

Is Iran in Strategic Equilibrium?

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Iran's Security Characteristics

Despite its imperial roots, for the past 200 years – including since 1979 – Iran has perceived itself as a country defending itself against stronger forces.¹ From its perspective, Iran has been a victim of Russian aggression that led to the loss of territory in its north and the Caspian Sea; aggression by the Ottoman Empire and the Afghan Pashtuns; British aggression that also led to a loss of territory; invasions by Russia (or the Soviet Union) and Britain into its heartland on a number of occasions; and aggression by Saddam Hussein. Iran also regards itself as threatened by American military deployments along almost all of its borders – in the Gulf, and following American invasions of two neighboring countries, Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2003, Iran believed that it was the next in line of American targets. Iran is also fearful of conspiracies, to a great extent because it was indeed a victim of actions taken in an attempt to overthrow its regime or in an attempted foreign takeover of its natural resources.²

According to its narrative, Iran stands alone against a threatening world, with no natural allies and no trust in the international system. For example, from its perspective, in the 1980-1988 war, it was supported mainly by the Syrian Alawites, while Iraq enjoyed the backing of almost “the rest of the world.” This belief has instilled in Iran security-related instincts based on the assumption that it is on the weak and defensive side, as reflected in the definition of its national objectives, policy, strategy, military doctrine, and force buildup.³ Iran's national objectives were the preservation of the state and its territory, and from 1979, also the preservation of the revolutionary-religious identity of its political system – the *nizam*. The Iranian policy objectives in recent decades toward the “south and west”

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have therefore been mainly preventive: preventing the emergence of threats and neutralizing existing threats.⁴

Historically, then, Iranian policy has sought to destabilize potential enemies, as well as to chart strategies positioning itself and its potential adversaries on the same side. For example, as the Iran-Iraq War erupted, Iran sought close relations with Syria and founded Hezbollah, inter alia to attempt to blur the Persian-Arab and Shiite-Sunni fault lines by emphasizing the Muslim-Israeli conflict – which places both Iran and the Arabs on the same side.

Tension exists between Iran's defensive characteristics and its ideological agenda as an exporter of revolution. Tension also results from its multiple identities: Persian, Islamic, Shiite, and revolutionary. Ideology dictates a degree of antagonism toward the Sunni and Western worlds, but it can be argued that most of the time, Iran has recognized the limitations of its power and has made practical decisions. It can also be argued that when ideology conflicted directly with realpolitik, Iran chose the utilitarian path⁵ (including, for example, the agreement ending the war with Iraq despite the previous ideological stance of Ayatollah Khomeini; withdrawal from the Tanker War; and suspension of its nuclear program in 2003). This policy was implemented through a defensive military strategy, based on deterring potential rivals, developing leverage to restrain enemies, keeping adversaries occupied in secondary theaters, and undermining the will of potential enemies, while attempting to create influence and a defense zone providing it with strategic depth beyond its borders.

The buildup of Iranian military power and the doctrine for its application has rested on three levels.⁶ The first is the regular army (Artesh) and quasi-regular elements of the Revolutionary Guards; the second is covert forces (headed by the al-Quds force); and the third is an array of proxies and clients. The Iranian army is exceptional among the world's armed forces: a regular army characterized by an asymmetric quasi-guerilla buildup.⁷ In the years immediately following 2003, the main reference scenario was an American invasion, and the Revolutionary Guards and the Artesh therefore developed concepts such as the Mosaic Doctrine, which consisted mainly of avoidance of major symmetric battles, decentralized and prolonged attrition in urban areas, and increased costs of war to the enemy – primarily in the stages following the occupation of parts of Iran. Naval doctrine was also based on guerilla ideas, attrition, and disruption of the free use of seaways, and

air doctrine was based on disruption of enemy air operations in Iranian skies, mainly through the use of surface-to-air missiles.

