistent, yet they suggest that weakness has accelerated adoption of asymmetric technologies rather than merely acting as an inhibitor. Scarcity of modern airpower in Iran has promoted missiles and drones; lack of naval symmetry has encouraged swarming and chokepoint pressure; and lack of conventional range has strengthened partner-network reliance. It is significant that the doctrine of Iran not only fails to cancel out weakness but also restructures it into a network of distributed pressure (Ward, 2009; Wehrey et al., 2009; McInnis, 2017; Haghshenass, 2008; Foundation for Strategic Research, 2024; Iran Watch, 2024).

When Mosaic Defence Collapses: Evidence from Recent Conflicts

Mosaic defence should therefore be treated as a resilience strategy, not as an automatic shield. Recent conflicts show that distribution can become fragile when an opponent targets the connective tissue of a network rather than only its formal centre. In April 2024, the strike on Iranian-linked command figures in Damascus demonstrated that distributed regional presence can still expose liaison, coordination and command nodes when they become visible or routinised (Reuters, 2024a). Ukraine's 2024 strikes on Russian ammunition and logistics sites, including facilities around Toropets in Tver Oblast, similarly show that dispersed systems rely on depots, routes, communications and disciplined coordination. If these are degraded, distribution may create communication breakdown, fratricide risk and supply failure rather than resilience (Institute for the Study of War, 2024b; Reuters, 2024b). This failure case strengthens rather than weakens the argument: mosaic defence complicates decapitation, but it remains vulnerable to logistics-focused, network-focused and discipline-focused countermeasures.

The results indicate a more general criterion. Mosaic defence can be understood as the denial of a decisive outcome to the adversary, the provision of retaliatory opportunities, and the retention of political uncertainty. This is not success as it is traditionally understood, and it can be very expensive for Iranian society and civilians in the region.

However, it is also strategically significant, as it would alter the calculation from overpowering an army to operating within a durable political-military network (Eisenstadt, 2011; Tabatabai, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2024).

Table 4. Contrastive synthesis between previous research and findings (Eisenstadt, 2011; Defence Intelligence Agency, 2019; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021)

Issue	Previous research	Findings contribution	Critical judgement
Survival logic	Iran seeks endurance under insecurity (Eisenstadt, 2011; Tabatabai, 2020).	Current reports show resilience through missiles, drones, partners and maritime pressure (Defence Intelligence Agency, 2019; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021).	Confirmed, but now more technical and networked.
IRGC role	The IRGC is an ideological and military institution (Alfoneh, 2013; Ostovar, 2016).	Findings show IRGC-linked roles in missile, UAV, maritime and partner networks (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2024; U.S. Treasury, 2024).	Confirmed, but control over partners remains imperfect.
Conventional weakness	Iran adapts because it cannot match U.S. or Israeli capabilities (Ward, 2009; Wehrey et al., 2009).	Missiles, drones and small-boat tactics create cost-exchange pressure (Centre for Strategic and International Studies Missile Defence Project, 2024; Foundation for Strategic Research, 2024).	Weakness accelerates asymmetric adoption, but does not prove independent innovation.
Victory concept	Older work often focuses on deterrence and regime survival.	Findings emphasise the denial of decisive outcomes and the ambiguity of escalation.	Mosaic defence is better read as survival warfare than battle-winning doctrine.

Implications for Future Warfare

Implication 1: Limits of Leadership Decapitation

The initial inference is that decapitating leadership will lose its usefulness for actors who pre-disperse authority and can scatter. Mosaic defence implies that opponents of the future can create a system in which the destruction of the heart command will not necessarily stop resistance. This does not render the role of leadership non-existent, but it lowers the notion that the centre is the sole definitive point of attack. They might require future militaries to concentrate on network disruption, logistics, production, information flows and political cohesion rather than on headquarters (McInnis, 2017; Defence Intelligence Agency, 2019; Congressional Research Service, 2024).

Implication 2: Cost-Exchange Warfare

The second implication has been the emergence of cost-exchange warfare. Inexpensive drones, rockets, and missiles can force their adversaries to incur much greater costs for detection, interception, hardening, and preparedness. Not because any low-cost system is precise or definitive, but because quantity, perseverance and ambiguity may wear out costly defences. Competition between offensive saturation and defensive affordability is thus probable in the context of future warfare in areas where air superiority is not politically or economically expensive (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021; Centre for Strategic and International Studies Missile Defence Project, 2024; Mouton, 2024).

