

Raising the Cost and Prolonging the Conflict With Minimal Attrition: How Iran Is Managing Its War

Estimates of the potential patterns of confrontation between Iran and the United States preceded the outbreak of the war itself. Military exercises conducted by both sides, escalating rhetoric, and gradually increasing military deployments had already revealed the contours of the confrontation each party was preparing for, as well as the tools they intended to employ in managing the conflict.

From the American perspective, hard military power and the vast gap in capabilities between the U.S. military, the most powerful in the world, and its adversaries formed the cornerstone of the offensive strategy. This advantage was reinforced by the direct participation of the Israeli military, which possesses extensive operational experience in the Middle East, alongside what has been described as a tight intelligence and military grip on the structure of the Iranian system and its capabilities.

On this basis, the United States assembled what is considered the largest military buildup in the region since the 2003 Iraq War, relying on the logic of overwhelming superiority to subdue the adversary and quickly break its will.

Iran, for its part, had been observing this buildup from its earliest stages and had spent years preparing for the scenario of confrontation that had long been threatened against it. Drawing lessons from the previous Twelve-Day War, Tehran took more serious steps in preparing itself for a large-scale conflict, setting a strategic ceiling based on managing its military and political resources with maximum efficiency in order to raise the cost of any attack to the highest possible level.

Based on the Iranian assessment that any major attack would not be merely a limited strike but an attempt at its core to eliminate or undermine the ruling system, Tehran approached the confrontation from its very first moments as an existential war one that could neither be contained nor absorbed politically. Instead, it must be fought through a strategy aimed at prolonging the conflict and raising its costs to levels difficult for adversaries to sustain.

Securing Command and Control

One of the most important lessons Iran drew from the previous Twelve-Day War was that a potential U.S.–Israeli strike would not be limited to nuclear facilities or military infrastructure. Rather, it would focus primarily on the command-and-control system of Iran’s military and security establishment.

The opening strike in that confrontation demonstrated that targeting the decision-making center could create operational confusion even if the core military capabilities remained intact.

Although Tehran was able at the time to contain this confusion quickly within the framework of a limited confrontation, the experience revealed shortcomings in the mechanisms for transferring leadership and distributing responsibilities should senior commanders come under attack. It also exposed vulnerabilities in the security and communication procedures between different leadership levels.

In light of this experience, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, worked during the period preceding the current war to reorganize the political and military leadership structure of the system. New arrangements were put in place to ensure the continuity of the decision-making apparatus even in the event of large-scale assassination operations targeting senior officials including the head of the system himself.

According to reports published by international platforms, clear mechanisms were established for the transfer of authority and the distribution of responsibilities within the leadership hierarchy to prevent any vacuum in strategic decision-making positions.

Field indicators suggest that these measures did not stop at the political level but also extended to operational military structures. Detailed contingency plans were prepared to allow a rapid transition from a state of anticipation to a state of war, with pre-designated alternative leadership and the opening of backup communication channels to ensure that the link between the command center and operational units remained intact even under targeted attacks or assassinations.

Nevertheless, the opening strike of the current war revealed the limited effectiveness of some of these security measures, as Israel succeeded in carrying out a series of assassinations targeting a number of influential Iranian military and political leaders.

The Israeli military announced the killing of seven senior Iranian military commanders in what it described as a "surprise attack" targeting two locations in Tehran where the leaders had been meeting. The strike reportedly included the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the defense minister, and Ali Shamkhani, the security adviser to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

In the same context, CBS News cited intelligence and military sources saying that joint U.S.–Israeli strikes resulted in the killing of approximately forty Iranian officials in one of the largest blows to the leadership structure of the Iranian system since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The apparent aim was to

create a leadership shock that would disrupt the decision-making apparatus in the early hours of the war.

Yet the speed of the Iranian response beginning only about an hour after the initial strike reflected the regime's ability to activate previously prepared contingency plans. A clear cohesion emerged between the political and military levels, reflected in successive statements issued by the head of the Supreme National Security Council and the foreign minister, alongside announcements from the Revolutionary Guard and the Iranian army.

This offered an early indication that the command-and-control system remained capable of managing the confrontation.

In the days that followed, patterns of military operations revealed a notable degree of organizational coherence compared with the Twelve-Day War experience both in the rapid transfer of leadership to alternative operational plans and in the regular pace of military strikes.

Some estimates suggest that the Revolutionary Guard managed the confrontation through a distributed networked system, whereby engagement parameters and operational plans were spread across multiple units operating horizontally, while daily operational communication between them was reduced to minimize the risks of infiltration or tracking.