The buildup of the regular Iranian armed forces (parts of the Revolutionary Guards and the Artesh) was therefore characterized by a preference for surface-to-surface and surface-to-air missiles over fighter jets and bombers, and a preference for shore-to-sea missiles, naval mining, and swarms of small boats over frigates. This force buildup is also attributed to lack of confidence in external supply sources, and a consequent preference for weapon systems that can be produced in Iran. The Iranian military, therefore, is not built for a large scale conventional ground offensive against a peer competitor, nor for dispatching large conventional expeditionary forces. The Iranian navy is also not built for a high intensity symmetric conflict, certainly not in blue water.

The covert forces, headed by al-Quds, serve two purposes: first, they are the “boots on the ground” in the various conflict theaters (albeit mostly covert boots), and second, they liaise with and operate the proxies and clients. Indeed, a cornerstone in Iranian force buildup and doctrine is the use of ethnic groups and organizations that are usually already active in the theaters in question. Iran wraps its proxies in a wealth of assistance, including religious education, *da’wa* (social aid), funding, strategic guidance, military training, weapons, means for self-manufacture of weapons, intelligence, operational advice, and sometimes also concrete combat assistance. The covert forces and proxies make it possible to operate with plausible deniability and to wear down the enemy for a prolonged period and pin it down to less important, secondary theaters, while aiming to avoid high intensity conflicts and the entanglement of Iran itself in combat.

Showcases: Iraq and Hezbollah

One example of the policy, strategy, doctrine, and distinct characteristics of the Iranian force buildup was Iran’s struggle against the American presence and the Sunni establishment in Iraq, where Iran was successful in both wearing down the Americans and undermining their willpower to shape Iraq (together with a concurrent Sunni effort against the US), and in destabilizing the Sunni order in Iraq. Tehran enhanced its influence on the Arab Shiites in Mesopotamia and turned Iraq into a zone where Iran was the most influential foreign player. Iran demonstrated expertise in understanding, penetrating, and shaping the human-social-political internal Iraqi environment at its various levels – from grassroots to the

emerging security establishment to the cabinet. Iran thereby neutralized potential threats – from Iraq itself and the concern that the US would use Iraq as a springboard against Iran – before these potential threats even began to emerge. In effect, Iraq became an Iranian security zone giving Iran strategic depth to its west.

Iran achieved this mainly through its proxies and covert forces, while tapping all its means of national power (including, for example, exploitation of religious affiliations with the Shiite majority in Iraq), and combining what is regarded by the West as unorthodox sticks and carrots (from money, bribery, and political intervention in tribal politics to kidnappings and assassinations). Iran operated in the heart of its competitive advantage envelope, and in effect defeated the US in a war over the shaping of Iraq, while keeping its costs and risks low, and without even approaching the threshold of a direct confrontation with the US or a Sunni threat to Iran itself.

Hezbollah also demonstrates Iranian utilitarianism and effectiveness. This organization, which portrays itself as a defender of (Arab) Lebanon and an ally of the Palestinians, has enabled Iran to attempt to invoke the Muslim-Israeli conflict, thereby blurring the Persian-Arab and Shiite-Sunni fault lines (at least up until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war). The organization also made it possible to engage (and sometimes wear down) Israel in a secondary theater, and it constitutes a lever of deterrence against Israel. Hezbollah provides Iran with one-sided access: Iran is present on Israel's border, and its reach extends into Israel's heartland by way of its proxy, while Israel must cross more than 1,000 kilometers and two countries on the way to Iran. Hezbollah provides plausible deniability, and Israel has indeed taken care to confine its retaliation against Hezbollah's aggression to Hezbollah, while not acting against Iran. Hezbollah has thereby enabled Iran to reduce its risks to a minimum. Furthermore, the economic cost of Hezbollah is low – in state terms, and in comparison with the cost of a conventional military expeditionary force consisting of warplanes, ships, and tanks aimed at attaining the same power projection so far away from Iran.

Has Something Changed in Iran's Behavior?

It could be said that starting in 1988 and especially since 2003, until recent years, Iran managed to achieve its basic national objectives – defending its territory and *nizam* – by dismantling potential threats before they emerged. During these years (mainly in 2003-2011), Iran was in strategic equilibrium.

It defended its vital interests in an environment saturated with threatening rivals, while managing to avoid expected costs. Indeed, despite the material friction forced by Iran on its rivals, Iran itself has kept out of direct and open participation in major hostilities since 1988.

