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**SUBJECT: Iran's Improving Ground Forces** [Redacted]  
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Iran's Improving Ground Forces

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Summary

Iran's ground forces--despite continuing high casualties and equipment shortages--are becoming more effective in offensive operations. Since the major defeat north of Al Basrah in March 1985, Tehran's operations have shown better planning, more coordination, and more skillful use of tactics and its troops. The success at Al Faw shows that Iran can launch surprise attacks, supply medium-size ground forces supported by artillery and air defenses, and quickly exploit opportunities.

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We believe the Iranians have the flexibility and capability to act effectively on their combat experiences and limit the impact of their military weaknesses. The lessons learned at Al Faw and its limited supply of weaponry might cause Tehran to use surprise, simultaneous, small-scale attacks to disperse and confuse Iraqi forces and then launch larger attacks to exploit weaknesses in Iraqi defenses. Baghdad probably would have little warning of such attacks and--partly because of its own mistakes and failure to use Iraqi military forces effectively--might not respond quickly or aggressively enough to stop Iran from expanding a small gain into a major victory.

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This paper was prepared by  the Persian Gulf Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESAs,

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Lessons of Defeat

In March 1985 a combination of military problems turned an Iranian offensive across the marshes north of Al Basrah into the worst Iranian military defeat in three years. Poor planning and the failure to conceal preparations lost the element of surprise and allowed the Iraqis to improve their defenses. Early gains were lost because of coordination problems between the Revolutionary Guard and the Army. The long distance across the marshes made it difficult to provide fire support or supply Iranian troops. A lack of air defenses left Iranian positions vulnerable to Iraqi air attacks. We believe that Tehran failed and suffered 30,000 to 40,000 casualties--half the attacking force--largely because of its own mistakes. [Redacted]

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The mistakes and problems that led to this disaster apparently caused the Iranians to develop new ways to improve their military performance. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] investigated the coordination problem and ordered a large number of Army personnel transferred to Revolutionary Guard units to improve the Guard's effectiveness and enhance cooperation with the Army. Iran launched a series of small-scale attacks in July and August that apparently were designed to improve cooperation and tactical skills. Many of these attacks involved troop landings from small boats, and one major amphibious exercise with Revolutionary Guard troops occurred in December near Lake Orymīyeh, according to press reports. As part of their efforts to improve tactics, Iranian troops infiltrated Iraqi positions at night and later attacked them from the flanks and rear. In July a large force slipped through Iraqi defenses and launched an attack that surprised and disorganized Iraqi forces, [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Iran also began to increase measures to train and equip some of its troops to defend themselves against chemical weapons. [Redacted]

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Better Planning and Preparation

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Careful planning and selection of target areas, evident in the Al Faw operation, are responsible for much of the improvement in the ground forces' performance. The marshy ground near Al Faw limited the use of armored vehicles that the Iraqis depend on for counterattacks. The choice of a peninsula prevented flank attacks--a favorite Iraqi tactic that Baghdad had used with devastating effect in March 1985. Bad weather--rain or fog so thick vehicles could not move--limited Iraqi reconnaissance before the attack and air operations once it began, [Redacted] Moreover, the short distance to Al Faw from Iranian territory helped Iran provide firepower to its troops. Lines of supply and reinforcement also were relatively short, easily repaired or replaced, and thus difficult for the Iraqis to cut. [Redacted]

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Careful planning would have meant little, however, if the Iranians had lost the element of surprise. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] The wooded and urban areas along the Shatt helped hide Iranian weapons, equipment, and troops before the amphibious attack. [Redacted] did not shell Iraqi positions before the operation, probably to try to conceal the direction of the attack and not alert the enemy. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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The shock and confusion among Iraqi troops showed the success of surprise during the Iranian attack. [Redacted] assault caused chaos among Iraqi units. Many Iraqi soldiers quickly abandoned their positions and equipment and fled to the rear. [Redacted]

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In addition to maintaining surprise, the Iranians demonstrated that they have improved their ability to assess a military situation and take advantage of enemy weaknesses. In contrast to March 1985, the Iranians attacked where Iraqi fortifications were weak and thinly manned by new or low-grade troops. Instead of a single effort, they launched three to four attacks, each with a few thousand men, that confused the Iraqis and made it difficult for them to locate the main thrust and quickly mass their units against it. Moreover, the attacks were launched in sequence, with the first assaults diverting Iraqi attention and forces northward to Khorramshahr, away from later Iranian efforts to the southeast near Al Faw. [Redacted]

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Improving Operational Skills...

Increased cooperation among Iranian forces was vital for Iran's success in gaining the Al Faw beachhead, capturing the entire peninsula, and stopping Iraqi counterattacks. Operations by frogmen, amphibious troop landings, and resupply and reinforcement activities were coordinated and carried out, in our judgment, without major problems.