Under this model, direct communication lines are activated only when absolutely necessary, ensuring that operational momentum can continue even if some command centers are targeted or disabled.

The Regionalization of the War

In the days preceding the outbreak of the war, Iranian leaders made it clear that any attack on Iran—regardless of its scale—would not remain confined within its borders but would instead open the door to a broad regional confrontation.

This warning came alongside negotiation rounds conducted with effective Omani mediation. In February, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated that any upcoming confrontation would be a “regional war.”

Under the Iranian definition, this concept means not confining combat within Iranian territory and its immediate surroundings, but rather transferring the confrontation to multiple arenas across the region, pushing the entire Middle East into a state of escalation that would be difficult for the relevant actors whether states or economic entities reliant on regional stability to contain.

Expanding the conflict into a regional confrontation marks a clear Iranian declaration of departure from the strategy of strategic patience and containment that had governed Iranian behavior and that of its allies in the region for decades.

This shift comes even amid the escalation that has gripped the region since Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and the subsequent series of Israeli military operations that began with the war in Gaza and later expanded across the region as part of Israel's effort to settle the conflict with its regional adversaries chief among them the forces of the "Axis of Resistance," Iran's principal allies.

The concept of regional war goes beyond direct military confrontation. It includes the possibility of activating unconventional pressure tools within regional states themselves, including forms of hybrid warfare and the undermining of political and economic stability.

Such dynamics raise risk levels beyond the impact of direct Iranian missile strikes, threatening the broader balance of stability across the Middle East.

In this context, Iran appears to view these risks as a strategic pressure card against the United States. Shortly after launching its response to the initial strike, Tehran carried out a series of attacks targeting Israel as well as locations within regional states, particularly Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

The aim appears to be to create additional pressure on Washington through its regional allies who themselves will seek to avoid having their territories transformed into open battlefields while the United States continues to wage a war far from its own territory.

Targeting Bases and Interests

Operating on the premise that if it cannot strike the United States within its own borders it must strike it within the Middle East, Iran structured its target bank around American military bases and interests across the region from the first day of the war.

As expected, Iran quickly targeted U.S. military sites in the Gulf. The Revolutionary Guard announced strikes against American bases in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, alongside military and security sites inside Israel. It also confirmed targeting the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain using missiles and drones.

In the days that followed, the pattern of Iranian targeting expanded significantly. It was no longer limited to military bases but extended to the network of American interests tied to Washington's economic and strategic presence in the region, including economic facilities and critical infrastructure.

The strategy aims to increase the cost of war across the wide network of American interests in the Middle East—especially in the Gulf—by disrupting their ability to operate normally and raising the price of regional alignment behind the U.S. military campaign.

The targeting did not stop there. It also extended to the energy sector, one of the most important pillars of the regional and global economy. According to the rule Iran seeks to impose in this confrontation, what becomes disrupted within Iran can also be disrupted across the Middle East.

Any disruption to Iran's energy market could therefore reverberate through the regional energy market—which in turn constitutes the primary supplier of the global energy market—raising the prospect of a global economic crisis.

So far, the war has contributed to reduced oil production in Iraq, halted Qatari gas supplies, and caused disruptions in Saudi Arabia as well as in Israel and the Kurdistan Region, where energy extraction operations have been partially or completely halted in some locations.

Gulf sources suggest that Tehran's targeting of oil-rich Gulf states is helping transform the battle from a regional confrontation into a global crisis threatening international oil flows—not merely regional security.

Economies such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates depend heavily on the stability of airspace and maritime shipping lanes. Any large-scale escalation therefore threatens the foundations of economic growth in these states.

Managing the Pace of the Conflict and Operational Tactics

In order to achieve the best possible military results, Iran has organized both its defensive and offensive military conduct through a set of steps that allow it to move from being the recipient of an attack to controlling part of the war's trajectory and tempo.

This approach has manifested in several operational tactics that have become defining features of its management of the confrontation.

Radar Blinding

The Revolutionary Guard focused its initial strikes on long-range radar systems in several regional countries including Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Iraq in an attempt to weaken the early-warning systems relied upon by American and allied air defenses.

Iranian defense sources announced the destruction of a radar belonging to the THAAD system in the Ruwais area of the UAE after it was struck by a precision missile launched by the Guard's Aerospace Force.

Tehran also announced the targeting of a U.S. FP-132 radar in Qatar, a long-range system designed to detect ballistic missiles.