Gradually, however, the map of threats to Iran has unraveled. The Soviet Union dissolved, and new countries (mostly Muslim) now buffer Iran from its traditional northern threat. The US withdrew from Iraq, and is planning to withdraw gradually from Afghanistan. It has remained in the Gulf, yet the scars from Afghanistan and Iraq have eroded the American appetite for hostilities with Iran. The US dismantled the Baath regime in Iraq, thereby removing the most concrete threat to Iran, and practically eliminated the Arab-Sunni threat on Iran's western front. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are perhaps capable of defending their territory and intervening in third countries, but they are certainly incapable of invading Iran. Turkey is casting about in the dark for a concrete policy and strategy to achieve its oscillating national objectives, and Israel has demonstrated that it was deterred and therefore refrained from attacking the Iranian nuclear program at the optimal timing – in 2010-2012. A large part of this process of the dissolution of these threats took place without any action by Iran, but Iran is certainly benefiting from the outcome.

Iran has found itself in an environment that is not only less threatening than it was before, but is also characterized by a power vacuum: players have disappeared, disintegrated, and lost power or self-confidence. Iran has been drawn into this vacuum. No structured process of Iranian reassessment of its national objectives, policy, and strategy is known in view of the evaporation of threats, the emergent power vacuum, and the nuclear agreement, but it can be argued that a glance at Iran reveals a drift in its behavior toward a new working premise that deviates from the country's traditional defensive patterns. Moreover, even if this is not fully the case, the proverbial statements about Iran's footprints in four Arab capitals⁸ – Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sana'a – surely denote a certain reality and attitude. Iran is present in more and more theaters – from the Horn of Africa to Afghanistan and Central Asia – and the Iranian fleet is leaving its green water for blue water more frequently than in the past. The talk about regional hegemony (whether justified or not) is becoming more frequent.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is expected to provide Iran with a dividend valued at tens of billions of dollars in the initial stage, and enable it to fund the enhancement of its various strategic efforts. The

JCPOA has not changed the Iranian policy of obtaining nuclear weapons. It has left Iran with certain uranium enrichment capabilities, has not affected its ability to develop more advanced centrifuges, and has not significantly dealt with the continued development of Iran's weaponization and nuclear missile capabilities. The JCPOA effectively recognizes Iran's status as a nuclear threshold state (with the ability to break out to nuclear weapons within a short time), and legitimizes the Iranian nuclear project in the eyes of the Western powers. The JCPOA might therefore strengthen the school of thought that views Iran as a stabilizing factor and part of the solution for the regional challenges, rather than part of the problem. The combination of its nuclear program, unfreezing of funds, and international legitimacy is liable to further empower Iran, bolster its self-confidence and freedom of action, increase its gravitational pull as a regional power, and detract from the Western powers' ability to oppose Iran on various issues, out of concern about an Iranian retaliation on JCPOA issues.

Loss of Equilibrium between Policy and Strategic Tools?

Iran's actual behavior shows some deviation from its traditional patterns. It can be asked, however, whether a player with security characteristics like those of Iran – a defensive and asymmetric force buildup, part of which consists of regular albeit quasi-guerilla military forces, and part of which consists of activity through sub-state proxies – is appropriately structured to act as a regional hegemon, and whether the strategic and doctrinal expertise that has served Iran's defensive policy can be stretched to building an empire. The various theaters of friction can be compared to a field of thorns in the summer. Iran has usually behaved like an actor who has thrown a burning match and stood by watching the results. This is an inexpensive action requiring specific expertise and limited resources. Iran's opponents have acted like an actor forced to call out a fleet of fire trucks and put out the fire – an action that requires many more resources, and requires both time and higher expertise. Throwing a match is not the act of a hegemon; it is a subversive act of an actor that challenges the status quo. A hegemon puts out fires, which are designed to challenge its status.

Iran is gradually being drawn away from the role of match thrower toward the status of a firefighter: from Iraq to Syria, and in the future possibly also in Lebanon, Iran is called upon to protect its assets (in some cases, new assets it acquired only a few years ago). A change in role, however, requires a different set of expertise and capabilities. There is no similarity

between the expertise and capabilities required to incite in Iraq, make it unbearable to the US, and undermine Sunni hegemony, versus the expertise and capabilities required to protect Iraq as a unified and functioning state, despite the lit matches being tossed around by non-Shiite challengers.

