



Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces

By Steven R. Ward

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Prior to the 1978 overthrow of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, Iran maintained close military relations with the United States and served as a central partner in U.S. foreign policy. Under the Nixon doctrine, the United States supported Iran, one of its regional “twin pillars,” with significant quantities of modern weapons and training. In the three decades since the Islamic revolution and the debacle of the U.S. Embassy takeover, the two countries have had no significant relations. Accordingly, U.S. direct knowledge of Iran’s military capabilities and intentions since that time has been effectively nonexistent. Concurrent with that blindness, Iran has sought actively both to reestablish itself as a regional power and to increase its military capabilities. A natural question to ask in this situation is: What are Iran’s capabilities and intentions?

Steven Ward seeks to offer insight into the historical trends of Iran’s military in *Immortal*,

a timely examination of 2,500 years of Persian/Iranian military history. A senior Central Intelligence Agency analyst specializing in Iran, Ward served from 2005 to 2006 as the Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East on the National Intelligence Council as well as on the National Security Council from 1998 to 1999 and brings solid credentials and unquestioned regional expertise.

In a single-volume survey, Ward might be expected to present only the most cursory examination of such a vast period and to offer little in-depth analysis. In fact, the opposite is true. Each of its 10 chapters is dedicated to a significant period of Persian history. Beginning with the first great Persian dynasty, the Achaemenids, c. 550 BCE, the book focuses attention on the Safavids and the Qajars, the tumult of the 19th century, as well as both world wars, the Cold War, the Islamic Revolution, and the Iran-Iraq War, before concluding with an examination of where Iran is heading in the 21st century. Each chapter begins with a scene-setting map highlighting the respective dynasty’s borders as well as a summary of the forthcoming discussion. Ward then provides a review of the political and military situation pertinent to the period. Battles are discussed in surprising detail that deftly intertwines both relevant tactical details and strategic actions. The final chapter serves as both a summary and a predictive analysis of Iran’s way forward through an examination of the broad trends established in the previous sections.

Several noteworthy trends emerge that require appreciation by the outside observer. First, the country’s individual soldiers are valorous and dedicated and have “achieved ...[great] success when ...rulers pay attention” to their troop’s martial abilities. Praise

for Persian soldiers comes from Herodotus in the 5th century BCE, Roman Emperor Maurice in the 6th century, and the British in the 18th century, who admired their “courage and hardiness” (p. 310). In fact, the book’s title refers to the Immortals, a celebrated royal guard of 10,000 men established by the Persian emperor Xerxes in the 5th century BCE. Their losses were immediately replaced to give the impression of invincibility. However, leaders throughout the centuries have frequently “failed to support their fighting man” (p. 301) and their poor leadership has repeatedly abused the noteworthy potential of Iran’s fighting men.

The next trend that Ward addresses is the establishment of dual militaries. Currently reflected in the Artesh (regular armed forces) and the Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guard Corps), the historical tendency of Iran’s leaders to establish dual militaries reflects the need to balance the defense of the country’s national interests with the political elite’s desire to have “competitive militaries to prevent challenges to central authority regardless of the cost to military effectiveness” (p. 301). In its present manifestation, this policy has granted primacy to the Pasdaran’s formalized role as “the preeminent service” (p. 302) and “guardians of the revolution” (p. 301), while the Artesh has accepted a decreased status as it focuses on “detering, defending against, and defeating foreign aggressors” (p. 302). This divergence of roles, in which the traditional armed forces are not the preeminent military service, creates an internal fissure that can be exploited by external actors.

Ward also points out the constant tension that exists between religious and secular leaders over the military’s role in society. The goal of the traditionalist clergy is to “assert their conception of a conservative

and idealized Islamic past without Western influences” (p. 302). Concurrently, nationalists seek “to restore Iran’s greatness by incorporating ...benefits of Western science, technology, and political liberalism” (p. 302). The tension associated with these competing camps has culminated in the development and supremacy of the Revolutionary Guard Corps over the army.

Finally, Ward notes that the nation’s strategic location and the role of geography have repeatedly been a factor both in why outsiders invade and how Persia’s rulers have been able to defend their rule. The strategic depth offered by the country’s extensive natural defenses retains its importance in the modern era as it severely limits the potential invasion routes available to a challenger state while serving to reinforce the more than symbolic isolation that accompanies the country’s natural barriers.

Ward has produced an excellent book that should be read by anyone interested in the region. It will be especially useful for those wanting insight into Iran’s military capabilities and the role heritage plays in their development. It excels at being informative while lacking the dryness of a standard academic tome. No predictions are made as to specific courses of action that Iran might take in the coming years, but insights are offered into the “nationalist sentiments and xenophobia” (p. 3) that explain why Iran’s current efforts to develop nuclear weapons are directly tied to their heritage and why a nuanced approach will be necessary to effectively engage the legacy of the Peacock Throne.

JFQ

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