Implication 3: Blurred State and Non-State Conflict

The third implication is that it will be more difficult to distinguish between state and non-state conflict. The model of a partner network used by Iran demonstrates that a given state can exert pressure through allied groups to maintain a degree of ambiguity. For opponents, this makes it difficult to deter through punishment, since the penalty may not be imposed on the individual who committed the immediate offense. To regional entities, it heightens the level of insecurity as war can be transferred across militias, borders, shipping routes and a virtual information space, without

an official declaration of war (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2024; United Nations Security Council, 2024; Chatham House, 2025; The Century Foundation, 2025).

Implication 4: Maritime Chokepoints as Pressure Points

The fourth implication is that maritime chokepoints will remain strategic points of pressure. The case of the naval asymmetry in Iran demonstrates how many economic and political effects can result from the ability to disrupt shipping, even when the perpetrator of the disruption will not succeed in a fleet battle. More mines, unmanned systems, shore-based missiles, small craft, and the psychological impacts of risk in the narrow seas can thus characterize future wars. This is not because asymmetric navies are able, at any rate, to prevail, but because they can disproportionately deter superior navies (Haghshenass, 2008; Nadimi, 2020; Foundation for Strategic Research, 2024).

Implication 5: Escalation Control and Distributed War Termination

The last implication is that it will be more complicated to control escalation during distributed wars. Fragmented networks may endure the attack, but also blunder with the signals, behave locally or perpetuate hostility when central leaders desire restraint. Mosaic defence thus creates a paradox for future warfare: the very qualities that make it more resilient could also make it less controllable. This directly applies to crisis management, ceasefire design and deterrence, since a networked actor may be able to maintain persistence without the capacity for precise discipline (International Crisis Group, 2024; U.S. Treasury, 2024).

Table 5. Future warfare implications of mosaic defence (Centre for Strategic and International Studies Missile Defence Project, 2024; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2024)

Implication	What mosaic defence shows	Critical policy challenge
Decapitation limits	Command can be dispersed and partially pre-delegated.	Targeting headquarters may not end fighting (Defence Intelligence Agency, 2019; McInnis, 2017).
Cost-exchange warfare	Cheap systems can impose expensive defensive burdens.	Air and missile defence must be sustainable (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021; Centre for Strategic and International Studies Missile Defence Project, 2024).
Proxy ambiguity	Partner networks extend reach while blurring attribution.	Deterrence must account for agency costs (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2024; Chatham House, 2025).
Chokepoint pressure	Small naval systems can create strategic economic risk.	Sea control must include resilience of trade and insurance systems (Haghshenass, 2008; Nadimi, 2020).
Escalation control	Distributed systems survive but may be harder to restrain.	Crisis diplomacy must address networks, not only states (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Table 6. Counter Mosaic Defence: Three Recommendations for Conventional Forces

Recommendation	Operational logic	Relevant evidence
Target logistics networks, not headquarters	Map depots, routes, procurement channels and communications that allow dispersed nodes to keep functioning.	The failure-case evidence shows that distribution depends on logistics and communications (Institute for the Study of War, 2024b; Reuters, 2024b).
Develop low-cost interceptor systems	Improve the cost-exchange ratio against drones, rockets and missiles by combining cheap interceptors, electronic warfare and layered sensors.	Iranian missile-drone saturation is significant because it can force expensive defensive responses (IISS, 2021; CSIS Missile Defence Project, 2024).
Invest in maritime mine clearance capabilities	Prepare ports, chokepoints and escort forces to absorb disruption from mines, small craft and unmanned maritime systems.	Iranian and partner maritime pressure relies on disruption rather than fleet victory (Haghshenass, 2008; Nadimi, 2020; Mazzucco, 2024).

Conclusion

The mosaic defence of Iran can best be described as a policy of survival warfare. It is meant to forestall collapse, ensure continuity of operations and create uncertainty for other stronger rivals. It echoes the experience of regional war, including Iran's conventional weaknesses and a priority on political survival. The article has demonstrated that mosaic defence operates through various mechanisms: decentralised command, missile-drone saturation, partner networks, maritime asymmetry and ambiguity in escalation. None of these mechanisms renders Iran invincible. They

are vulnerable to disruption, degradation and high politics. They are important because defeat is harder to determine and victory harder to achieve against a technologically superior adversary. The article validates the role of strategic culture and institutional history, compared with previous studies, but asserts that more recent evidence should be interpreted more as networks. The aspects of dispersed capability, punishment absorption, and the ability to maintain operations and create strategic uncertainty will only favour those actors who develop greater capabilities in future warfare. Mosaic defence is not, however, exclusively an Iranian doctrine. It is a caution concerning the nature of war in a drone era, the missile, the proxy, and the strong political-military

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