Indeed, Iran has found itself using capabilities it is not accustomed to wielding – such as conducting high signature large scale symmetric battles through its proxies and covert forces, as well as attacks by Iranian warplanes in Iraqi territory – capabilities remote from the Iranian comfort zone and competitive advantage. Not surprisingly, its achievements in defending the new Iranian order in Iraq are far short of its achievements in destabilizing the American or the Sunni order in Mesopotamia.

Iran and its proxies are also underperforming in the Syrian civil war. Over the past five years, Iran has found it difficult to defend the Alawite regime in the Sunni and Kurdish areas. Indeed, the relative ineffectiveness of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria – a deficit in the relevant power they were able to deploy on the battlefield – were among the factors that created the conditions for Russia’s military intervention in Syria. Since Russia is acting in its own interest, not that of Iran, such a major Russian foothold involves substantial risk from an Iranian perspective.

The al-Quds force has usually operated other parties, but developments in Iraq and Syria have pushed it into engaging in actual major battles, including committing thousands of fighters into Syria, in which it had to demonstrate capabilities not needed by Iran since 1988, and which exacted losses from it.⁹ According to reports, these losses caused Iran to withdraw a large part of its forces from Syria, while weakening the Iranian commitment to direct involvement in the fighting in this vital theater. Hezbollah has found itself conducting major high signature battles, some of which were highly taxing, over geographic space of unprecedented size. Despite the potential threat posed to Lebanon by jihadists groups, Hezbollah may be weakening its status as a “defender of Lebanon,” and appearing as an Iranian proxy. Iran’s competitors, on the other hand, such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Turkey, are operating in Syria and Iraq through proxies at little cost and low risk – Iran’s former pattern of behavior.

After the Houthis conquered Sana’a, Iran sent warships to the coast of Yemen. In response, the US, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia sent their own ships to the area, and Iran quickly withdrew its ships. Iran almost made an error, thinking it was capable of force projection as a conventional power. It realized its mistake in time, but this course of events indicates

that it cannot be taken for granted that Iranian capabilities are suitable for a policy of attaining regional hegemony. Indeed, Iran is having difficulty rendering effective aid (and even in establishing stable, meaningful supply lines) to its allies in Yemen, who have gone from being on the offensive to losing ground. In some cases, the drift of Iranian policy has made it the reacting side, instead of the initiating side. Having once thwarted threats before they could emerge (e.g., as in the initiative to dismantle the Iraqi system and wear down the American forces in Iraq), Iran now finds itself responding to challenges emerging in Iraq, Syria, and to some degree also in Lebanon, or to military initiatives by the Arab Gulf states in Yemen. Iran is having trouble managing the contours of each conflict, its duration, and the means it requires. There is no better example of this than the stalemate that led to Russian boots being placed on Syrian ground.

The Yemeni theater raises another question: Iran has usually defended its first order national interests, such as eliminating the threat of attack from Iraq (by the Iraqi or American forces), using Hezbollah to deter Israel

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from attacking its nuclear facilities, and protecting its most important ally in Damascus. These are three examples of “no-choice theaters” – Iran had no alternative but to deal with them. It is possible, however, that Yemen (like Sudan in the past, the Horn of Africa, Central Asia, and other new spheres of interest) represents second or third order Iranian interests, not first order interests.¹⁰ While there are clearly advantages to Iran regarding a foothold in Yemen, as a lever over the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and in order to keep Saudi Arabia pinned down in a theater of secondary importance, Iran could certainly have chosen not to intervene in Yemen. This is an “optional theater,” and Iran intervened there simply because it was able to.