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[Redacted]

[Redacted] We believe that Iran's ability to coordinate and combine special operations, ground attacks, air defenses, and logistics at Al Faw provided the most important evidence of improvement in Tehran's ground forces. [Redacted]

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Improved operational skills and coordination at Al Faw also solved or reduced some of the firepower and logistic problems that undermined the Iranian attack in March 1985. The Iranians massed approximately 250 artillery pieces--over a third of Iran's operational artillery--east of the Shatt to provide intensive fire that helped crush Iraqi counterattacks. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Such losses probably caused Iraqi aircraft to fly at higher altitudes and resulted in ineffective bombing. Iranian engineers' efforts to put bridges across rivers in the rear areas and the Shatt helped supplies and reinforcements reach units on the peninsula. [Redacted]

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...Problems Remain

A variety of problems may reappear to weaken Iran's future operations against Iraq. Despite the victory at Al Faw, [Redacted] morale among Iranian troops in other areas is deteriorating or already poor. [Redacted] continued friction between the Revolutionary Guard and Army has led to missed opportunities or defeats. Without a high-level clerical leader constantly enforcing cooperation between the two rival services, effectiveness declines and old problems reemerge. [Redacted]

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Equipment shortages and logistic problems will continue to be among Iran's greatest military weaknesses. [Redacted] lack of equipment severely limits the performance and capabilities of the Iranian Air Force and that Iran has relatively few vehicles to transport troops and supplies. The redeployment or concentration of limited supplies and weapons to one sector for an operation leaves other areas vulnerable. [Redacted]

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Iran's recent purchase of weapons from China and Austria may encourage Tehran to believe that its equipment shortage will soon ease. We believe that it would take years to rearm Iran's ground forces extensively and would be very expensive. Reequipping a few elite units or acquiring more artillery, air defense, or armor, however, would improve considerably Iran's chances of achieving a significant military success in the near term. [Redacted]

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Increasingly Capable and Dangerous

Iranian attacks since early 1985 suggest that Tehran's ground forces--despite equipment shortages and high casualties--are slowly becoming more effective. Six years of combat have forged a cadre of military planners and commanders, especially in the Revolutionary Guard, who perhaps are becoming better than the Iraqis in the operational and tactical use of forces. Iranian political and military leaders have learned from their mistakes and recognize their military weaknesses. At Al Faw, we judge they showed that they can develop ways to overcome or reduce these weaknesses and score a major victory. [Redacted]

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Iran's military success also will continue to depend considerably on Iraq's mistakes and failure to use its military forces effectively. Baghdad's tight control over operations and commanders significantly reduces initiative and the ability of units to launch timely and effective counterattacks. Despite having air superiority over Iran, Iraq has failed to use its air power to preempt Iranian preparations or disrupt attacks significantly. Baghdad's reluctance to use infantry in counterattacks often gives Iran considerable advantage in defending against Iraqi attempts to recapture lost territory. [Redacted]

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If the trend toward improvement continues, we believe future Iranian attacks will be increasingly well planned and skillfully directed, thus increasing the chances of being victorious. A major offensive later this year would be more likely to deal a single blow that would cause the Iraqi army to collapse. Because of supply and coordination limitations, Tehran may in the future put less emphasis on a mass offensive--over 100,000 men--and instead may limit its operations to about 50,000 troops. Revolutionary Guards or Basij volunteers are likely to play the primary role, with the Army giving technical and material help on weapons, engineering, and logistics. We believe the Iranians would first launch a series of small surprise attacks to try to confuse and disperse Iraqi forces. They would then mass a larger number of troops at one or two of these attacks to overwhelm Iraqi defenses with the objective of inflicting a defeat even greater than at Al Faw. [Redacted]

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Iraq, in our judgment, will have problems containing and defeating such Iranian attacks. Iran's wide distribution of forces, use of bad weather to hide preparations, and communications security before battles will give the Iraqis little warning of the time and place of such assaults. Baghdad probably will not react quickly or effectively enough to repel all the small-scale, simultaneous, surprise attacks. The failure of chemical weapons to defeat the Iranians at Al Faw suggests that Iraq cannot depend on such weapons as a last resort to stop or contain the Iranians. In the future, therefore, Baghdad will not be able to depend on Iran's mistakes and shortcomings to limit Tehran's gains and will have to improve the skills and initiative of Iraqi commanders to effectively counter the Iranians. [Redacted]

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Implications and Options for the United States

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Maintaining the arms embargo against Iran remains crucial in limiting Tehran's military capabilities against Iraq. Recent sales and contacts between Iran and some countries, however, suggest that the ban may be weakening. We estimate that China has sold Iran up to \$1 billion in arms and equipment, including air defense missiles,

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**artillery, and ammunition, in 1986 alone. Tehran is likely to increase its efforts to buy arms from North Korea and East European countries. France's recent move toward more balanced relations between Iraq and Iran suggests that Tehran also will press Paris for weapons and equipment.** [REDACTED]

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