

# Iranian Army's drone revolution takes center stage

## PERSPECTIVE

Throughout the 2010s, the Iranian Army set out to ramp up its drone warfare capabilities — a move that has now given rise to a full-blown drone revolution within its ranks. The sheer number of these unmanned aerial vehicles on display at the outset of the Army Day parade drove home just how vital they have become.

What stood out more than ever during the April 18 parade in Tehran was the coordinated drone fly-past of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army. In previous years, each branch would showcase its drones separately as part of its own mobile units. This year, however, the drones were brought together in a unified display, underscoring their growing significance within the Army.

Against this backdrop, it's worth taking stock of the status and role of pilotless planes across the Army's various branches. The formation of a drone unit within the Air Defense Force and the simultaneous display of numerous UAVs in the mid-2010s marked the beginning of the Army's drone revolution. During this period, drones with a wide range of missions were brought into service, and their mass deployment made waves in the media.

In the following years, other Army branches jumped on the bandwagon, each moving to expand its drone warfare organization as needed. The Air Force, in particular, stepped up its game due to operational demands, even rolling out the strategic Kaman-22 drone and later setting up a dedicated drone academy to train specialized personnel.

With the establishment of drone commands in all four branches, the Army's drone warfare capabilities picked up speed. There was now a need to showcase this growing power and pave the way for large-scale drone procurement.

In January 2021, the Army's four branches came together for their first joint drone drill, showing off the latest research and operational achievements in Iran's central desert. This exercise opened the door for new drone equipment to make its way into the Army.

Just four months later, on May 17, 2021, a contract was signed between the Army and the Ministry of Defense for the production and delivery of 1,000 drones — a clear sign of the Army's all-out push to build up its drone fleet for modern warfare.

That year, Army drones took part in several exercises, carrying out missions such as the Arash suicide drone's destruction of a target after flying more than 1,300 kilometers, the pinpoint strike by the Qaem bomb dropped from the Air Force's Kaman-12 drone at a range of 15 to 20 kilometers, and the targeting of small floating objects by the Simorgh drone (a naval version of the Shahed-129) using precision-guided bombs.

On April 18, 2022, for the first



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian (standing-R) and commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Aerospace Force Amir Ali Hajizadeh (standing-L) observe Iran's new Shahed 136-B drone during Tehran's military parade commemorating the anniversary of the war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq, in Tehran on September 21, 2024.

● ATTA KENARE/AFP

time, more than 50 drones of various types were put on display at the Army Day parade. Among them were several drones, such as Omid and Ababil-5, that were seen for the first time.

The operational status of the strategic Kaman-22 drone was also announced around this time, though it had first been spotted in March 2021.

In those same days, 200 combat, reconnaissance, and suicide drones were handed over to the Army's four branches in a ceremony attended by the minister of defense and Army's chief commander Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi. This delivery, the first batch under the 1,000-drone contract, included a new suicide drone named Amin.

Perhaps the most striking milestone in the Army's drone revolution came with the unveiling of

the strategic Drone Base 313 in May 2022. This underground facility, with its dedicated corridors and taxiways for various drones, brought together models such as Arash, Omid, Mohajer-6, Ababil-5, Kaman-12, Kaman-22, Fotros, and Karrar, all armed with new indigenous munitions-from Balaban and Qaem bombs to Azarakhsh and Shafaq-2 missiles, as well as Heidar-1 and -2 cruise missiles.

It was the first time news of drones being armed with cruise missiles in Iran hit the headlines, and the details of Drone Base 313 sparked widespread coverage in international media and among analysts.

In July 2022, drones made their way onto the Navy's vessels, and the first drone-carrying flotilla was officially commissioned. This flotilla, comprising sever-

al surface and subsurface vessels equipped with a range of drones, carries out various operations depending on the drones' flight range. The group includes the Lavan (Hengam-class) and Delvar logistics ships, the Hendijan support ship, the Jamaran warship as the flotilla's command center, and two submarines — Tareq (Kilo-class) and Fateh.

In December 2023, the Army, in cooperation with the Ministry of Defense, managed to equip the Karrar jet drone with Majid air-to-air missiles as part of Project Rasool. Previously, the Karrar had been armed with Azarakhsh air-to-air missiles in its role as an interceptor drone, but the Majid missile, with its 8-kilometer range and enhanced capabilities, gave the Army an edge in aerial interception, especially against other drones.

The outbreak of regional and international conflicts has shown that drones are far more powerful than previously imagined, capable of single-handedly turning the tide of any battle. Notably, the war in Ukraine brought to the fore the role of small drones and FPVs, which even air defense systems have struggled to counter. This highlighted the need to focus on small drones, especially in ground warfare.

All things considered, it appears that over the past decade, the Iranian Army has pulled off a major transformation in its drone capabilities — and all signs point to this upward trajectory gathering steam in the years ahead.



Iranian specialized forces operate domestically-engineered micro air vehicles during the Great Prophet 19 military exercise by the IRGC Ground Forces on February 18, 2025.

● TASNIM



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