Iran’s current pattern of behavior not only does not allow plausible deniability, but also highlights the vector in which it moves. Iran is increasingly perceived in the Arab and Sunni world as a threatening force, and its operation, mainly through Shiite communities,¹¹ is arousing primal fears. Not only is Iran no longer successful in blurring the Persian-Arab and Shiite-Sunni fault lines (through an attempt to invoke a Muslim-Israeli

divide, for example), but Iran's expansion and its challenge to the other regional peers is creating a new fault line of "all the regional actors against Iran" (though this is offset somewhat by Iran's rapprochement with the global powers). To a great extent, even the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq is, in part, a reaction to concerns about an Iranian takeover in Mesopotamia.

Iran is nowhere near being economically overstretched, since the economic dividend of the JCPOA¹² and the Iranian modus operandi enables Iran to continue funding its regional efforts. In many cases, Iran operates through groups and organizations that are already present and fighting in the relevant theater of interest; Iran merely empowers and guides these groups. Its standard aid package does not incur substantial costs for a state actor, and in the Middle East, where the military depots of crumbling armies and the American weapons left in Iraq or supplied to the Yemeni government are open to scavenging, the cost of the weapons supply is negligible. The Iranian aid package for the Houthis, for example, is not significant in Iranian terms. The number of Iranian boots on the ground in all the relevant theaters combined is estimated as much less than ten thousand, and the number of Iranians returning home in body bags each year has not yet caused any significant upheaval in the Iranian public theater.¹³

Significance and Recommendations for Israel

It appears that from a player acting from "negative" motives (preventing threats), Iran is becoming a player trying to achieve "positive" goals (strongholds and hegemony). It is therefore possible that Iran is moving toward lack of equilibrium between its traditional defensive toolbox and entry into the power vacuum around it. It is possible that the attempt to establish regional hegemony with a foothold in a number of Arab capitals is less effective when conducted through covert organizations, proxies, and an asymmetric doctrine. Iran may be moving away from its competitive advantage when it sends its fleet to the shores of Yemen, its air force to the skies in Iraq, and the al-Quds force to major battles in Syria.

This also detracts from Iran's deterrent. Strategic mathematics do not predetermine in advance rivalry between Iran and Israel, but as long as Iran decides to act as Israel's primary enemy, Israel has an interest in weakening it and in keeping it preoccupied elsewhere. If Iran does move towards a lack of synchronization between its ends and its ways and means, this provides Israel with an advantage – and perhaps also an opportunity to engage in measures that will aggravate this lack of synchronization: a

paradigm shift in the strategic dynamic vis-à-vis Iran, and a reversal of roles between the challenger and the challenged.

Israel and its regional partners in the effort to contain Iran – such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states (and possibly Turkey too) – will be able to consider a policy whose objectives are keeping Iran pinned down in secondary theaters, thereby restricting its freedom of action against them; weakening Iran through a strategy designed to prolong the conflicts in which Iran is engaged in the above-mentioned theaters; and raising the price exacted from it. The price is multidimensional, involving economics, political diplomacy, and manpower, with the possibility that this price could exert destabilizing pressure on the regime in Tehran in the future. As such, the price is also tallied in terms of focus and management attention. Furthermore, the price's currency might be legitimacy (Persian-Shiite hegemony in an Arab-Sunni region), and is already reflected in the sharpening of the fault lines between Iran and other regional players, thereby deepening Iran's isolation and expanding the coalition against it by exposing its measures against other regional players, including measures through its proxies and covert forces.

To effect this paradigm shift and role reversal, actors that are already at loggerheads with Iran can be supported and provided with weapons, training, funds, and intelligence. As part of inverting regional dynamics, distance and deniability should be maintained, and risks and costs minimized. Since the objective is to confine Iran to secondary theaters for an extended period and weaken it, these are the parameters through which the success of this policy should be measured (and not the degree of rolling back Iran's hegemony endeavor in such theaters). Insofar as Iran seeks to consolidate its hegemonic status in additional theaters, it will therefore become more vulnerable to this policy and strategy. One third of Iran's population, if not more, is not Persian, and some of the minorities have confrontational relations with the Persian majority, at least from time to time. This provides an opportunity to engage Iran even inside its own territory.

