

War with Iran: The “Boots on the Ground” Question

As the war in Iran grows in size and intensity, one question is increasingly being raised in strategic discussions: Could this conflict eventually escalate to a ground phase involving “boots on the ground”?

This question is quickly moving from a theoretical one into an anticipated conclusion...it seems as though it is now about timing and to whom those boots might belong.

Drexel GPS Assessment:

- In Washington, the political concern is obvious. Many immediately think back to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the long U.S. ground deployment that followed. The prospect of American soldiers fighting inside Iran is something policymakers are extremely aware of—and politically eager to avoid.
- What is more likely, at least in the early stages of any ground fighting, is that the first forces to engage Iran’s IRGC and Quds (the IRGC’s elite division) units would not be American troops at all. Kurdish fighters operating from northern Iraq and parts of Turkey are the more probable candidates.
- If Kurdish forces do begin pushing into Iranian territory, they would almost certainly do so with the expectation that U.S. airpower would support them along the way—particularly against IRGC positions, supply routes, and hardened military targets.
- That kind of battlefield coordination rarely happens without some on-the-ground presence. In practice, it would likely involve limited U.S. special operations support as well as elements of the CIA’s Special Activities Center - particularly its Special Operations Group - which is largely made up of former special forces personnel.

Drexel GPS Summary:

- The moment Kurdish fighters move into Iran, the conflict will begin to take on another dimension. Iran is home to multiple ethnic and political factions that have been held in check for decades by the regime’s security apparatus.
- Kurdish groups, for example, may see this moment as an opportunity to reclaim areas they have long viewed as part of their historical homeland.
- At the same time, Iran’s current leadership could find itself facing pressure from more than one direction. Along with confronting the Kurdish fighters, the regime could also face an emerging insurgency made up of Iranian citizens—particularly if opposition groups become armed and organized.
- For regime loyalists, this would make the conflict existential. Given the regime’s past willingness to use extreme violence against civilians even during peacetime protests, it is reasonable to expect that violence could escalate significantly if they believe their survival is at stake.
- Instead of a quick collapse of the regime, a more realistic risk is a prolonged and messy internal conflict inside Iran.
- It is also important to keep one political reality in mind: while many Iranians deeply resent the regime, U.S. strikes and civilian casualties mean American involvement will not automatically be welcomed everywhere. Public sentiment inside Iran will likely be complicated and divided—and that will shape how events unfold on the ground.

In summary, if a ground phase emerges in this war, it will likely begin indirectly — and evolve into something more complex than a conventional battlefield.

Drexel GPS will continue to monitor this evolving situation