These radars are a key component of the early-warning network that enables air

defense systems to detect missiles and aerial threats in the early stages of flight. Targeting them therefore aims to reduce the ability of air defenses to detect threats in time and shorten their response window, increasing the likelihood that missiles will penetrate targeted airspace.

Escalating Risks for Aircraft Carriers

Aircraft carriers represent one of the most important tools of American power in any confrontation with Iran. The United States operates more than a dozen naval assets in the region, including the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln in the Sea of Oman and the USS Gerald R. Ford in the Mediterranean.

Before the war, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei hinted at the possibility of targeting these carriers, noting that the most dangerous weapon against them is one capable of sinking them.

Although sinking a U.S. aircraft carrier remains extremely rare in military history, even the threat itself represents a highly sensitive scenario for the U.S. military.

Damaging a carrier—even without sinking it—could represent a major military and psychological blow, as well as a significant propaganda victory for Iran.

In this context, the Revolutionary Guard announced that it had targeted the Lincoln carrier with four cruise missiles, claiming the vessel was forced to move away from its operational position. The United States said the missiles had failed to approach the carrier.

Despite the conflicting accounts, merely revealing the carrier's location and attempting to target it represents a significant escalation in the level of risk facing American naval assets in the region.

Raising the Cost of War for the United States

Iran is also betting on increasing the economic and military cost of the war for the United States.

Media reports indicate that Washington spent approximately \$779 million during the first twenty-four hours of its attack on Iran.

The Wall Street Journal also revealed that the American military buildup preceding the war—including the deployment of warships and aircraft in the region cost around \$630 million.

According to the Center for a New American Security, operating a carrier strike group such as the USS Gerald R. Ford costs approximately \$6.5 million per day.

Estimates suggest that a prolonged conflict lasting weeks could drain American weapons stockpiles, particularly given the high cost of missiles used in operations.

A Tomahawk missile costs more than \$1 million, a Patriot interceptor about \$4 million, and a THAAD interceptor roughly \$13 million.

Within this framework, Iran has sought to expand the geographic scope of its missile strikes from the Gulf to Palestinian territories and Cyprus creating a wide theater for exhausting U.S. and allied air defense systems.

Managing Firepower Resources

Iran manages its military resources according to the principle of prolonging the fight and making optimal use of available firepower. Its offensive strength is concentrated primarily in ballistic missiles and drones.

Unlike the Twelve-Day War, Iran appears to be avoiding heavy use of its medium-range missiles such as Shahab-3, Emad, Ghadr, and Sejjil.

Instead, it is relying more heavily on short-range missiles with ranges between 150 and 800 kilometers, including the Fateh family, Zolfaghar, and Qiam missiles.

These missiles can be launched in successive salvos that reduce early-warning time for the adversary, making interception more difficult.

Field data indicate that most attacks targeting the Gulf and Erbil during Operation True Promise 4 relied primarily on the short-range Fateh-110 missile, a weapon Iran possesses in large quantities allowing it to sustain attacks for extended periods.

Gradual Involvement of Allies

Iran's allied forces across the region—grouped under the Axis of Resistance—had previously signaled their readiness to engage in any confrontation involving Tehran. Yet their participation has unfolded gradually and in line with the rhythm of Iranian operations.

Iraqi factions launched the first attacks by targeting U.S. military sites in Iraq and Erbil.

Lebanon's Hezbollah joined the confrontation after the announcement of the assassination of Iran's supreme leader, beginning with limited rocket salvos before gradually escalating.

Meanwhile, the delayed involvement of Yemen's Ansar Allah (the Houthis), despite their declared readiness to intervene, suggests that their participation may be tied to operational timing coordinated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

The entry of Iran's allies expands the scope of attrition against American and Israeli defensive capabilities, disperses military and intelligence efforts, and

reduces pressure on Iran's own arsenal.

Conclusion

The patterns of engagement adopted by Iran in this war reveal that its objective is not to achieve a conventional military victory. Rather, Tehran seeks to reshape the cost equation of the conflict.

Instead of directly confronting U.S. and Israeli military superiority, Iran aims to expand the arenas of attrition and complicate the theater of operations transforming the war from a concentrated strike into a multi-level regional crisis.

While the United States and Israel are searching for a clearly defined "victory," Iran appears focused on achieving a tangible failure of the war's objectives—particularly preserving the structure of the regime and avoiding major concessions that would undermine the core strategic doctrine that has guided the Islamic Republic for decades.

In that sense, the war may ultimately become less a race to deliver a decisive blow than a test of which side can better endure the costs of continuing the conflict.