Iran is an intelligent and calculated player, with a high degree of self-awareness. If Iran does indeed change its policy, it is liable to try to adjust and adapt its strategy, doctrine, and force buildup to this new policy. Israel will have to consider whether such an Iranian adjustment process will make Israel's situation better or worse. On the one hand, if Iran adjusts, it is liable to become more effective and quicken the pace of its regional hegemony bid. On the other hand, an Iranian investment in warplanes,

warships, and armored vehicles – instead of missiles, covert organizations, and guerilla organizations – is likely to move Iran away from its competitive advantage, and put it on a playing field in which the Israeli advantage (as well as the American advantage, and perhaps that of Saudi Arabia and Egypt) is much more distinct. Indeed, it is possible that challenging Iran in direct military power – despite its preference for conducting indirect proxy wars – is the most effective method against it.

If Israel does assess that an Iranian process of adjustment designed to build a force more suitable for its new policy is not in accordance with its interest, it will be possible to take action to disrupt this process. In contrast with the current Iranian force buildup, which is based primarily on domestic Iranian production, imports from countries like North Korea, and weapons that are easy to obtain (such as anti-tank missiles), the weapon systems that Iran is liable to need in the future (such as warplanes, frigates, and armored vehicles) are usually imported from industrialized countries. Diplomatic action can therefore be taken to disrupt the supply of such weapons (similar to the way Israel has acted in the past to delay the delivery of S-300 missiles from Russia).

These circumstances may generate a number of opportunities, involving:

- a. Exploiting the declining Iranian effectiveness resulting from Iran's use of its traditional security tools in the service of a policy other than the one for which they were devised;
- b. Exploiting Iranian ineffectiveness in the use of symmetric state military tools in which Iran does not benefit from a competitive advantage, including the possibility of challenging Iran symmetrically;
- c. If Iran begins the process of building a force suitable for attaining hegemony, taking diplomatic action to delay the buildup of such a force, or alternatively, benefiting from the diversion of Iranian resources to types of warfare far from Iran's competitive advantage, and which lie at the core of the competitive advantage of Israel and the US;
- d. Exploiting changes in Iran's situation, including a change in its position from challenger to challenged, and increasing the price paid by Iran for holding various assets;
- e. Exploiting the fact that Iran's own actions are pushing most regional actors into a coalition against it, highlighting the fault lines between Iran and most regional actors, and increasing Iran's regional isolation and the cooperation between Israel and the surviving Sunni governments.

Both the changing circumstances and the resulting processes of adjustment are likely to create opportunities for Israel to develop policy, strategies, a network of proxies, and operational concepts that will engage, weaken, and challenge Iran.

Notes

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- 1 George Friedman, "Iran's Strategy," Stratfor Global Intelligence, April 10, 2012.
- 2 For further discussion, see Ephraim Kam, *From Terror to Nuclear Bombs: The Significance of the Iranian Threat* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 2004), p. 27.
- 3 J. Matthew McInnis, *Iran's Strategic Thinking, Origins, and Evolution*, American Enterprise Institute, May 2015.
- 4 This essay does not deal with Iran's policy toward the "east and north" – the Caucasus and Central Asia – or its energy policy toward Russia and Turkey, and touches on the nuclear question only in passing.
- 5 McInnis, *Iran's Strategic Thinking, Origins, and Evolution*, p. 6, and David Menashri, *Iran: Between Islam and the West* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 1996), pp. 144-61.
- 6 Ahmed S. Hashim, "The Evolution of Iran's Military Doctrine," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 9, 2013.
- 7 Michael Connell, "Iran's Military Doctrine," *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, 2010.
- 8 David Hearts, "Saudi Crapshoot in Yemen," *Huffington Post*, September 28, 2014.
- 9 "Iranian Casualties Rise in Syria, as Revolutionary Guards Ramp up Role," *Reuters*, December 22, 2015.
- 10 Saeid Jafari, "Why Iran Doesn't Want to Stay in Yemen," *al-Monitor*, October 27, 2015.
- 11 Although Iran is also successfully gaining support from non-Shiite players, such as the Alawites, the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine, Sudan, and so forth.
- 12 The long term effect of the drop in oil prices is not analyzed in this essay.
- 13 Arthur MacMillan, "As Iranian Deaths in Syria Rise, Debate Opens at Home," *AFP*, October 27, 2015.